

Worship and Prayer in the Christian Assembly

16/15 Doctrine Commission's report "A theology of Christian assembly"

(A report from the Sydney Diocesan Doctrine Commission.)

Resolution 16/15: Doctrine Commission's report "A theology of Christian assembly"

That this Synod –

- (a) requests the Diocesan Doctrine Commission to revisit its report "A theology of Christian assembly" (4 September 2008), and
- (b) noting that the Commission's current report –
 - (i) makes no reference to WORSHIP, and
 - (ii) makes only passing reference to PRAYER,
 requests the Commission to give due consideration to (and advice on) the proper place for worship and prayer in Christian assembly.

1. Introduction

1.1 The Doctrine Commission report of 2008 (to which this Resolution refers) came in response to a request asking it "to prepare a report for the next Synod presenting a theology of Christian assembly which can help shape authentic, biblical and Anglican orders of service suitable for the contemporary church."¹

1.2 In doing so, the 2008 report surveyed the Bible's teaching, and identified three main purposes for Christian assemblies, within the over-arching purpose of God to gather his people to himself in Christ, to the praise of his glory. Those three purposes were:

- to act as a testimony to Christ,
- for fellowship in Christ, and
- for building the body towards maturity in Christ.

Each of these purposes was explored within the framework of God's gracious initiative towards us ("divine achievement") and our grateful response to God ("human activity").

1.3 The various activities that should take place in the Christian assembly were located and expounded within these this broader context—activities such as the reading, preaching and mutual speaking of God's word, and our response to God in repentance, faith, confession, prayer, praise, thanksgiving and rejoicing.

1.4 The three main purposes of Christian assembly highlighted by the 2008 Report are not, of course, the only three themes or purposes around which the rich teaching of the Bible on Christian assembly could be organized or articulated. Nevertheless, the current Commission sees no reason to revisit the theological judgements of the 2008 report, and regards its conclusions as sound.

1.5 Within this theological framework, what additional advice might be given with regard to "worship" and "prayer"?

2. Worship in the Christian Assembly

2.1 The term "worship", as it appears in most English Bibles, translates a range of Hebrew and Greek terms that cover multiple expressions of human action directed towards God in response to his

¹ The report, "A Theology of Christian Assembly," may be found here: https://www.sds.asn.au/sites/default/files/synod/Synod2008/Theol%20of%20Xn%20assembly-final.pdf?doc_id=NDc2Mg=.

2 Worship and Prayer in the Christian Assembly (2019)

saving grace, such as homage or submission to God, reverence or respect for God, and service to or in the name of God.

- 2.2 Under the old covenant, the worship of God was largely (although not exclusively) centred around the tabernacle or temple, the mediatorial ministry of Israel's priests and the various sacrifices prescribed by the law. Under the new covenant, true worship is first of all offered *by* Jesus (as the perfect priest and sacrifice), then offered *through* Jesus (as the new, true temple) as well as *to* Jesus (as the one who, with the Spirit, shares the being and throne of God). Consequently, Jesus describes new covenant worship as no longer being tied to the temple in Jerusalem (John 4:21), but as "worship in Spirit and truth" (v. 24)—that is, worship offered to the Father on the basis of the redeeming and revealing work of the Son and the regenerating and illuminating work of the Spirit.
- 2.3 Echoing such an understanding, the apostle Paul appeals to Christians to present their bodies, "by the mercies of God," as "a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God." This, he writes, "is your spiritual worship" (Rom 12:1). In other words, the appropriate sacrificial response to the revelation of God's mercy in Jesus Christ is not the offering of animals but the offering of our *whole selves* ("body" = the total person in all aspects of life, cf. Rom 12–15). The implication of this is that new covenant worship (that is, acts of submission to God, honouring of God, service of God) while expressed in the activities of the Christian assembly, is not restricted to those activities nor even to relationships within the Christian community. Indeed, it is noteworthy that in those texts where the apostles explicitly teach about the nature and practices of Christian assemblies, the language of worship plays only a minor part.²
- 2.4 This last observation has sparked a discussion within the Diocese over the past several decades as to whether worship language is the best way to describe the nature, purposes and activities of Christian assemblies—whether in relation to particular activities within the assembly, such as singing, or applied as a descriptive category to the assembly as a whole.³ In an attempt to avoid being distracted by this discussion, the 2008 Report sought to discuss the issues with minimal reference to worship language.
- 2.5 As was clear within the 2008 Report, Christian assemblies feature actions that flow from God to us (e.g., God speaking to us by his Word), from us to God (e.g., us responding to God in prayer), and from us to one another (e.g., as we speak the word to each other, and encourage each other). In fact, many of the activities of the Christian assembly participate in more than one of these dimensions at the same time, as Paul's description of singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs makes clear (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16). That is, singing can be (at the same time) a means by which God speaks his Word to us, a way of responding to him in joyful thanksgiving, and a Spirit-enabled form of mutual encouragement.⁴
- 2.6 There seems to be little disagreement on all sides that all three of these dimensions are vital, and that none of them should be downplayed at the expense of another. The conversation has turned on the helpfulness of using various labels and categories to speak about these different dimensions and about the purpose of the congregational gathering as a whole. Some are concerned that using worship language about church reinforces common misunderstandings about worship (and church), and over-emphasizes the us-to-God dimension of the assembly at the expense of mutual edification. Others are concerned that avoiding worship language risks diminishing the Godward dimension, turning the assembly into a purely horizontal exercise of mutual encouragement and disconnecting us from the language of our liturgical heritage.
- 2.7 Both of these concerns are valid. To lose worship language from our vocabulary entirely seems unwarranted, and deprives us of an important strand of biblically and historically rich language for talking about our corporate response to God. However, the limitations of "worship" language should also be recognized, particularly the risk that it becomes the sole label for describing all the dimensions of a church gathering. The 2008 Report was written with this particular risk in mind and,

