

Conclusion

In this work, I have tried to show how Christendom has wreaked havoc with the new covenant in three areas: the *ekklēsia*, ‘worship’ and evangelism. This has not been a fuss about nothing! Indeed, biblical recovery – repentance and reformation – in all three is both essential and urgent. However hard the task may be – and it will, I fear, prove to be so difficult that I really have little hope of its being accomplished – I say again that we need, at once, to set about doing what we can to recover new-covenant principles and practice in all three: the *ekklēsia*, ‘worship’ and evangelism.

For a start, Christendom-speak – all talk of ‘public worship’, ‘church attendance’, ‘house of God’, ‘place of worship’, ‘time of worship’, ‘attending worship’, ‘attending the means of grace’, and so on – is symptomatic of the catastrophic damage Christendom has inflicted upon the cause of Christ, and should be pole-axed. The same goes for the idea that ‘church’ – the *ekklēsia* – should be used to attract pagans – dubbing them the ‘unchurched’ – into ‘attendance at’ ‘public worship’ or ‘worship services’ in order to evangelise them.

In speaking against ‘public worship’, I am not, of course, arguing against the concept of ‘worship’; to criticise the notion of ‘a service’ does not imply that believers should not ‘serve’ the Lord Christ. Nothing could be further from the truth! The fact is, the whole purpose of life for every man – whether unbeliever or believer – can be summed up as ‘worship’ or ‘service’. Pagans ‘worship’ or ‘serve’ their particular god – self, principally – this being their root sin. The believer wants to ‘worship’ God, wants to ‘serve’ God, in everything, and at all times: his ‘worship’ and ‘service’ is his life lived for the glory of God.

So... am I against ‘worship’ and ‘service’? Decidedly not!

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Nor, because I have argued as strenuously as I have against any tinkering with the *ekklēsia*, even for evangelism, does it mean that pagans should not be addressed with the gospel.

But I remain convinced that talk of ‘public worship’ is ‘a drastic error’, stemming from a ‘lack of serious engagement with what the Bible actually says about church’. No, those words are not mine – though I firmly endorse them; they come from a work by Phillip D.Jensen and Tony Payne:

‘Don’t we basically go to church to “worship” God...?’... That this view is so common among evangelicals today is testimony... to our lack of serious engagement with what the Bible actually says about church... When we hear evangelicals talking about church being ‘worship’, and our buildings being sanctuaries... it is greatly disturbing, not least of all because it is so biblically wrong. All the [old-covenant] language of temple, altar, sanctuary, service, priests and offerings is taken up and fulfilled in the death of the Lord Jesus Christ, our great high priest. He is our temple, our tabernacle, our offering, our sacrifice. In him God’s presence is continually with us (through the indwelling Spirit), and thus our whole lives are our spiritual ‘worship’ as we obey him and do his will. We do still ‘worship’ in church – but only in the sense that we breathe in church. We don’t go to church to ‘worship’ any more than we go to church to breathe. The purpose of church is fellowship [for and] with God’s people around God’s word. We ‘worship’ in every aspect of our lives day by day as we offer our bodies as living sacrifices to God. To confuse the two, as most evangelicals seem to [do] today, is a drastic error. You certainly won’t find the two confused in the New Testament... [Expressing] these ideas no doubt [goes] somewhat against the grain. [They could say that again!] We have sat, Sunday after Sunday for years on end, hearing our pastor [I let this stand, but see my *Pastor*] say: ‘We welcome you today to our hour of “worship”’. Yet study the Scriptures and see.¹

Quite! Nevertheless, as I have acknowledged, such a step – reading Scripture without a preconceived theology, Confession

¹ Phillip D.Jensen and Tony Payne: ‘Church/Campus Connections’, in D.A.Carson (ed.): *Telling Truth: Evangelising Post-Moderns*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2000, pp202-203.

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or tradition – will prove a step too far for most, since it is natural for us to love the institutional. To break with tradition takes us out of our ‘comfort zone’. Notice my ‘us’: I do not exclude myself!

Let me illustrate how ingrained Christendom-tradition is. I know of a church where ‘the pastor’ wanted to introduce a measure of liberty into the prayer meeting: he wanted men – women were still to be silent – to pray spontaneously. But the men simply could not pray under such a system. It was only when he reverted to stipulating who should pray, and in what order, that they could speak.

