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“Free-church Bapto-catholic”: A Story of Possibilities Embraced

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Abstract

From a Baptist congregation in inner-city Melbourne, Australia, comes an example of the postmodern phenomenon of worship constructed by particular communities of Christians, drawing on elements from many sources for texts, music, art and environment. The worship service is described here, with particular attention given to those details which are most illustrative of the distinctive liturgical ethos of this congregation. The description is followed by some historical and theological analysis, and then by the fascinating story of how the congregation developed and reached consensus on a form and style of worship that is at once traditional and contemporary.¹

Description

A congregation of about 35 people gathers at the South Yarra Community Baptist Church each Sunday evening for their weekly celebration of the Eucharist. The space is rich with sensory imagery; subdued lighting, banners, traditional icons, candles, incense and evocative furnishings. A substantial circular table sits right in the middle of the space, with the congregation gathered in a three-quarter circle around it; some seated on the floor and some on chairs, but most standing for much of the liturgy. The gap in the circle is occupied by the lectern from which the scriptures are read and proclaimed. Using a written text which has evolved within the congregation's own life, the liturgy follows the ancient catholic pattern of gathering and approach, scripture readings and sermon, the prayers of the faithful, the celebration of the Table, and sending rites.

As people gather, some greet one another and chat quietly, others spend some time praying and lighting candles before the icons. The opening acclamation is delivered from the lectern:

¹ Emerging worship forms often go by a confusing plethora of labels, but the worship described here would fit very comfortably under the “ancient-future worship” label popularised in the USA by Robert Webber. See, for example, his *Ancient-Future Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999) or www.ancientfutureworship.com

*Blessed is our God, Trinity of Love,
and blessed is the dominion of our God,
now and ever and to the ages of ages!*

All join in hearty “Amen”. Brief welcomes and greetings are delivered, concluding with a trinitarian greeting, before hymns of praise and gathering are sung, usually unaccompanied. During the singing, a thurifer uses incense and bowing to honour the icons — both the hand-crafted ones and the living ones who have walked through the door, and the latter return the bow.

The Paschal candle is lit and the liturgy continues without any obvious leader; various voices, including those of children and some in languages other than English, leading different elements from within the circle and the whole congregation joining in the responses, many of which are sung in acapella harmonies. People obviously know their parts, and a booklet containing the text and a simple commentary enables newcomers to follow and understand what is going on. The extended gathering litany is vaguely reminiscent of the Kyrie litany from the Divine Liturgy of St John Chrysostom. Over fifteen stanzas, it affirms that the congregation understand themselves to be praying in solidarity “with the deep groans of creation yearning for redemption”, “with all who bear the wounds of a broken world and yearn for healing and renewal”, and “with God’s faithful servants of every time and place, all our mothers and fathers among the saints”, a selection of whom are named, spanning many traditions and twenty centuries, with no regard for formalities of canonisation. Each stanza closes with a refrain sung by all: *Into your communion, Lord, gather all creation.*

Many kneel during the prayers of confession which are also in a litany form with a sung refrain. After a general declaration of forgiveness based on the lections for the day, the absolution is personalised as each person in turn around the circle marks the sign of the cross on their neighbour’s forehead, and says, “Brother/Sister, your sins are forgiven. Be at peace.” Then follows an exuberant singing of the *Gloria in Excelsis*, with the congregation standing, many with hands raised orans style.

The Bible is processed around the inside of the circle, and most people bow as it passes. The congregation prays:

*Send your Holy Spirit upon us,
that your Word may take root*

*in the secret places of our hearts
and bear much fruit to your glory.*

The three readings and canticle set for the week in the Revised Common Lectionary are read from an Australian paraphrase² which often startles visitors who are used to contexts where the worship mainly utilises informal language and the most formal language is reserved for the scripture readings. Here it is intentionally the other way around, and the juxtaposition compels attention to the scriptures. The first two readings are each followed by two minutes of contemplative silence. After the gospel is read from the centre of the room, framed by sung acclamations of Alleluia, the following exchange takes place:

L: *Lest the Word of life be lost,
let us allow God to confront us
in the sound of sheer silence.*
C: *Spirit of comfort and conviction,
unclothe me of my pride,
unweave my thoughts,
uncomplicate my heart,
and give me surrender,
that I may welcome the deep silence
which stands at the centre of my being
like the rock at the heart of our land.*

This exchange introduces a ten minute “sermon of silence”, during which the people sit or kneel in silent contemplation and reflection. The silence is broken by a short recorded Gregorian Alleluia, and the preacher comes to the lectern and preaches a sermon based on one or more of the lections, and lasting about fifteen minutes. The congregation stands and affirms the faith of the church by singing the Apostles Creed in a two part harmony, during which they are sprinkled with water as a reminder of their identity as a people baptised into Christ and into the faith of his Church.

