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FLOW

**THE ANCIENT WAY
TO DO CONTEMPORARY
WORSHIP**

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Chapter 1

AN ANCIENT WAY TO DO CONTEMPORARY WORSHIP

Lester Ruth

Allow me a bold statement: there are qualities in the description of ancient Christian worship that we today should more normally associate with the style of contemporary worship than with traditional worship. This assertion might surprise you as you conjure up an image of a typical contemporary service today and what you imagine ancient worship was like. Yes, of course, there were no bands with guitars and drum kits in the second century. Nor did churches at that time have the electronic technology we now use in worship. But there are certain points of connection—critical similar aspects—between ancient ways of worship and the style of contemporary worship.

My statement above is bold because recent attempts to reappropriate ancient ways of worship—attempts reflected in recent liturgical resources of mainline denominations—normally trigger associations with style elements of so-called traditional worship. Turn to one of these official denominational liturgical resources and you will see the flagship for the reappropriating of ancient Christian worship, namely, an order of worship called Word and Table or something similar. The manner of presentation of this order (sometimes called a four-fold order because it has four main parts: gathering, then time spent on the word of God [the Bible], followed by the Lord's Supper, and culminating in a sending back into the world) suggests a traditional style of worship. The manner in which the order is laid out on a page, the instructions for how to lead this order (i.e., the rubrics), and the surrounding resources all steer an adopter of this order toward a traditional style of worship.

But what if that need not be the case? What if there were a way to do this ancient order of Word and Table in a way that felt thoroughly and authentically contemporary?

There is such a way. Amazingly, the seeds for doing the ancient order of Word and Table in a contemporary way can be found in one of the earliest historical descriptions of this order, a well-known passage that influenced all the modern, mainline liturgical resources.

Justin Martyr's Ancient/Contemporary Order of Worship

The well-known passage describing this order of worship was in a work by a second-century martyr for the faith, Justin. This man, writing about the church's worship as part of a larger defense of the Christian faith, described what took place when Christians gathered to worship. The passage has had enormous influence on recent liturgical revisions. Probably every worship scholar and denominational worship official knows this passage by heart. Here is how Justin Martyr described worship on the first day of the week:

On the day called Sunday, there is an assembling of those who live in cities or the countryside, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as long as time permits. Then, when the reader has stopped, the presider in an address admonishes and invites us to the imitation of these good things. Then we all stand up together and send prayers to God. And, as we said before, when we have stopped praying, bread and wine and water are brought, and the presider sends up prayers and thanksgivings in similar fashion, to the best of his ability, and the people give their assent, saying "Amen." And there is a distribution and a partaking by each person of the food over which thanks have been given. And the food is sent to those who are not present by means of the deacons.¹

Justin concludes his description noting how worshippers could contribute money so the church could take care of those in need. Although Justin does not mention a dismissal of the people or a return of the people to their homes, surely his worship services eventually ended and people returned home.

1. The translation of Justin here is based on the Greek and English found in Denis Minns and Paul Parvis, eds., *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr: Apologies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 258–61, and Cyril C. Richardson, ed. *Early Christian Fathers*, Library of Christian Classics, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953), 287.

Worshippers in mainline denominations with newly revised books of worship will probably recognize the basic order of the worship Justin described because it parallels the order they will see in their own books. Indeed, Justin's description is one of the important historical sources used to shape these new orders of worship since it is one of the first descriptions of a whole service from the early church.² These new orders based on Justin's description typically have four sections that correspond to the basic sequence seen in Justin. The "entrance" of the four-fold Word and Table order corresponds to where Justin speaks of the assembling of the congregation. The "proclamation" or "Word" in recently printed versions of Word and Table corresponds to the multiple readings from scripture described by Justin (the "memoirs of the apostles" or the "writings of the prophets"). Next in the four-fold order come the main congregational prayers, especially intercession, as well as consecration of the Lord's Supper, which is just how Justin describes what comes after the sermon. After Communion comes the "sending" in the four-fold order. Even though Justin did not mention such a sending, there surely was a departure of the people. Recent published denominational resources fill out these four folds of "Word and Table" (Entrance, Word, Table, Sending) by listing and providing individual acts of worship fitting for each of the four sections.