Yes, we love the institutional, the traditional, because it is safe; it is comfortable. We dare not even think of breaking with it. Although she was writing on a very different issue, Vera Brittain hit the nail squarely on the head:

Most people... wish above all else to be comfortable, and thought is a pre-eminently uncomfortable process; it brings to the individual far more suffering than happiness.²

But we have to think of the losses, the damage, incurred by Christendom-speak and Christendom-practice in the areas under consideration. Losses? Yes, indeed – losses for the believer and the unbeliever. Let me remind you of them.

Losses for the believer

‘Public worship’ is an oxymoron. ‘Worship’ is an inward, spiritual, heart matter, something for the regenerate, not external, physical, something for the general public. ‘Public worship’ blurs this vital distinctive. The encouraging of pagans into ‘church attendance’ utterly ruins the new-covenant principle of separation for the *ekklēsia*.

Talk of ‘public worship’ robs believers of nearly everything that true ‘worship’ speaks of: ‘worship’ for a believer is a life lived

² Vera Brittain: *Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900-1925*, Fontana Paperbacks in association with Virago, 1979, p40.

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for the glory of God, not merely an hour of ‘public worship’. ‘Public worship’ means that attendance at ‘a service’ triumphs over a life of obedience and ‘service’. How easy it is to attend ‘a service’;³ how difficult it is to live a life of devoted obedience!

Think of the confusion – and the waste of energy – involved when believers get uptight about ‘freedom of worship’. What they mean, of course, is the legal right – ‘freedom’ – to ‘attend “public worship”’. Were the first believers – who often found themselves living under one tyrannical regime or another – concerned about this ‘freedom’? I cannot recall reading that they were. As for governments and their power over ‘worship’, Paul’s focus was elsewhere:

I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we [believers] may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Saviour (1 Tim. 2:1-3).

This has nothing to do with freedom to ‘attend public worship’. Rather, Paul wanted prayers for the authorities so that society might be stable enough to let us as believers get on with our progressive sanctification, get on with living to the glory of God.⁴

³ Indeed, it can be pleasant, as this illustration from Spurgeon shows: ‘Hodge, the hedger and ditcher... remarked to a Christian man with whom he was talking: “I loikes Sunday, I does; I loikes Sunday”. “And what makes you like Sunday?” “Cause, you see, it’s a day of rest; I goes down to the old church, I gets into a pew, and puts my legs up, and I thinks o’ nothing”. It is to be feared [observed Spurgeon] that in town as well as in country this “thinking of nothing” is a very usual thing’ (C.H.Spurgeon: ‘The Uses of Anecdotes and Illustrations’, *Lectures to My Students*, Vol.2). Leaving aside the incidentals, I fear that Hodge’s attitude (or something very like it) may be closer to home than many would care to admit.

⁴ As is only to be expected, Calvin, because of his theological presuppositions, in his *Commentary* spoke of ‘the preservation of godliness, that is, when magistrates give themselves to promote religion, to maintain the worship of God, and to take care that sacred ordinances be observed with due reverence... We must always hold by

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Believers are impoverished by talk of a building as the ‘house of God’; there is a ‘house of God’, a sanctuary or temple in the new covenant, but it is Christ and his people with him and in him; believers, individually and corporately, are God’s temple. This vital truth is ruined when church buildings are treated as ‘holy places’, when church furniture and other religious objects are regarded as sacred, and when architecture and ceremonies suggest that God is present in any building. In the old covenant, yes; in the new, no. The new covenant nuances and spiritually transfers such old-covenant concepts to the *ekklēsia* – the people of God themselves.⁵ It is tragic when believers are more concerned about bricks and mortar than they are about the spiritual well-being and vigour of the *ekklēsia*. Think of the cash, the man-hours, the energy consumed in evangelical churches today by the erection, maintenance and use of buildings, with all the associated props, stage scenery, lighting, audio and musical equipment, technical paraphernalia, considered necessary for ‘worship’.

Think of the loss believers incur when the scriptural purpose of *ekklēsia* assemblies – the mutual edification of each believer – is replaced by ‘public worship’, especially when linked to attracting and holding pagans for the purpose of evangelism. As I have tried to hammer home throughout the book – and elsewhere⁶ – in the vital matter of spiritual edification, the Christendom, institutional, traditional ‘church service’ cannot hold a candle to the new-covenant emphasis on mutuality under the guidance of able elders. By the latter, everyone gains. As I have said, we learn by trying to teach; until we can put biblical

this principle that magistrates were appointed by God for the protection of religion... [Magistrates] have no right to flatter themselves if they neglect to lend their assistance to maintain the worship of God’. Not much of a leap from this to the Westminster Confession of Faith and its dreadful talk of magistrates enforcing religion! And not only talk! See my *Battle*.

⁵ But decidedly not as the Fathers did it.

⁶ See my *Sowed; Performance*.

