

KINGDOM WORSHIP: JAMES K. A. SMITH,  
ROBERT WEBBER, AND WESTERN  
CIVILIZATION

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To the American church's never-ending (and appropriate) obsession with worship renewal, Jamie Smith's *Cultural Liturgies* series adds some interesting breadth and depth. Believing that the Christian faith is more than "a set of ideas, principles, claims and propositions that are known and believed,"<sup>1</sup> Smith calls on church leaders to step beyond the categories of form and content to see worship as the thick, formative practices through which churches make and become disciples of Jesus Christ. Rather than isolate the intellect in Christian "disciple education,"<sup>2</sup> Smith sees the whole experience of Christian worship as the necessary counter to the cultural liturgies of consumption and hedonism in which we are immersed every day. He uses words such as "formation" and "imagination" and "gut" and "native" and "second nature" and "habit" to encourage us to think beyond the didactic model of worship used in so many evangelical churches.<sup>3</sup> He wants church leaders to approach Christian formation from a new perspective that "understands human persons as embodied actors rather than merely thinking things; prioritizes practices rather than ideas as the site of challenge and resistance; looks at cultural practices and institutions through the lens of worship or liturgy."<sup>4</sup> Those principles are best engaged in corporate *worship*.

Within my own, Baptist, context, "Worship has not traditionally been one of the strengths of Baptist local church practice."<sup>5</sup> Worse than this, "the denomination which gives its ministers maximum freedom in liturgical practices is the same denomination which offers minimum

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<sup>1</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Cultural Liturgies, 1; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 32.

<sup>2</sup> "From most expositions of the Christian worldview, you would never guess that Christians worship!" (Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 64).

<sup>3</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 18, 57, 57; James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Cultural Liturgies, 2; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 93, 83, 58.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 35.

<sup>5</sup> David S. Dockery, "The Church, Worship, and the Lord's Supper," in *The Mission of Today's Church: Baptist Leaders Look at Modern Faith Issues*, ed. R. Stanton Norman (Nashville: B&H, 2007): 37-50, at 37.

training in liturgical principles.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, there are some who would assume that Baptists *have* no liturgical principles let alone the ability to discourse about them, and there are many who think that Baptists will thus always be at a significant disadvantage in all discussions of the church’s worship. That’s serious. And frustrating. And I lived it for more than a decade of full-time music ministry. And that made me think of Robert Webber.

Like many young worship leaders, I first encountered Webber through *Worship Leader* magazine, of which he was an editor. A *popular* theologian (to a fault, if you read his erstwhile critics), Webber introduced an entire generation of upstart and aspiring ministers to the *Didache*, Hyppolytus, the catechumenate, and so much more. He spoke to us on a level that even fresh seminary students with little theological background could understand. His *Ancient-Future* series pursued four goals: “the recovery of a *Christus Victor* view of the gospel, the restoration of worship as praise for God’s saving deeds in history, the recovery of the healing and nurturing ministry of the Eucharist, and the ordering of the church’s life around the great feasts and fasts of the Christian year.”<sup>7</sup> He wanted us to move “from information to formation” and “from program to narrative”<sup>8</sup>—very much the same kinds of things that Smith has proposed.

But that is not why I include Webber in this article. I am a committed free churchman in a Southern Baptist church. I believe strongly in my tradition’s understanding of ecclesiology, of which worship is a very important part. Yet, in 1982, Webber left his Baptist upbringing to join the Episcopal Church because of worship. He mourned that “Christianity was no longer a power to be experienced but a system to be defended” and that the basic truths of mystery, worship, sacraments, historic identity, ecclesiastical home, and holistic spirituality “were not adequately fulfilled for me in my Christian experience” in his Baptist church.<sup>9</sup> Over the course of 40 books, Webber pled with Baptist worship leaders to overcome the shortcomings of our tradition by adopting a more historical-liturgical approach to worship. And I struggled with that challenge. Ultimately, I earned a PhD in Free Church Theology specifically for the purpose of joining his and other dialogs about the principles of worship, even publishing a book to prove that the earliest English-speaking Baptists formed their tradition around very clear principles of worship. In summary, I am adding Robert Webber as a second dialog partner in this article because he said many of the same things Smith has more recently written, and he specifically called on the Free Church tradition to respond. Let

<sup>6</sup> Thomas R. McKibbens, “Our Baptist Heritage in Worship,” *Review and Expositor* 80 (1983): 67.

<sup>7</sup> Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 162-63.

<sup>8</sup> See the chapter titles in Robert E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of a New World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> Robert E. Webber, *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail: Why Evangelicals Are Attracted to the Liturgical Church* (Waco: Word Books, 1985), 15, 24.

us then turn our attention to the intersection of Webber's *Ancient-Future* and Smith's *Cultural Liturgies*.