Given the parallels between Justin's order of worship from the second century and its recent appropriations, it is easy to think Justin Martyr's church in the second century worshipped in the same traditional style as many churches that have implemented this ancient order of worship. But that would be a wrong assumption.

We should notice three things in Justin's description that distinguish his ancient worship from the traditional way many modern churches do a four-fold Word and Table order. In fact, these three elements have more in common with a contemporary style of worship than with so-called traditional worship and are the key to pursuing an ancient way to contemporary worship. What are these three elements?

2. For many denominations, like my own Methodist Church, this order was something new in its history, particularly as the norm for weekly worship. Prior to the Word and Table orders of recent denominational resources, most Methodist worship, Sunday in and Sunday out, was a standard "traditional worship" order consisting of some mixture of responsive readings, congregational hymns, unison prayers, choir anthem, and pastoral prayer, all leading up to the main scripture reading with sermon toward the end of the service. Some sort of invitation or call to discipleship, with a final hymn, concluded the service. This was the order of worship I grew up with as a small child until the four-fold Word and Table was introduced in the 1980s.

The first is an open-endedness of time. Justin spoke about reading from the Old and the New Testaments for “as long as time permits.” The Old Testament readings he called “the writings of the prophets” and the New Testament readings “the memoirs of the apostles.” We might be mesmerized by that balance and breadth: his church read from both the Old and New Testaments. But notice something more subtle: the readings went on “as long as time permits.” This phrase suggests the readings were not entirely prescribed with a clear beginning and ending for each Sunday. More importantly, it meant someone was having to determine the beginning and ending of the readings; that is, someone was having to discern matters of time. How would one have known if a reading had gone on long enough? Of course, there would have been natural ending points in passages, but surely there was something more, a discerning of what seems fitting, right, and long enough for that particular occasion and people. In contrast, if we do an ancient order of Word and Table with a fully written-out order of worship in a bulletin or from a book, what discernment of time is needed as we progress steadily through the printed order?

The second is the need for extemporaneity in praying. Describing how the presider prays at the Lord’s Supper, Justin did not say he used a prescribed, written-out Communion prayer. Instead, Justin pointed out how the presider prayed “according to his ability,” that is, extemporaneously. With no fixed Communion consecration prayer (and, presumably, with extemporaneous prayer throughout the service), there was a fluidity, flexibility, and opportunity for variety in the content of worship. And, as anyone who has ever prayed extemporaneously will tell you, there was also that same need for the discernment of time and occasion to sense when it is time to move through the sections of a prayer and when it is time to bring it to a close. Something beyond the literacy required to read a prayer is needed to lead worship in this sort of way. In contrast, if our service of Word and Table is fully scripted with every word chosen ahead of time, the requirement for leading involves proper handling of a written text, not the shaping of prayer from the heart.

Finally, Justin laid out his order of worship by actions. In other words, Justin’s description envisions an order of worship as a series of essential activities that flow from one to the next. Notice all the verbs (that is, actions) he uses to describe the order: assembling...read...admonishes and invites...stand...offer...send...brought...give assent...send up...distribute and partaking. Justin put the emphasis in his description of Christian worship in these activities. Of course, Justin did mention a few things—objects like memoirs and prayers—in the order of worship, but if you go beyond

the surface of his words, you will see essential activities immediately below the surface. In contrast, how often have you seen people treat the printed order of worship as a list of objects that can be checked off like groceries on a shopping list? (I have seen that done in church: someone holding their bulletin and putting a check mark every time something has been completed.)