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doctrine into our own words, our hold on it – and, more important, its hold on us – will be only tenuous at best.

And talk of – or even thought of – ‘attendance’ at ‘a service’ in a sacred space (however it may be dressed up) robs believers of a sense of their sitting with Christ in heaven itself (Eph. 2:6).

Quite a list!

And what about unbelievers?

Losses for the unbeliever

Some of the above have a ruinous effect on unbelievers too.

Think of the damage to unbelievers by their ‘attendance’ at ‘public worship’: this must inevitably encourage them to think they are right with God. Why ‘inevitably’? Take the reading of Scripture. The language of the Bible is heavily inclusive; most of the post-Pentecost Scriptures, after all, were written to believers. Consequently the overwhelming amount of Scripture read in ‘services’ has to be full of ‘us’, ‘we’, ‘you’, ‘they’ – speaking of believers, to believers, and only of and to believers. The same goes for most of the hymns and songs; the prayers, likewise. Most preachers deal in ‘us’ and ‘we’.⁷ Inevitably, therefore, the ‘service’ gathers all and sundry – believer and unbeliever – into one body. What else can it do in a time and place of ‘*public* worship’? To pedantically and repeatedly correct this throughout the ‘service’ would, at the very least, make for a wearisome experience. (I know of one man who tried it, and I also know what one congregation thought of it). But in any case, it would be no use: an ambience from start to finish that combines believers and unbelievers in ‘public worship’ takes all the sting out of any admonition. The stern fact is, all such mixing of believers and unbelievers is a direct contradiction of new-covenant principles, and therefore inevitably encourages pagans in hypocrisy. Far more serious even than encouraging their hypocrisy, it must lead many, having been lulled by the way they have been received among believers, to think they are right with

⁷ See my *Preaching*.

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God by keeping up ‘church attendance’, when they are, in truth, only adding to their condemnation.⁸

If that is not a sad catalogue of loss for the unbeliever brought about by ‘public worship’, I don’t know what is.

Oh yes, reformation is urgently needed.

* * *

But as I have said, reformation will prove exceedingly difficult. As I hope I have shown, from a theoretical point of view the argument for reformation is an open-and-shut case; in practical terms, though, it seems a dream. I have described my feelings as looking through a glass wall – looking at something I know is there but seems unattainable.⁹

I have to plead guilty. As I admitted right at the start, Christendom is now well and truly embedded in my DNA. I find traditional language so deeply ingrained, that I instinctively use it frequently. I still think in terms of meetings as ‘services’.

I am also guilty of hypocrisy. I participate in ‘public worship’, lead it, preach at it, attend – and actually administer – wedding and funeral ‘services’, and have arranged my own funeral ‘service’. You see? I really am caught in the spider’s web.

I often quote John 4:23-24 at the start of ‘a service’, when it should be an everyday, 24/7, experience – or, at least, an aspiration. Moreover, even this should not degenerate into formal daily prayer: ‘Help me today to “worship” you in spirit and truth’. Rather, it should be my constant attitude – can I say, spiritual instinct? The early believers seemed to find it so. Do not miss the way the New Testament writers break out into doxology, even when – especially when – setting out massive doctrines; they clearly lived in a spirit of ‘worship’ (see Luke 1:68; Rom. 1:25; 9:5; 11:33–36; 16:25–27; 2 Cor. 1:3; 11:31; Gal. 1:4–5; Eph. 1:3; 3:20–21; Phil. 4:20; 1 Tim. 1:17; 6:15–16;

⁸ See my *Deceit*.

⁹ See my ‘Through a Glass Wall’ on my sermonaudio.com page.

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2 Tim. 4:18; Heb. 13:20–21; 1 Pet. 1:3; 4:11; 5:11; 2 Pet. 3:18; Jude 1:24–25; Rev. 1:5–6).

And that leads me to another self-condemnation! How many times I must have said something along the lines of: ‘I’m preaching at so-and-so church next Sunday’! I suppose only about 10% of believers could say such a thing, and they overwhelmingly male. *But it is Christendom-speak from start to finish!* And the principle behind it spells ruin for the new-covenant meaning of preaching. According to the post-Pentecost Scriptures, ‘preaching’ in the early days was, for the most part, spontaneous, often in response to a question or somesuch. I am not saying that there was no stated preaching, but I cannot discover any evidence that any early preachers had a diary full of ‘preaching appointments’ for which he had been ‘booked’.¹⁰ My point is that here is a further example of the way in which Satan has used Christendom to interfere with yet another aspect of the glorious new-covenant ministry,¹¹ to the detriment of believers (both individually and corporately) and unbelievers. What loss do believers suffer by this institutionalising of preaching? For a start, it really does encourage the notion of ‘attending a performance’: the TV spectacular begins at 19:00 on the 24th; the preaching in the ‘worship service’ begins at 11:30 on the 25th. Spot the difference! Moreover, the idea that I am preaching for 40 minutes on Sunday morning anaesthetises me to the fact that I am supposed to be (and, I actually am, in one way or another) living 24/7 in such a way as will open the way for preaching:

¹⁰ Nigel Watson: ‘Preaching has evolved over the centuries and only by degrees attained a clearly defined form. That form results from the confluence over some generations of several lines of tradition... This means that, as normally practiced today, preaching does not correspond exactly to any one of the various ministries of the word about which we read in the New Testament, but has elements of them all’ (Nigel Watson: *Striking Home*, Epworth, 1987, p113f., quoted by Thomson p8). As to the loss incurred, see my *Sowed*.

¹¹ See my *Glorious*.

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You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven (Matt. 5:14-16).

Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison – that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak. Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person (Col. 4:2-6).

Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honourable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation (1 Pet. 2:12).

Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behaviour in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil (1 Pet. 3:13-17).

I speak from experience: it is much easier to accept and fulfil 'a preaching engagement', and far more satisfying to my *ego*, than to so live before pagans that I compel them to ask me about my hope, and so open the door for me to proclaim Christ. But I still fall far short of Isaac Watts' prayer (which was the opening of a hymn my wife and I chose for our wedding sixty years ago):

*So let our lips and lives express
The holy gospel we profess;
So let our works and virtues shine,
To prove the doctrine all divine.*

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*Thus shall we best proclaim abroad
The honours of our Saviour God:
When his salvation reigns within,
And grace subdues the pow'r of sin.*

Spot on, Dr Watts, spot on!

Ah! Singing it is a doddle, but it's the doing of it! Once again, the institutional is relatively easy, and tends to be pleasant to the flesh, while the new-covenant requires the constant supply of God's sovereign Spirit.

Faced with these difficulties, why have I published?

* * *

I was well on with the book when Philip Yancey's words struck me and encouraged me to press on – but, alas, not with Yancey's use of 'hope':

I became a writer [said Yancey] because... I gained hope that spoiled words, [which had had] their original meaning wrung out [of them], could be reclaimed.¹²

The three 'spoiled words' in question for me have been 'worship', 'church' and 'evangelism'. As I say, I find Christendom so entrenched, even in myself as I write, and the price to be paid for rejecting it so steep, I cannot go as far as Yancey's 'hope' with regard to my work. The best I can aspire to is to say that perhaps this volume might make some think about 'worship', 'church' and 'evangelism'.

It is just possible that it might be said of me, as A.L.Rowse said of a certain Winston Churchill (an ancestor of the far more illustrious descendant with the same name):

Sunk in a sense of near-hopelessness,¹³ he had, at any rate, the consolation that intelligent¹⁴ people have who are defeated and

¹² Philip Yancey: *Soul Survivor: How my Faith Survived the Church*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2007, p7.

¹³ Original 'glum resentment'. I hope I am not bitter – sad, but not bitter.

¹⁴ In my case, 'sensitive' or 'passionate' might be better choices.

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out of step;¹⁵ [namely,] reading and writing... His spirit was not defeated: it burns with unquenched ardour in what he wrote.¹⁶

I cannot (quite) repeat Lord Rosebery's words in his (political) Chesterfield speech in late 1901:

I must plough my lonely furrow... but before I get to the end of that furrow it is possible that I may find myself not alone.¹⁷

Perhaps I can find out. What do you think of this quote: "“Worship” takes place wherever the people of God assemble, for they are his temple (Matt. 18:20)’?¹⁸ What do you think about ‘worship’, ‘wherever’, ‘assemble’, and the application of Matthew 18:20, in the context of the quote? I get the distinct impression that the underlying thought in the mind of its author was the question of ‘public worship’. I would like to think that those of you who have got this far with my book will robustly declare that God is to be ‘worshipped’ by his people non-stop in every aspect of life, and that saints must take every opportunity to engage in mutual edification with fellow-believers – wherever and whenever they meet, whether spontaneously or by pre-arrangement in set assemblies.

Whatever the response to that may be, I know that I am not quite alone. David Peterson I have quoted extensively, and one or two others in passing, but since there is so much excellent material available I intend to publish an accompanying volume of annotated extracts from a good many others. But this, in itself, adds to my depression over the subject – so little effect for good, it seems, has come from so much fine material; sadly, with

¹⁵ Original ‘favour’. While that may be said of me, I prefer ‘step’ in my case.