BEING HUMAN TAKES PRACTICE:  
A LITURGICAL CHRISTIANITY

Before I respond to Smith or Webber, let me summarize the basic elements of their concern about worship. First, they both believe that the evangelical model<sup>10</sup> of pedagogical worship falls woefully short of what God intended. To them, the proof is in the pudding. Where Webber explains, "The faith's aim is to make Christians radically different persons—persons who no longer live for self, but for God and others—and they will not be different persons merely as 'isolated' individuals. They can become different only in a community that is different,"<sup>11</sup> Smith observes, "Isn't it the case that, though many Christians in North America gather for worship week in and week out, we don't seem to look very peculiar?"<sup>12</sup> Both see the intellectualization of worship (which Webber traces to the Fundamentalist/Modernist controversy<sup>13</sup>) as the primary culprit of this failure. Smith makes it clear that "our bodies are essential to our identities"<sup>14</sup> as well as to our dispositions and decision-making. Together these form our subconscious, and until the church chooses to engage it, Christians will never be radically changed.

Pedagogical worship fails because it fails to respect the formative power of our society's cultures. Smith points to the mall, the university, and the stadium as example loci of a culture that not only teaches certain behaviors, but also prioritizes ways of looking at the world. They effectively shape human "hearts and imaginations not by providing a set of rules or ideas, but by painting a picture of what it looks like for us to flourish and live well."<sup>15</sup> Not only has the church failed to counter the culture, it has actually ended up "mimicking it, merely substituting Christian commodities."<sup>16</sup> Webber points out some sociological implications, but he focuses on the culture's impact on worship practices, particularly in music, environment, and efficiency. He draws the necessary and disturbing

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<sup>10</sup> There is actually quite a fierce debate whether or not Baptists should be considered "evangelicals;" I am not getting involved in that debate here except to say that Baptist failures to educate church leaders on free church liturgical principles have meant that those leaders have had to learn from evangelical sources, sources like Robert Webber. Consequently, when Jamie Smith offers complaints against the broad evangelicalism, I believe those apply to Baptists. However, I also believe that the appropriate Baptist *response* must be very different than that of the rest of evangelicalism, something I hope to demonstrate in my conclusion.

<sup>11</sup> Robert E. Webber and Rodney Clapp, *People of the Truth: The Power of the Worshiping Community in the Modern World* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988), 11.

<sup>12</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 208.

<sup>13</sup> Robert E. Webber, *Common Roots: A Call to Evangelical Maturity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), 15, 119.

<sup>14</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 32.

<sup>15</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 53.

<sup>16</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 103.

conclusion: “My concern is that culturally driven worship will nurture a culturally formed spiritual life.”<sup>17</sup>

Smith and Webber both conclude that the corrective to these failures is a reassessment of the real outcome of Christian worship, nothing short of Christian formation itself. Smith proposes, “Becoming a disciple is not a matter of a new or changed self-understanding but of becoming part of a different community with a different set of practices,”<sup>18</sup> practices that are caught, not taught, practices that must be repeated until habitualized, practices that demonstrate the church as a counter-culture. To this, Webber summarizes, “The work of the church in forming the spiritual life of the new disciple is to train the new Christian in the practice of living in the pattern of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”<sup>19</sup>

Both anticipate the evangelical retort that such a work sounds like “discipleship,” and both consider that a case-in-point for their argument. Smith answers very simply, “Worship and the practices of Christian formation are first and foremost the way the Spirit invites us into union with the Triune God. *Worship* is the arena in which we encounter God and are formed by God in and through the practices in which the Spirit is present—centering rituals to which God makes a promise (the sacraments).”<sup>20</sup> While Webber is a bit more precise in his boundaries for Christian worship, both believe that this formation takes place in weekly worship and in the rhythm of the Christian year. Smith even cites Webber in the section in which he concludes, “The practices of Christian worship over the liturgical year form in us something of an ‘old soul’ that is perpetually pointed to a future, longing for a coming kingdom, and seeking to be such a stretched people in the present who are a foretaste of the coming kingdom.”<sup>21</sup>

To move toward this goal, both Smith and Webber encourage church leaders to design worship services that engage the whole person, not just the mind. Webber often uses the word “narrative;” Smith uses “imagination;” both intend the same idea. Webber exhorts, “We do not understand or verify a story by standing outside it and seeking to analyze or defend it. Rather, we understand stories by becoming a part of them, experiencing them as participants.”<sup>22</sup> Webber is very clear that the story of Christ, and *only* the story of Christ, must be “proclaimed, recalled, and enacted every time we worship.”<sup>23</sup> Smith calls those “thick” practices of worship “liturgies” and describes them as “compressed, repeated, performed narratives that, over time, conscript us into the story they ‘tell’

<sup>17</sup> Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship: Proclaiming and Enacting God's Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 106.

<sup>18</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 220.

<sup>19</sup> Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Evangelism: Making Your Church a Faith-Forming Community* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 89.

<sup>20</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 152, emphasis added.

<sup>21</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 159.

<sup>22</sup> Webber, *Younger Evangelicals*, 90-91.

<sup>23</sup> Robert E. Webber, *Planning Blended Worship: The Creative Mixture of Old and New* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 41.

by showing, by performing.”<sup>24</sup> A good film or even a novel penetrates us much “deeper” than any monograph or lecture ever could.

#### A VISION OF THE GOOD LIFE: CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

That brings us to the actual proposals offered by Smith and by Webber as to what such formative worship would look like. Webber had a few more books in which to develop his ideas, so we will start with him. Webber roots all biblical worship in a specific event. For Jews, it is the Exodus, celebrated in the Passover. For Christians, it is the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, celebrated in the Lord’s Supper.<sup>25</sup> He summarizes, “The basic structure of worship from the New Testament appears to be a twofold emphasis on the Word and Lord’s Supper, attended by prayer and praise.”<sup>26</sup> The service of the Word engages the people in the self-revelation of God in the Bible; the service of the Table engages the people in the work of Jesus Christ.