These three elements (open-ended time, extemporaneity, and an understanding of worship as a flow of actions) provide the common ground between Justin's form of ancient worship and our contemporary worship. In other words, Justin's service had a certain feel and rhythm that required those leading worship to actively discern fittingness, appropriateness, and a host of other subtle qualities in real time. The way Justin described it, the worship in his church did not move according to a completely predetermined script. As the service began, the worship leader did not simply hit the "start" button and the service unfolded precisely according to a plan.

Leading Word and Table as Justin portrayed it required sensibilities similar to musicians who create a groove in a song. To make music with a groove is not simply a matter of replicating the notes and rhythm as found on a page. What good musicians do is a subtle skill by which they make the music come alive, be distinctive, and be emotionally compelling. Gifted musicians give music a groove, a term resisting easy definition. With my limited piano skills, I can play the notes written on a page of music. More accomplished musicians can do much more. I can play a song; they can make music with a groove.

These qualities (open-ended time, extemporaneity, and an understanding of worship as a flow of actions) have been common in contemporary worship. I am suggesting that by using these key qualities found in Justin Martyr's description of ancient worship, we can find a new way to do older ways of Protestant worship, whether "traditional worship" or "ancient worship."

From Ancient to Traditional Worship: The Path after Justin

But what happened after Justin Martyr? How did worship lose those three qualities seen in his writing?

After the second century, some things remained the same. What did not change was the shape of the basic order of worship: an initial gathering led to a time of scripture reading, followed by a series of Table-related acts of worship, culminating in the Eucharist. A dismissal ended the service. This basic order would define worship up until the Protestant Reformation of the

sixteenth century. This basic order lies behind recent revisions of the worship resources of many denominations. The order did not change.

What did change were those three elements highlighted in Justin's description: open-ended time, extemporaneity, and an understanding of worship as a flow of actions. Starting in the fourth century especially, the manner in which a Word and Table order was done began to change. The direction of change over the centuries generally has been away from those three elements. This trajectory has meant that, although we recently have used Justin's description of worship to understand what we are doing in the new liturgical resources and to validate them, we have subtly interpreted his order of worship with presumptions drawn from the last 1,500 years of worship history. We have given it a different feel and a different rhythm, thus losing the groove that it originally had.

How and when did those changes happen? Simply put, in the centuries after Justin Martyr (remember that he was in the second century), ways of worship have tended to move from open-endedness of time to bounded time, from extemporaneity to a fully scripted liturgical text, and from the order of worship understood as a sequence of activity to a succession of liturgical objects. Of course, these changes were neither sudden nor simultaneously in every place. Neither were they completely thorough in how any church at any one time worshipped, particularly in the first centuries after Justin Martyr. Nonetheless, the overall trajectories of worship history have been away from the qualities Justin highlighted, except in the case of some liturgical traditions of recent centuries.

As the church moved from its earliest centuries into the Middle Ages (the sixth century and after), several developments launched the trajectory away from the three elements critical for the four-fold Word and Table service described by Justin. These developments would erode the need for active discernment of time and the capability for extemporaneity. The developments would also help Christians see their order of worship as consisting of a list of objects to be done, not a sequence of unified actions.

The movement of the trajectory was slow, unfolding over centuries, but it was steady. For example, bit by bit, there was a loss of extemporaneous prayer as worship history moved from the late patristic period into the medieval. Prayers and other liturgical texts became written down, edited, combined, scrutinized, shared, and standardized as families of liturgical rites associated with large regions developed. Eventually, the entire service would be scripted. These changes resulted in a tighter management of time and a much decreased need for inward discernment as to the immediate fittingness for a

time and place. Leading worship by a liturgical text gives a worship leader a different relationship to the temporal rhythm of the entire service.

Similarly, the development of lectionaries organizing scripture readings for each service (in conjunction with the development of an ever more complicated liturgical year) changed worship's relationship to time and active discernment. As the beginning and ending point of each reading was set—as well as the specific passage to be read—readers and preachers became less individually responsible for determining the length of the reading and its appropriateness for a congregation in a particular time and place. And, depending upon the particular lectionaries being used, the readings could have varying degrees of natural relatedness to each other. In other words, the multiple readings might fit well together, or they might not.