The intercessory Prayers of the People, take place in a stational form with about five minutes set aside for people to move around at will among eight different prayer stations, several of which are devoted to intercession for particular types of need in the world:

*for the care of the earth and the web of life on which we all depend;
for reconciliation and justice wherever there is conflict, abuse or oppression;
for those who are sick, hurting, fearful, despairing or grieving;
for those who work for good with integrity and faithfulness;*

² The paraphrases can be found on the congregation’s *Laughing Bird Liturgical Resources* website at www.laughingbird.net

and for the whole of Christ's Church, with all its life, prayer and ministry.

Some offer prayers out loud, while others write or draw their prayers, or symbolise their prayer by lighting candles, arranging flowers, or hanging flags. The intercessions culminate with people returning to their places as they sing the Lord's Prayer.

The invitation to the Table affirms that

*We stand at the threshold of the ultimate feast
when all who hunger will be fed
and the new wine of justice will be poured.
But even now, Christ invites us to his table,
to taste the first fruits
and be nourished for the journey.
Whosoever will, may come:
not because you are worthy,
nor because any church gives permission,
but simply because Jesus offers himself to you,
and you want to offer yourself in return.*

Greetings of peace are exchanged after those gathered affirm that

*though we are a company of strangers,
in approaching this table,
we bind ourselves to one another
to live in love and peace from this day forth.*

The Table is set by the children while a communion hymn is sung. The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving, with a weekly proper preface, would be familiar in shape and content to worshippers from most major liturgical traditions, and so only some extracts are reproduced here. The post-Sanctus thanksgiving (during ordinary time) proceeds:

*Blessed are you, O God,
who sets the table of creation
and invites us to feast with you
in a cosmic celebration of love and desire.
We thank you for Jesus,
whose life, prayer and ministry
opened our eyes to the glory of life
and fuelled our hunger
for your long anticipated reign
of justice, mercy and peace.
We thank you for Christ's passionate solidarity
with the suffering of all the earth;
for as he bore in his own body the wounds of creation,
he embraced us in our brokenness
and gathered us into his wholeness
so that we might know ourselves beloved
and serve with him as priests forever
in an all-embracing eucharist.*

Throughout the prayer, there is no single presider. The whole congregation stands around the Table and numerous voices contribute to the prayer. The prayer reaches its climax with the calling down of the Holy Spirit, symbolised by the whole congregation extending their hands towards the bread and wine and singing “come, Holy Spirit, come.”

*Come and brood over these bodily things,
this bread and this wine.*

*May they be for us the body and blood of Christ;
healing, renewing and making us whole.*

Come, Holy Spirit, Come.*(sung)*

*Come and embrace us with your life-giving power
that as bread and wine are made one with us,
we may become one with you;
bone of your bone, flesh of your flesh.*

Come, Holy Spirit, Come.*(sung)*

*Come and make of your gathered people
the real presence of Christ for the world,
living our prayer and praying our life
till earth and heaven are reconciled,
and all are free as Christ is free.*

(sung) ***Glory be to you, O God,***

Father, Son and Holy Spirit;

— one God and Mother of all creation —

as in the beginning,

so now, and forever.

Amen!