To organize this worship experience, Webber proposes a buffer before and after these two elements. A formal “gathering” at the beginning of worship buffers the glorious, healing presence of God in Word and Table from the dislocations of life. It is a time of praise, wonder, confession, and the assurance of forgiveness. Churches can take this journey in song, prayer, or readings, as long as the congregation understands the destination. He places a second “buffer” between the Word and Table, a time often called “the prayers of the people,” and encourages churches to see the service of the Table as a response to the Word. The Lord’s Supper is far more meaningful than an evangelical “invitation” “when we see it as a response of commitment to the relationship of the covenant that God offers through the proclamation of the gospel of Christ in his Word.”<sup>27</sup> A formal “dismissal” buffers the encounter with God by directing it into the world through a benediction and commission.

In many ways, we can view Webber’s proposal as a simple answer to the quest of Gregory Dix and other structuralists in their comparative studies of formal liturgies.<sup>28</sup> It is a brilliant endeavor that engages every Christian tradition, for even the staunchest free churchman would say, “The liturgical practices established by Christ and the apostles are liturgical practices normative for Christians of all time.”<sup>29</sup> If we have a simple, flexible, translatable, cross-cultural, and *apostolic* model for Christian worship, we have a solution to so much of the discord of American Christianity. Indeed, Webber always saw as his goal “to recover the universally accepted framework of faith that originated with the

<sup>24</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 109.

<sup>25</sup> Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*, 102.

<sup>26</sup> Robert E. Webber, *Worship Old and New: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Introduction*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 55.

<sup>27</sup> Webber, *Worship Old and New*, 56.

<sup>28</sup> See Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (Westminster: Dacre, 1945).

<sup>29</sup> Malcolm B. Yarnell, III, *The Formation of Christian Doctrine* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2008), 147.

apostles, was developed by the Fathers, and has been handed down by the church in its liturgical and theological traditions.”<sup>30</sup>

Of course, Baptists have no need to be afraid to say “liturgical.” In plain usage, it simply refers to the structure and organization of a church’s corporate worship. Smith often uses liturgy as a synonym for worship, and I did the same in my book.<sup>31</sup> Even if someone were to balk at the connotation of the word to imply pre-planned and repeated, should I not respond that Baptist worship can be, shall we say, predictable? (Webber, for example, regularly challenged the baptistic anti-liturgical mindset via “the invitation.” Serving my fourth church in my third state, I can vouch that Baptists have a very clear invitation liturgy.) Baptists should have no trouble with the use of the word “liturgy” to describe worship services. However, there is a second meaning of the word: the formal, published liturgies of various denominations. *Those* liturgies function as authorities (as, for example, the Preface of the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer* clarifies). That *is* a problem to the Free Church tradition, and we will keep that in mind as this article progresses.

Jamie Smith takes a similar approach in his vision of Christian worship, but focuses more on the elements rather than the structure thereof, particularly in how they write a counter-narrative to the cultural liturgies around us. Worship begins with an invocation, gathering, and call, something that reminds us “of our utter dependence, cutting against the grain of myths of self-sufficiency that we’ve been immersed in all week long.”<sup>32</sup> It consists of song, a full-bodied expression in unity; a reading of law, which “signals that our good is not something that we determine or choose for ourselves;”<sup>33</sup> confession, a reminder that all is not well with the world; baptism, an integration into a new body politic; prayer, a recognition that God is interested and concerned with our realities; Scripture, our new constitution; Eucharist, an experience of forgiveness and reconciliation in the mundane; and offering, the promotion of an alternative economy.

There are two significant differences between Smith and Webber and one important agreement that will propel this article to its conclusion. The first difference has to do with Smith’s emphasis on counter-narrative. He goes to great lengths to explain how worship can and should offer us a different vision of the good life. Indeed, this seems to be his highest priority (his “liturgical hermeneutic” if you will), which is how he can find ample space for an invocation, law reading, and offering in his outline for Christian worship, though none of those explicitly appear in New Testament descriptions of corporate worship. Webber, not being quite as technical, seems to place his liturgical hermeneutic in the phrase quoted above, “developed by the Fathers,” and simply offers elements of worship as found in the patristic liturgies after his considerable work of harmonizing them.

<sup>30</sup> Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*, 17.

<sup>31</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 24; Matthew Ward, *Pure Worship: The Early English Baptist Distinctive* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2014), 18.

<sup>32</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 169.

<sup>33</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 175.