² For example, 1 Cor 11:17–14:40; Eph 4:1–16; Col 3:12–17; 1 Tim 2:8–15; 4:13–14; 5:17–21; Heb 10:19–25.

³ For a survey of the issues from different sides of the discussion, see D. A. Carson, "Worship Under the Word" in *Worship by the Book* (ed. D. A. Carson. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), pp. 11–63, esp. p. 49; Tony Payne, *The Tony Payne Collection* (Sydney: Matthias Media, 2017), pp. 275–312; David Peterson, "A Church Without Worship?," *Southern Cross* (23 February 2009): https://sydneyanglicans.net/blogs/ministrythinking/a_church_without_worship.

⁴ See Mike Raiter & Rob Smith, *Songs of the Saints: Enriching Our Singing by Learning from the Songs of Scripture* (Sydney: Matthias Press, 2017), pp. 196–197.

without wishing to deny either of the above concerns, sought to find fresh ways to describe the various purposes and dimensions of the Christian assembly.

- 2.8 Whatever language is used to articulate the different dimensions of the gatherings of God's new covenant people (and Scripture provides us with a range of options), the most important thing is that God's people give meaningful expression to each of these dimensions—i.e., that we hear from the living God, that we respond to him in prayer, praise and thanksgiving, and that we encourage one another in faith, hope and love.