A pastor steps forward to the Table and breaks the loaf of bread; fresh baked and with the traditional inscription in buckwheat dough on top. Bread and wine are elevated and announced as “holy things for holy people,” to which the congregation replies in song:

*Only one is holy,
Jesus Christ!
In him, and him alone,
all things are made holy
to the glory and praise of God!*

Then follows the exchange:

L: *Let us receive what we are;
let us become what we receive:*
C: *the body of Christ.*

The bread is passed from hand to hand around the circle with each person taking a piece before serving the next person. During the distribution of the bread, the wine is poured into individual wine glasses (proper wine glasses - not tiny shot glasses!). At the invitation,

“Come, receive the new wine — a taste of the joy to come — and let us raise our glasses as one,” the people all approach the Table, take a glass, and step back into the circle. One voice calls out, “The blood of Christ keep you in eternal life,” and all raise their glasses and respond, “Until he comes,” with the children sounding especially enthusiastic in this response. All then drink together.³

An *Agnus Dei* is sung, and then the liturgy concludes with “sending rites” which include a covenant prayer, and affirm a commitment to taking the spirit of the Eucharist out into daily living, “making it our first work to love; and bearing witness in our words and our lives that the Reign of God has come.” A hymn is sung and a blessing given, and then the people gradually disperse, many staying a while to light candles and pray before the icons, or to receive prayer with the laying on of hands, before moving into the hospitality area for conversation over a nibbles and drinks.

Locating this Liturgy in Postmodernity and Baptist Traditions

Since the Baptist movement was not founded on a distinctive liturgical style, and since Baptists make their liturgical decisions at the congregational level, there is (at least potentially) endless diversity among Baptist churches in the style of their worship, especially their celebration of the Lord’s Table, and in their interpretation of what they are doing. The celebration described here cannot therefore be taken as typical, but represents the growing influence among some Baptists of two recent forces. The first is the recent ecumenical waves of liturgical renewal with their scholarly recovery of knowledge of ancient Christian practices and beliefs. This influence though, is here expressed with a distinctly free-church attitude to the production and authorisation of liturgical texts and practices. This attitude finds a natural counterpart in the second recent force: the ethos of postmodern culture, with its global eclecticism, its localised (rather than institutional) tribalism, and its subversion of hierarchical social and authority structures. Baptists have traditionally been evangelistically active, and so the emergence of a new cultural ethos will inevitably prompt a liturgical ferment as they seek ways of repackaging their worship to engage with the genuine spiritual yearnings of the communities in which they find themselves. The liturgical style of the South Yarra congregation may therefore be

³ For an exploration of the symbolism of this practice, see the article “Thinking the Unthinkable: A Theological Defence of Individual Cups at the Table” by the same author, in a forthcoming issue of *Studia Liturgica*.

understood as an experimental response to the post-modern generation's rising interest in forms of communal ritual which are rooted in ancient forms, engage the full range of senses, and lead to a more integrative and contemplative spirituality.

Baptists have been known for a widespread ambivalence towards written liturgical texts. Since their beginnings, the significance they have ascribed to personal sincerity and extempore prayer has frequently expressed itself in a distrust and even outright rejection of pre-composed liturgical materials. At the same time, however, the steady increase in the amount of singing in Baptist worship has meant that more and more of their worship is dependent on the use of written liturgical texts. Indeed, the widespread use of hymnals as a source of spiritual writings to aid personal devotion is evidence of how Baptists came to value the impressive function of written texts,⁴ even if they have often failed to recognise its correlation with the use of prayer books in other traditions. Historically, the Baptist aversion to scripted liturgies was born of a principled opposition to the English Parliament's edicts of conformity which accompanied each edition of the Book of Common Prayer. In theory, the commitment to the liturgical freedom of the local congregation meant the freedom *to* adopt a prayer-book liturgical style just as much as it meant the freedom to forgo such a style. In practice though, it is really only with the recent advent of desk-top publishing (and/or data projection) that it became logistically and financially possible for individual congregations to develop and produce their own liturgical texts. The eclectic but formally scripted liturgical style of the South Yarra congregation is, thus, an example of the embrace of the liturgical possibilities which are newly opened up for free-church congregations by the information technologies of the postmodern era.

One of the things that surprised us along the way was that a formal scripted liturgy is, in fact, particularly suited to children and to adults with language or learning disabilities. There are several reasons for this. The use of repetition – spoken, sung, structural and visual – makes the service easy to memorise over time, whether or not people can read. We have had children bellowing out parts of the liturgy from the age of two or so, sometimes in the supermarket as well as in church! During the service, we encourage participation rather than performance. As part of this, every regular attendee, including each child, has several parts during the service; the effect is that the service is spoken by many voices, with no voice dominating. The children also have roles in which they can

⁴ Christopher Ellis, "Baptist Worship" in Paul Bradshaw (ed.), *The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002) p.55

move about – they process with icons; dance as we sing; hold the Bible during the readings; and set the communion table.