The second difference has to do with the dichotomy of form and content in worship. Smith believes that the evangelical emphasis on content alone has turned the form of worship into a “disposable husk” that can be adjusted *ad infinitum* as long as the kernel of the gospel message remains intact. He makes the point that both form and content matter, but he goes beyond that to insist that form and content are in fact *inseparable*. The form itself shapes the content of worship through its connection with our imagination.<sup>34</sup> Webber, on the other hand, embodies the attitude that Smith rejects (“The primary factor in worship concerns not the structure, nor the style, but the content”<sup>35</sup>), but let me explain his point. Yes, the form itself shapes the content, but the form is also itself shaped by culture. You would have noticed my titular reference to Western Civilization; this is the main reason. The Reformed liturgies promoted by Smith (and even Webber when you peel back the layers) are inherently Western. That is a significant accusation that steps far beyond the confines of these pages, and all I can do is point you toward the growing body of literature on ethnodoxology.<sup>36</sup> But Webber’s point is that a quest for both the content *and* form of worship inevitably leads an American or European author to promote a form basically shaped by Western European culture and civilization. He’s not comfortable with that (and neither am I). This is why Webber built his proposal for worship around what he believed to be a supra-cultural event, the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ.

That said, Webber understood that his primary audience was conservative American evangelicals, which leads to one final area in which Smith and Webber agree: the need for the church to rediscover the historic written liturgies. Webber was clear that this includes both the ancient liturgies and those of the Reformation; his “Call to an Ancient Evangelical Future,” co-authored with Philip Kenyon in 2006, took as ecumenical a tone as possible.<sup>37</sup> Smith refers to these resources as the “historical riches of the church’s worship” and includes a table summarizing the elements of Roman Catholic, Lutheran (ELCA), Anglican, United Methodist, and Presbyterian (PCUSA) liturgies in support.<sup>38</sup> Webber was very happy with his Anglican environment and regularly promoted the *Book of Common Prayer* for use in worship. Smith does not promote a

<sup>34</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 168-69.

<sup>35</sup> Webber, *Worship Old and New*, 149.

<sup>36</sup> Ethnodoxology is the study of (and appreciation of) worship diversity throughout the world’s cultures. A place to start is the website for the International Council of Ethnodoxologists, <http://worldofworship.org> (last accessed 18 Feb 2016). Many of their ideas were recently compiled in *Worship and Mission for the Global Church: An Ethnodoxology Handbook* (William Carey Library, 2013), some of the highlights of which are freely available at <http://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/archive/ethnodoxology> (last accessed 18 Feb 2016).

<sup>37</sup> Robert E. Webber, “Preconditions for Worship Renewal: New Attention to the Biblical and Historical Sources,” *Evangelical Journal* 9, no. 1 (1991): 9; Robert E. Webber and Philip Kenyon, “A Call to an Ancient Evangelical Future,” <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/september/11.57.html> (last accessed 13 Nov 2015).

<sup>38</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 152, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 170-71.

single liturgy in these volumes, although he very well could in a future volume (based on his accounts of Calvin's Geneva and references to *The Worship Sourcebook*, it would not be hard to imagine him taking a similar approach to that of Bryan Chappell in *Christ-Centered Worship*<sup>39</sup>).

Both Smith and Webber are comfortable in the world of published liturgies, though in a way that opens the door for engagement with the Free Church tradition. Let's start with Smith:

Worship leaders and planners (and those who teach both) need to be adept in their reflection on that logic of practice that eludes our grasp—precisely so that they can plan worship that invites the rest of us into that *habitus*-forming practice with confidence and trust, because many of the rest of us will not be able to 'think about it' like those engaged in worship leadership. For the sake of the community of practitioners, worship planners and leaders need to take on the responsibility of reflexive evaluation of our practices in order to ensure that the imaginative coherences of worship are consistent with the vision of God's kingdom to which we are being habituated.<sup>40</sup>

Webber takes the same approach, treating written liturgies much in the same way that a Baptist would treat a hymnal: as a useful but non-binding resource. It is about principle, not repetition; he exhorts, "The recovery of ancient practices is not the mere restoration of ritual but a deep, profound, and passionate engagement with truth—truth that forms and shapes the spiritual life into a Christlikeness that issues forth in the call to a godly and holy life and into a deep commitment to justice and the needs of the poor."<sup>41</sup> In conclusion, although my two dialog partners propose published liturgies as resources, neither seems obligated to recognize them as authorities on the level of Scripture. That seems like a very appropriate note on which to inject a Free Church point of view.

#### FREELY DESIRING AND IMAGINING: FORMS OF WORSHIP IN THE FREE CHURCHES

Obviously, "free form" is an oxymoron, so it would be helpful to run through a quick primer on the Free Church tradition (as even most free church members no longer really know the foundations of their ecclesiologies). We usually identify a free church as one which recognizes

<sup>39</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 154-57. Bryan Chappell, *Christ-Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009). Chappell proposed to seek worship practices based on the gospel, but really only explained the common elements of Luther's, Calvin's and Westminster's liturgies before settling on a Reformed liturgy connected with his seminary.

<sup>40</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 187.