3. Prayer in the Christian Assembly

- 3.1 The 2008 Report spoke briefly about prayer, along with other congregational activities. What follows is a fuller account of the nature and function of prayer and its place in the Christian assembly.
- 3.2 Like "worship", the English word "prayer" is also used to translate a variety of different Hebrew and Greek terms. What all of these terms have in common is that they are essentially petitionary. That is, to pray is to ask—whether for oneself, for others or for the glory of God. This is why Jesus not only uses the language of asking in prayer (Matt 21:22; Mark 11:24) but teaches his disciples to pray by providing a series of requests (Matt 6:9–13; Luke 11:2–4). Jesus' own prayers are also petitionary in character (Matt 26:39; Luke 23:34; John 17). Such an understanding of prayer is further underlined by Paul's instruction in Philippians 4:6: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."⁵
- 3.3 In contemporary Christian parlance, and even in much theological discussion, the language of prayer is frequently used more broadly to cover any form of divine address—e.g., adoration, confession and thanksgiving. Indeed, such a practice is embedded in our Anglican heritage, as the title given to the *Book of Common Prayer* (which contains creeds, confession, praises, thanksgiving and much else besides) illustrates. Provided that petition is not denigrated or marginalised as a consequence, this way of speaking is not greatly problematic.⁶ Nevertheless, if we are to be guided by the normal pattern of Scripture, then these other, equally important forms of divine address are better regarded as things that ought to accompany prayer (e.g., Ezra 10:1; Dan 9:4; Phil 4:6; Col 4:2) or, alternatively, things that will naturally be accompanied by prayer.
- 3.4 It is clear from the New Testament that prayer can take place in a range of ways and contexts: e.g., privately and individually (Matt 6:6; Mark 1:35), within the marriage relationship (1 Cor 7:5; 1 Pet 3:7) and between any two or more Christian brothers and sisters (Matt 18:19–20; James 5:16). The New Testament is likewise replete with examples of corporate prayer. The book of Acts, for instance, describes the first believers in Jerusalem as being devoted to "the prayers" (2:42); after Peter and John were threatened by the Jewish authorities, the Jerusalem church prayed as one that the gospel might continue to be preached boldly (4:24–31); when Peter was later imprisoned by Herod, the church again gathered to pray for his release (12:5). Acts also records a variety of other descriptions of corporate prayer in connection with the ministry of Paul (13:3; 14:23; 20:36; 21:5).
- 3.5 The Pauline epistles are not only peppered with reports of Paul's own prayers for his churches (e.g., Rom 1:10; 2 Cor 13:7–9; Eph 1:16–18; 3:16–17; Phil 1:4–11; Col 1:3–14; 1 Thess 1:2; 3:10; 2 Thess 1:11–12; Phlm 4–6) but with numerous exhortations and instructions to believers about prayer (e.g., Rom 12:12; 15:30; Eph 6:18–20; Phil 4:6; Col 4:2–4; 1 Thess 5:17, 24; 2 Thess 3:1–2; 1 Tim 2:1, 8). While such teaching can clearly be applied to personal, private prayer, it is addressed to churches and expressed in plural form. This suggests, if not requires, that it should also be carried out in corporate settings.
- 3.6 In Romans 15:30, for example, Paul calls upon his readers "to strive together (Gk. *sunagōnizomai*) with me in your prayers to God on my behalf." Similarly, in Ephesians 6:18, at the end of a long series of corporate commands, Paul urges his readers to pray together "at all times in the Spirit, with all

⁵ The two terms, "prayer" (*proseuchē*) and "supplication" (*deēsei*), appear together in Paul's writings at a number of points (e.g., Eph 6:18; 1 Tim 2:1). While the first is often a more general term for requests and the second focussed more on specific needs, here the two terms seem to function as virtual synonyms. See Peter T. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 492–493.

⁶ It may even be seen to have a precedent in Luke 18:11, where the Pharisee's prayer consists of thanksgiving (if not self-congratulation). However, in context, this use of *proseuchē* could well be ironic—as Jesus' point is that the Pharisee is blind to his need and therefore doesn't ask for anything.

4 Worship and Prayer in the Christian Assembly (2019)

prayer and supplication.” The *Book of Common Prayer* is, therefore, again correct to see “common prayer” as one of the chief reasons why believers assemble; that is, we gather “to ask those things which are requisite and necessary, as well for the body as the soul” (“Order for Morning Prayer”).

- 3.7 While common prayer may be offered in liturgical form and may even be spoken collectively (i.e., in unison), individual and spontaneous prayer can also be offered corporately. This is the situation Paul envisages in 1 Corinthians 14 and why he is so insistent that any words spoken to God must be intelligible to others. If they are not, writes Paul, “how can anyone in the position of an outsider say ‘Amen’ to your thanksgiving?” (v. 16). But if the meaning is clear, then others will be in a position to express their collective agreement with their corporate “Amen” (i.e., “let it be so”). In this way, prayer offered by one person in the midst of the congregation is as much a corporate act as prayer spoken by all.
- 3.8 Finally, the New Testament provides no shortage of guidance as to what believers ought to pray for, not only privately but also in their assemblies. Jesus sets the fundamental parameters with the concerns articulated in “The Lord’s Prayer” (Matt 6:9–13) and Paul’s repeated requests that prayer be made for the progress of the gospel and the faithfulness and boldness of gospel preachers also indicates a central concern (Eph 6:19–20; Col 4:3–4). Prayer, of course, may be offered for any matter (for things “as well for the body as the soul”), but ought to reflect God’s will for his world and his concern for “all sorts and conditions of men” (*BCP*, “A Collect or Prayer for all Conditions of Men”). Particularly instructive, therefore, are Paul’s words to Timothy: “I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness” (1 Tim 2:1–2).

4. Conclusion

- 4.1 We commend the 2008 Report together with these further reflections and trust that they clarify the proper place of worship and prayer in Christian assemblies.

On behalf of the Diocesan Doctrine Commission.

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