¹⁶ Quoted by Anthony Storr: ‘The Man’ in *Churchill: Four Faces and the Man*, Book Club Associates, London, 1969, p209.

¹⁷ Quoted by Roy Jenkins: *Churchill*, Pan Books, 2002, p79 from the biography of Lord Randolph Churchill by his son, Winston S.Churchill.

¹⁸ The quotation comes from James M.Hamilton Jr: *God’s Indwelling Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Old and New Testaments*, B&H Publishing Group, Nashville, 2006, p165.

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apologies to Anna Waring, it looks as though ‘nothing – or very little – changes here’.¹⁹

Nevertheless, let me now pay tribute to some who have raised some of the issues, and tried to do something about them.

I start with John Walker in Ireland in the early nineteenth century. As Grayson Carter observed:

Walker was moving on towards a more radical ecclesiology which in some ways resembled that of the [late] sixteenth-century English Puritans. He soon began to prohibit so-called ‘mixed communion’ (the practice of believers and non-believers uniting in ‘worship’)... Although he did not see united ‘worship’ as intrinsically unlawful,²⁰ he feared that it might give outsiders a false impression of the nature of the true ‘church of Christ’. He even considered removing the chapel’s pews, or at least establishing pews for the regenerate *only*, arguing that as long as believers and unbelievers could sit together, ‘the true church were [*sic*] not sufficiently separated as a body’.²¹

At about the same time, in England:

...Thomas Snow propagated a separatist doctrine... It was unscriptural, Snow claimed, for true Christians to unite with the unconverted in any act of ‘worship’: while he was willing to preach to the unconverted, he could only unite in full ‘worship’ [whatever that may mean – DG] and fellowship with recognised believers.²²

Septimus Sears, the Strict Baptist, in the third quarter of nineteenth-century England, was another who tried:

We feel assured that all we have to do for the unconverted is to preach the gospel to them... and to pray for a divine blessing to rest upon our efforts; and that to put into their lips the language of spiritual ‘worship’... is to lead them to mock their Maker

¹⁹ The hymn ‘In heavenly love abiding’ by Anna Letitia Waring.

²⁰ A fatal flaw in his thinking.

²¹ Grayson Carter: *Anglican Evangelicals: Protestant Secessions from the Via Media, c.1800-1850*, Oxford University Press, 2001, pp84-85, emphasis original.

²² Carter pp128-129.

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with a solemn sound upon a thoughtless tongue, and to come before God with a lie in their right hand.²³

Sears went on to describe how he hoped to avoid the pitfall when producing his *Clifton Hymnal for the Young*.²⁴

I cannot speak for the present, but the Brethren assemblies I knew some sixty years ago were going part of the way back to the new covenant when they thought of the ‘morning meeting’ as ‘a worship service’, and the gathering in the evening as ‘a gospel service’. The time in the morning was exclusively for believers ‘in fellowship’ with the assembly; the time in the evening was public. The latter, however, was – in my experience – a typical time of ‘public worship’.

* * *

So... where now? I am conscious that most believers – even if they happen to come across it – will dismiss my work out of hand: how can Christendom practice, such a tradition, loved by so many, over so many centuries, be wrong? My thesis, to put it politely, will seem hare-brained to the overwhelming majority.

Even so, I have the example and challenge of Josiah (2 Chron. 34:19 – 35:19) to face up to. He knew – God’s word by the prophetic left no room for doubt – that Judah was bound to go into captivity because of their rejection of the covenant and its law. He also knew that this would not happen in his lifetime. How did he respond? Did he throw up his hands on the first count, and sit back and relax – or even bury his head in the sand – on the second? Not a bit of it! *He did what he could!* He did what he could to remove idolatry, to restore the covenant and the law, and to recover the Passover. In other words, despite knowing that his work was doomed to long-term failure, he did what he could.

²³ Septimus Sears: *The Sower*, 1878, p29.

²⁴ While I commend Sears’ effort, for the reasons I have given, it was bound to fail: not least, the reading of Scripture and corporate prayer are all heavily inclusive.

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In my case, I am not privy to what God is going to do, what the future holds. So... however small the possibility that my work will make a difference... here it is.

It may be... it may just be... that a handful of believers will find that I have struck a chord for them. Perhaps others might be stimulated to search the Scriptures for themselves, unblinkered by tradition, man-made systematic theology, or Confession. If so, my work will not have been in vain.

But whatever else may be the result, may God be glorified; that is, 'worshipped'.