<sup>41</sup> Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 109. Elsewhere he adds, "The ancient process does not need to be treated legalistically and translated into our post-Christian culture in a wooden and mechanical way. Let each local congregation catch the spirit of the ancient model and listen to how the Spirit leads them to apply the model in their cultural setting." *Ancient-Future Evangelism*, 53.



no hierarchy among churches, which acknowledges the Bible (primarily the New Testament) as its sole authority for faith and practice, and which prioritizes the message of salvation through Jesus Christ. Those are useful marks, but it has proved difficult for their church leaders to craft a coherent theology of worship from them. I propose that those identifying marks are actually expressions of deeper principles at the heart of the Free Church tradition. Those principles give me a foundation upon which I can engage both the *Ancient-Future* and *Cultural Liturgies*, and so they are indispensable for this discussion. In summary, there are four basic principles at the heart of the Free Church tradition: Christocentrism, the coinherent work of Word and Spirit, fidelity to the biblical order above human invention, and the believers' church.<sup>42</sup> I will subsequently develop them in greater detail, but those principles are more robust in theological discussion than the expressions most people associate with free churches. Indeed, I will argue that those principles are so robust as to make the Free Church tradition uniquely qualified to engage and filter the many good suggestions made by both Smith and Webber. I will even be so bold to say that Baptist worship fell on hard times precisely because Baptist educators stopped training our church leaders on those principles, forcing those leaders to borrow indiscriminately from our evangelical brethren.<sup>43</sup> That never needed to be the case; the Free Church tradition has much of value to contribute to the dialog of worship renewal.

*Christocentrism.* As Jesus Christ is the centerpiece of God's revelation to man as well as our Mediator to God, a free churchman should always begin any discussion of worship with and through him. Any gathering for worship must be a celebration of the resurrection and victory of Christ-Savior and Christ-God. If the Christian life is to be lived in the name of the Lord Jesus, in thankfulness and for his glory, then how much more a gathering of Christians on Sundays. This focus on Jesus, born of our relationship with him, is our primary filter for interpreting and applying suggestions for worship such as Smith's and Webber's. To begin, we should resonate soundly with Webber's attempt to shape worship around Word and Table, understood as Christ speaking to us and then us coming to Christ for forgiveness and reconciliation. The simplicity of that pattern of worship will aid us greatly in later discussion. We should also resonate with his call to mold the church year around the life of Christ and break the hold of the secular calendar on our emphases in worship. While free churches will have some reservation about extrabiblical elements of the "church year" proposed both by Webber and by Smith (but more on that below), we should readily confess that our desire to avoid the traditional church calendar has resulted in our assimilating the secular calendar;

<sup>42</sup> There are several variations of this list. I am working with the framework developed in Yarnell, *Formation of Christian Doctrine*. He summarizes these principles (106), but the entire book is a development of their source and outworking.

<sup>43</sup> Webber makes a useful accusation here: evangelical worship has become dead and ritualistic because those leaders shaped their understanding of worship around practices they inherited from the culture instead of the other way around; because they built principles on practices, they could not but help institutionalize those practices. I am certain Smith would concur. See Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*, 100.

many Free Churches spend more Sundays celebrating their American identity than they do the events of the life of Christ.

The other important trend that Christocentrism stabilizes is a healthy approach to what might be called sacramentality. For example, Southern Baptist John Hammett pokes fun at what he calls the Baptist doctrine of “real absence” in the Lord’s Supper (“Wherever else Christ’s presence may be found, don’t look for it here!”).<sup>44</sup> A sad byproduct of intellectualized worship has been the codification and quantification of worship; if it cannot be understood, it cannot be experienced. Webber is certainly not alone in feeling that there is no mystery in Baptist worship services. But that has not always been the Baptist understanding, and it certainly does not need to be. An early and very dogmatic English Baptist leader named William Kiffin had such a powerful understanding of the presence of Christ that he could say, “Doubtless he that cares not for Christ in the Word, Christ in the promise, Christ in the minister, Christ in the water, Christ in the bread and wine, Christ sacramental; cares as little for Christ God, Christ flesh, Christ Emmanuel.”<sup>45</sup> Jesus *is* himself a mystery who came to reveal a mystery; he defies analysis and structuralization; he breaks through analytical walls by which we try to categorize him. True Christocentrism protects against the doctrine of real absence, and it also protects against the definition of “sacrament” that most free churchmen fear, that grace can be manipulated through a physical process of worship. Why? Because Christ-Savior is Christ-God who cannot be manipulated or misled. The Christ of the universe is the Christ of the Bible, and he does not operate *ex opere operato*.

I believe that a free church’s response to Webber in both of those areas must be to pattern our worship around the good news of salvation—not worship that is “gospel-centered” but truly gospel-driven. By keeping the whole of salvation history in our worship services, we keep the emphasis on the revelation of God in Christ and immerse the congregation in our relationship with God in Christ. Consider this summary of the biblical message (where “CHRIST” is shorthand for the entire Christ event):

#### Creation–Fall–CHRIST–New Creation–Consummation

See how easily that applies to a church’s order of worship. A call to worship acknowledges the presence of God and celebrates his good works, but soon we must confess our fall, which leads us to the dominant element of the service, a celebration of the life, sacrifice, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. The result of the work of Christ through the Holy Spirit causes us to reflect on our new identity in him, and our looking forward to the consummation of all things gives us the urgency and energy to be about Christ’s continuing work on earth. That looks like an outline for a gospel-driven, fully principled, culturally flexible worship service that can teach and form and glorify God. And it also addresses an

<sup>44</sup> John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2005), 281.

<sup>45</sup> William Kiffin, *A Sober Discourse of Right to Church-Communion* (London: n.p., 1681), 42-43.

important Free Church concern with published liturgies, which will be a focus of the next section.