Another major development was the introduction into written orders of worship of elements that were done in every service. The danger, if we may call it that, of such acts of worship is that it becomes easy to see them as things or objects to be checked off in the order of worship. It is easy to forget what they essentially are: a way of doing some vital worshipping activity toward God. Eventually these regular elements tended to be called by some technical name—often the first several words—that hid their essential nature as verbal activity and made it easy to think of them as liturgical things or objects. As orders became more scripted, it was those names that were mentioned and remembered in orders of worship, not some essential worshipping activity. Ancient examples would include the prayers of praise and adoration like the *Gloria in Excelsis* or the *Te Deum*. A modern example would be the Doxology listed in many modern orders of worship. Many wonderful items were added to the classic Word and Table order over the centuries, but there was a loss of the original feel of Justin's service. It became easier to think of Word and Table as a sequence of liturgical objects, not as a flow of worshipping actions.

One other historical development undercut the groove of the earliest Word and Table services: the loss of spontaneous interaction between the worship leaders and congregation. Worship through the first several centuries bore hallmarks of public ritual in an oral culture like the use of call and response and spur-of-the-moment outbursts from the congregation to which a liturgical leader responded. Anyone who has participated in worship involving interactive dimensions like these realizes that having them adds a certain feel to a service. Their loss as the first millennium of Christian history rolled over to the second was another way the order of Word and Table became a different kind of worship.

The coming of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century brought a fracturing of Word and Table as the standard order of worship, along with a sowing of a wide diversity about how to order worship among Protestants. All this was the result of an amazing anomaly that had developed by the late Middle Ages. Late medieval churches had weekly or daily worship using a Word and Table order to consecrate the Eucharist, but actual reception of Communion by the people was infrequent! Protestants uniformly decided there would be no celebration of the Lord's Supper without reception. With that conviction in hand, Protestants could either increase the frequency of reception or create new, non-Communion (that is, non-Word and Table) orders of worship highlighting the sermon. Because increasing the frequency proved very difficult to accomplish, the result was creation of a diverse arrangement of orders of worship, whether in the sixteenth century or now. New liturgical approaches might have been created with the new Protestant orders, but what was not reclaimed in the major early Protestant liturgical traditions (Anglican, Lutheran, and Reformed) was the first centuries' feel for doing Word and Table.

In addition, other early Protestant developments reinforced a trajectory away from the original ancient way found in Justin's worship. Ironically, one of these was the reintroduction of congregational song (as opposed to a reliance upon choirs to provide all the music). While congregational singing was a wonderful recovery for Protestants and brought its own sense of renewal, the manner in which Protestants often did songs did not contribute to recovering the ancient feel of worship as a continuous flow of activity. The way most Protestants handled congregational song usually reinforced the notion of doing only one thing at a time—we sing a song and when the music ends we do something else—thus eliminating the layering of multiple liturgical actions simultaneously.

Most Protestants also continued to rely upon a written liturgical text, a reliance that increased as the printing press made standardized texts more easily produced and distributed. Therefore, extemporaneity and discernment of time continued to be marginal concerns, except for some Protestants. The presentation of a printed order of worship with its written-out texts likewise created an assumption about the independence of the objects, that is, acts of worship listed on the page.

The standard tone of Protestant worship in its major traditions also worked against having the feel of Justin's worship. Protestant worship, on the whole, has been characterized by being rational (concerned with the mind), verbal (reliant upon words), and instructive (cultivating the knowing of what

is being done and why). The later philosophical movement of the eighteenth century called the Enlightenment brought about an emphasis on these qualities. The social advancement of congregations and traditions did too, since increased education, greater wealth, and higher social position have often led to presumptions about what constitutes proper worship. The combined effect of these factors has often been a concern for a way of worship that does not have the same liturgical dynamics of an oral culture like the one we can presume in Justin Martyr's description. The combined effect is to produce worship like we saw in mid-twentieth century mainline Protestantism, so-called "traditional worship."