*Word and Spirit: Biblical Order above Human Invention.* I am going to combine the second and third principles of the Free Church tradition in this article: the coinherent work of Word and Spirit, and fidelity to the biblical order above human invention. In the context of corporate worship, there is a great deal of overlap in the two. Free churches are quite concerned about human inventions (so much so that they tend to overlook their own). “Because I said so” will not resolve many debates in Baptist churches, although “because the Bible says so” often does. In their estimation, a published liturgy is a human invention. Trying to argue, as Webber does about the *Book of Common Prayer*, that a particular liturgy is filled with much Scripture and therefore acceptable will never impress; a principled free churchman will unapologetically respond, “Then we will start with that Scripture and end with that Scripture.” Even the publication of a liturgical outline is beyond Free Church tolerances. That is precisely what the Westminster Assembly attempted in the 1640s: replace the strict and comprehensive *Book of Common Prayer* with a *Directory* that simply gave guidelines and basic structure for worship. But the Baptists of that day would accept no prescription of any kind. They knew that imposing rules for prayer was only one step away from imposing a prayer book, and they defiantly “with the Apostle freely confess, that after the way which they call heresy, worship we the God of our Fathers, believing all things which are written in the Law and in the Prophets and Apostles.”<sup>46</sup>

I imagine that you might be thinking, “Silly Baptist, aren’t you yourself suggesting a structure for worship to be used in other free churches? Aren’t you contradicting your own principles?” Well, yes and no. I am suggesting a structure of worship just as I am suggesting principles by which free churches “do church,” but there is a big difference between suggesting and imposing. The Westminster Assembly though claiming to suggest actually attempted to impose, and as a result those early Baptists would have none of it. But Smith and Webber are merely suggesting, which is why I say that is the primary point of contact through which our dialog can take place. Smith and Webber have suggested structures and elements of worship for consideration. Free churches should not only appreciate that, they should be challenged by it. But that by which we evaluate these suggestions is the biblical order and nothing else. Not tradition, not culture, not expediency, not expertise, not charisma. That is why the only things I could ever suggest as a free churchman must be immediately connected to the biblical order.

As a result, there are several elements to Smith’s and Webber’s suggestions that raise the proverbial red flag. Let’s start with the so-called church year. We know that Jesus was born, He was presented in the Temple, He was tempted in the wilderness, He triumphantly entered Jerusalem, He shared a last supper, He was betrayed and crucified and buried, He rose from the dead, He ascended into heaven, and He sent the

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<sup>46</sup> *The Confession of Faith, Of those Churches which are commonly (though falsly) called Anabaptists* (London: n.p., 1644), Article LII[1].

Holy Spirit. But where do we get the dates for Christmas or Epiphany? Where do we get the seasons of Lent or Advent? Not from the Bible. They are human inventions, biblical extrapolations designed for the increase of Christian devotion. I personally believe that Webber makes a convincing argument in favor of his use of the church year. Daily, weekly, and annual cycles that immerse us in the life of Christ are far superior to the secular alternatives currently placed on church calendars. But they are human inventions and must be subject to careful and continuous evaluation. Of particular concern to free churches is the relationship between the church year, liturgical colors, and vestments, but I will address that below. Other concerns include the implied theological directives inherent in the calendar (such as preaching the doctrine of the Trinity on Trinity Sunday<sup>47</sup>), as well as the saints days and feast days that have trickled in to some of Webber's suggestions. A free church can choose—voluntarily and intentionally—to use the church year for the many benefits to discipleship and devotion. My church does. But we use it as a tool, and we are never afraid to modify or suspend it as necessary to accommodate where we believe the Spirit is leading. In other words, “because the calendar says so” can never have the same value as “because the Bible says so.”

A similar concern must be raised about prayers. Both Smith and Webber suggest specific prayers in their works, and they suggest resources that suggest specific prayers. I imagine that most free churchmen would take that for what it is: a suggestion intended to help a church improve its public prayer life. The concern relates to that prayer's use and efficacy. In the Free Church perspective, giving someone a prayer (a human invention) rather than teaching someone to pray invokes all manner of alarm. Passionate arguments can and have been made that the prayers in the *Book of Common Prayer* and *The Worship Sourcebook* are superior to those offered in Baptist churches. I do not necessarily want to defend potentially lazy practices (“bless the gift and the giver” does not suggest great devotional preparation), but I do want to ask what that really means. What makes a prayer “superior”? Does the language of a prayer book impress God more than that of the old deacon who prays for the safety of “our boys fighting overseas”? Of course not. There is no definition of “superior” that could have anything to do with the spoken words of a prayer. (And if someone says that a superior prayer is more edifying to those who hear it, I would respond that such a person is probably praying for the wrong reason.) Prayer is about the heart. A free church should know and appreciate that truth intensely well, and its leaders should desire far more to cultivate pray-ers than to hand out prayers.

That emphasis on the heart leads us to the other half of the principle pair, the coinherent work of Word and Spirit. In years past, church leaders wrote and imposed liturgies because they believed that the common

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<sup>47</sup> This in no way defends those free churches which never preach those doctrines built into the church year. The church year, as it is practiced in many Protestant churches, is well-designed and extremely useful. I simply caution that pastors should take their preaching cues from the Bible, utilizing the church year insofar as it helps them lead their congregations—intentionally, not slavishly.

people needed help to worship. Common people could not worship effectively or rightly on their own; they needed a written guide, and they needed someone to lead them through that guide. On the one hand, that problematically has led churches to evaluate the efficacy of worship by the accuracy of its performance, but even more importantly it has separated Christian churches from all of their rights and blessings of a relationship with God in Christ. Free churches in principle should never relinquish their greatest right: to worship God as they are led directly by Word and Spirit, without any kind of hierarchical human mediation. The Spirit is God's gift to the churches, and all churches have the same access to God in worship through the same Spirit (but more on local church autonomy in a moment).

While I do believe that many Baptists and others in the Free Church tradition are rightly accused by Smith and by Webber of approaching worship as an activity of a brain on a stick, I also believe that such an accusation would never have been levied had those churches remained true to their principles. Their tradition, as the next section will elaborate, is rooted in the commitment that every church member be a born-again disciple of Jesus Christ, indwelt and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Baptists could and should have a great trust and expectation of the work of the Holy Spirit drawing Christians into a relationship with the Word Incarnate and illuminating them by the Word Inscripturate. In short, everyone in the Free Church tradition should believe very strongly that their local church, as the body of Christ, fully has the mind of Christ and the Spirit of Christ. They do not need "help" to worship. Indeed, any human suggestion in worship would by definition be inferior to anything given in the biblical order.<sup>48</sup>

This coinherence, rightfully understood, protects both against legalism and spiritualism. Yes, the Word is our rule, but the Word teaches us our freedom in the Spirit. The Spirit sets us above the rules of men, but the Spirit never sets us against the Word. That is why a free church can and must consider all "suggestions" made in the Spirit of God through the Word of God. And those are the only kinds of suggestions I should consider making in this context. Our prayer is more about our spirit than our word; our worship is more about our spirit than our action; our spirits are enlivened and restored by the Holy Spirit; the ministry of the Holy Spirit is witnessed to and testified by the written Word of God. And every single local church has full rights and privileges therein with respect to worship.

This does mean that the accusation that many free churches use less Bible in their services than other traditions is quite serious. Worship in a free church should ooze scripture. It also means that free churches which use a primarily intellectual model of worship do so in violation of the

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<sup>48</sup> This is why I try hard to restrict my suggestions to those with an obvious biblical source. If someone should suggest it unnecessary for me to tell a church leader what he could read for himself in the Bible, I would agree and be very satisfied. God did not leave worship leadership in the hands of a small group of musical or theological elite. He gave its right and responsibility to all of His children.

principles that made their tradition viable. Mental engagement is not the same thing as spiritual transformation, and no human can go unchanged by an encounter with the living God. It equally means that free churches which place a low priority on intentional worship planning also violate those principles. The freedom claimed in the Free Church tradition is rightfully theirs, but it comes with great responsibility. More than any other tradition, we have unilateral right to investigate any resource for use in worship (which, by the way, includes every song), and we believe wholeheartedly in our Spirit-led ability to evaluate that resource. The fact that many free churches fail to exercise this right makes us a poor dialog partner, and I would desire to remedy that.

*The Believers' Church.* The final ground principle of the Free Church tradition, the believers' church, ties all of these considerations together in such a way that should make free churches very interested in what Smith and Webber have to say. In my opinion, Webber's most underappreciated claim (one that Smith has argued for in a fresh way) is the power of corporate worship to shape a disciple. The very experience of worship apprentices an attendee in the way of life proposed by that church. Webber focuses more on the intellect than Smith, and Smith expresses a deeper appreciation for the cultural narrative, but both insist on the formative power of the worship experience. Of all church traditions, free churches should *appreciate* this. We accept no hierarchy of churches, only partnerships. Every Christian church stands with equal accountability before God which means that we have absolute responsibility for our actions and decisions as a church. Consequently, in the Free Church tradition, we have the autonomy to make the decisions to organize worship gatherings as we see fit—to act on Smith's and Webber's claims. To treat our worship with anything less than the most careful and comprehensive consideration (to abdicate that responsibility by passing it off to a manmade book or, worse, not thinking about it at all) is a mistake of the gravest kind.

There is a second layer of "freedom" in the Free Church tradition: in addition to no hierarchy between churches, there should be no hierarchy within a church. The idea behind the phrase "believers' church" is that only born-again Christians are accepted into local church membership. Every member should thus understand grace, forgiveness, mercy, and humility. Each is a sinner saved by grace, each has received an equal wage from the vineyard owner, no one is superior in the sight of God. This is why many in the Free Church tradition have reacted so negatively to the lay/clergy division latent within the historic liturgical traditions. Vestments, enhanced as they may be by seasonal colors, have always been used to distinguish those allowed to lead in worship. The written liturgy itself is based on the idea that a local church cannot worship properly on its own and that there are few in that congregation who should be allowed to lead through that liturgy. Finding no rule for these practices or principles in the New Testament, free churches have worked to avoid them. The fact that some free churches have fallen into their uncritical use speaks volumes to our failure to educate our leaders in the principles that have made our tradition viable. As I said before, I believe there is a place for the church year and even these manmade liturgies in a free church's

worship, when they are used intentionally, freely, and critically as a tool to enhance worship and not to elevate one individual or group within the congregation.<sup>49</sup>