Of course, there have been some Protestant worship traditions (including Pentecostal, Charismatic, or non-denominational) that have recovered the elements seen in Justin's account: an open-endedness of time, extemporaneity, and the order as a flowing sequence of essential activity. But they rarely had these elements when they were worshipping by an order that included the Table. These traditions usually have not been interested in worship history other than what they draw from the New Testament.

Very recent developments, including technological developments, have often reinforced the loss of an ancient groove for mainline Protestant worship. The growing ability for local congregations to print its own order of worship and texts—first through mimeograph machines, then copiers, and now computer printers—can now easily place an order of worship adapted for each service into the hands of all worshippers. Holding such an order draws the eyes downward and makes a worshipper's body more passive. The manner of presentation on the page tends to reinforce the isolation of individual acts of worship as independent objects, while also instilling a sense of orderly, sequential progression through the service, one item at a time.

The recent shift of worship leadership to laity seated in the pews has brought about another development: gaps of time waiting for the next act of worship. When these lay "liturgists" are seated throughout the space, there is inevitably a gap of time until they walk to the spot (usually marked by another technological development, a microphone) to do their part. The stationary microphone identifies the place where leadership can take place, thus isolating the location for leading and also further isolating the items listed in the order of worship as separate acts of worship.

And that is where mainline, "traditional" Protestant worship was by the mid-twentieth century. It had lost the groove it had in the second century and had a different feel to it. It had lost its original open-endedness in time, its extemporaneity, and its order as a smooth flow moving from one action to the

next. Unfortunately, when denominations over recent decades introduced the four-fold order of Word and Table as a recovery of an ancient way of worship, its advocates did not pick up on these subtle aspects of Justin’s description. Instead, advocates of the new “ancient worship” picked up the feel of the immediately preceding “traditional” Protestant worship. Thus it was easy to confuse “traditional Protestant worship” and this attempt to recover “ancient worship” because outwardly they looked and felt so similar.

But who says a Word and Table order today cannot be done with the same groove seen in the second century? Who says Word and Table cannot provide a template for doing contemporary worship? Answering those questions is the goal of the remainder of this book.

HOW TO DO CONTEMPORARY WORSHIP IN A TRADITIONAL CHURCH

Lester Ruth, with Zachary Barnes, Andrew Eastes, Jonathan Ottaway, Adam Perez, Glenn Stallsmith, and Debbie Wong

Many contemporary worship services feel clunky and disjointed. *Flow: The Ancient Way to Do Contemporary Worship* addresses this problem, teaching readers how to create worship services using the classic worship order, but in a way that feels legitimately and authentically contemporary. The book is for **pastors, church musicians, worship leaders, and students of worship** in seminary or other training courses. Features include:

- A definition of *flow*, and how it relates to both ancient and contemporary forms of worship
- A new approach to the worship planning process
- Techniques for musical flow
- Techniques for spoken flow—what gets said, how, and why
- Techniques for visual flow—how to use presentation technologies
- A complete worship service laid out in linear form, with analytical notes, so readers can see what a service with flow looks like

Flow: The Ancient Way to Do Contemporary Worship...

“... is full of insightful, practical advice, guiding us to reclaim valuable ancient worship features that are relevant to modern worship stylings.”

—**CONSTANCE M. CHERRY**, professor of worship and pastoral ministry, Indiana Wesleyan University, Marion, IN; author, *Worship Like Jesus*, from Abingdon Press

“... defines a central problem: how to move from a punch list order of worship to a flowing, cohesive experience using both traditional and contemporary elements. This book is both empowering and convicting. I’m recommending it to every pastor and worship leader at my home church and those with which I consult.”

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The United Methodist Church of the Resurrection, Leawood, KS

“... is written with scholarly integrity and pastoral sensitivity. An important book for all who are responsible for congregational worship.”

—**CRAIG ALAN SATTERLEE**, ELCA bishop; adjunct professor in theology,
University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN

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