That said, the connection that Smith and Webber have made between corporate worship and discipleship should resonate soundly with every free church. Free churches hold the Great Commission at their core, making disciples their primary Christ-given task. As their members go about their lives, they evangelize, bringing friends and acquaintances into the life of the church. Eventually, one of these makes a profession of faith in Christ, and that new believer is baptized into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and soon after brought into church membership. The lifelong journey those church members make together toward Christlikeness is what we call discipleship. There is an element of responsibility on the part of the individual to remain committed to the process; there is an element of responsibility on the part of the church to provide a healthy environment for the process; there is an element of responsibility on the part of the Spirit to empower and guide the process. In the Free Church tradition, church leaders should understand that they have no authority over the Spirit, over the individual, or even over the church (only Christ has that). What they *do* have is stewardship over the environment of discipleship. Both Smith and Webber have challenged us to use every moment we have as a gathered church intentionally for discipleship—from someone’s arrival on campus to his exit, every moment is an opportunity, and many of those opportunities are missed.

Smith and Webber make two observations that should really drive this importance home. First, both invoke the cultural illustration of the athletic venue, and Smith also mentions the shopping mall. Everything about our experience there is designed to impress upon us a way of life. Indeed, everywhere we go and everything we do immerses us in a “cultural liturgy” that is at odds with our vision of discipleship. How can we ever counter that immersion if we are unintentional with the moments we have in our churches? Second, corporate worship is one place where Christ has promised a special presence of the Holy Spirit (I’m not sure I’m comfortable with Smith’s description as “hot-spot,” but I understand he means that in the sense of “a conduit of the Spirit’s transformative power”<sup>50</sup>). It is one place where we have divine assistance overcoming those cultural liturgies. For a free church to neglect this opportunity of formative and even transformative encounter is unwise at best and irresponsible at least.

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<sup>49</sup> For example, consider the raised platform in a church. It can be an invisible fence designed to isolate and elevate the leaders from the congregation, or it can simply be a tool designed to improve visibility. That is a matter of intent. The difference between a platform and a vestment is anyone can ascend to the platform at any time. For that reason, I do not see how vestments can be used without violating this principle of the believers’ church, and that makes me very wary of any liturgy that leans heavily on their use. But to be fair, I should point out that the use of titles in some free churches seems to have become a *de facto* vestment.

<sup>50</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 148, 135.

I have spent a lot of time in this article acknowledging the accusations of Smith and of Webber; now let me draw some of these threads together in defense of my tradition. Even our less-structured approach to worship has formed a distinct and sometimes vibrant identity. Imagine what we could be with a little more intentionality! Older Baptists are bound to other revivalists through a common hymnody; younger Baptists are bound to other evangelicals through their common song base. The weekly song service (as many call it) has formed hope and trust and love into church members, and a strong preaching ministry has engaged hearts and minds over the full counsel of God's Word. I am every bit as satisfied with the "track record" of worshippers in free churches as compared with that of those in more elaborate liturgies promoted by Smith and by Webber. Smith, for example, used the fictional story of Alex who was able to offer powerful forgiveness due to his weekly experience of liturgical confession and absolution.<sup>51</sup> I have seen that illustration played out countless times among my Baptist church members; they didn't need a liturgy to understand forgiveness. The truth is that the mass exodus from the Free Church tradition to the liturgical traditions predicted thirty years ago by Webber never happened. If Smith will use "results" in his evaluation of free worship, must we not do the same for the liturgical traditions? Smith celebrates "the accrued wisdom of the church catholic" by identifying the common structure of five major liturgies—liturgies used by five denominations for whom recent membership declines have been nothing short of catastrophic.<sup>52</sup> Use of an historic liturgy is not the simple solution to the struggles of Christianity in America, and it would be a mistake for free church leaders to think otherwise. A greater appreciation of the importance of worship, not only in the life of the church but specifically in the journey of discipleship, a greater intentionality in its structure, a greater reliance on Word and Spirit—those are steps toward solving the problem identified by Smith and by Webber. Those are steps every church, at least every free church, can take immediately.

In closing, I exhort Baptists and others in the Free Church tradition to listen carefully to men such as Jamie Smith and Robert Webber. No Baptist church should dare say that "we have arrived" in the perfect form of God's worship; every Baptist church should continuously evaluate itself by the Word of God in the Spirit of God. And the Free Church tradition is uniquely positioned and equipped to consider and engage the suggestions of these men. If we do so within the framework of and not in lieu of our guiding principles as an ecclesial tradition, we can be made stronger and more faithful to our calling as God's church. These principles have clear and powerful application even in the realm of corporate worship, and it is time that free churches reengage them. Through my reading, I was challenged by an old exhortation, "I believe the Baptists to hold to a distinct position among other Protestant sects; that they entertain sentiments, which, if carried into practice, must render them somewhat peculiar, and that they are perfectly capable of establishing their own

<sup>51</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 184-85.

<sup>52</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 169-71.



usages, and of adapting their modes of worship and rules of discipline to the principles which they believe. They need borrow from no one."<sup>53</sup> I pray that this article offers another step in the realization of that belief.

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<sup>53</sup> Francis Wayland, *Notes on the Principles and Practices of Baptist Churches* (New York: Sheldon, Blakeman & Co., 1857), 147-48.