The repetition of the formal liturgy has also opened up possibilities for the inclusion of languages other than English. We now regularly have some prayers led out loud in other languages — Chinese, Arabic, French, German and Italian — and it is quite seamless because everyone else has the English translation in front of them if they can't remember what is being said. Although the speakers of these languages can all speak quite good English, the inclusion of their first languages communicates our valuing of their heritage and it is a Pentecost gift to us all.

The feature of this celebration which would perhaps be most surprising to Christians from the mainstream liturgical traditions is one with deep roots in historic Baptist convictions, and that is the shared nature of the presiding at the Table and the radical invisibility of ordained clergy. Although there are usually several ordained pastors present in the congregation, their liturgical leadership is expressed in the ordering of worship and the liturgical formation of the congregation, rather than in representational presiding. As is evident in their approach to church government, Baptists generally perceive the representative presence of Christ in the whole gathered congregation of the baptised, rather than focussed in any one member of it. In the celebration described here, this conviction can be seen being given sacramental expression in an understanding of the gathered community as presider. This is not the same as the “lay presidency” position being advocated in some churches. Instead of arguing that “any member can do it”, this position asserts that “only the gathered congregation can do it” on the grounds that where two or three gather in his name, there is Christ, embodied in them, presiding at his own Table. In technical terms, sacramental authority is located in the baptised status of the gathered congregation rather than in the ordained status of any individual present. This approach to the “priesthood of the whole congregation” is perhaps the most distinctive aspect of Baptist eucharistic thinking,⁵ and is highly congruent with the fiercely egalitarian ethos of the postmodern generations.

⁵ For a more detailed explanation of this view, see Nathan Nettleton, “Eucharistic Celebration: A Baptist perspective” in T Knowles (ed) *Eucharist: Experience & Testimony* (Melbourne: David Lovell Publishing, 2001) p.180-185.

How we got there⁶

The origins of the South Yarra congregation's journey into its "bapto-catholic" liturgical style are bound up with aspects of my personal journey as its pastor for the last twenty years. When I first arrived, the congregation's worship style was a contemporary form of the traditional reformed Service of the Word, with communion included twice a month. Although they were more comfortable with explicit structure and responsive prayers than some congregations, their liturgical style was not strange to Baptists in Australia or Britain. I had just begun my academic journey into liturgical studies, but I had not developed any real liturgical spirituality of my own, and was not anticipating any radical reordering of the congregation's worship.

About three years after I arrived, I spent four days on retreat at the Holy Transfiguration Monastery in Geelong, a regional centre about an hour's drive from Melbourne. It is a predominantly Baptist monastery, which tells you that our later liturgical experimentation is not unprecedented in Australian Baptist life! Having been deeply affected by their rhythm of daily prayer and their dedicated prayerful spaces, I began a simple pattern of daily office prayer at home in a more liturgical style than I had previously been used to. Over time, others joined me and it grew into a small group who met weekly for contemplative liturgical prayer, and further along that grew into a regular Wednesday night Eucharist service. It was as different from our Sunday morning service as you could imagine. Drawing on my experiences at the monastery, on my still raw liturgical scholarship, and on a range of published resources from the likes of the French Taizé Community and Scotland's Iona Community, I prepared a fully scripted liturgy, which was used every week without changing. We sang unaccompanied. There was no preaching (because I was not going to take on a second sermon each week) but after the three readings we had a twenty minute "sermon of silence". We used candles and icons and incense, without a great deal of understanding of what we were doing other than creating an atmosphere of prayerfulness and openness to the mysterious presence of the risen Christ. The Wednesday night Eucharist was understood, not as competition to the Sunday morning gathering, but as an alternative for those seeking to supplement their liturgical diet with something more prayerful and contemplative. It was never attended by more than about ten people, but it became very special to those who were regularly part of it. A number of them used to say

⁶ At this point I intentionally switch to a first-person narrative style.

that they went to the Sunday morning service for fellowship, but the Wednesday night Eucharist for worship and prayer.

After that service had been going for about two years, there was a big disaster in the wider congregation. Our most prominent lay leader was accused of sustained sexual harassment by several women, and the resulting sense of betrayal and disillusionment saw the church fall apart over the next twelve months. With only about twenty people left, we were faced with some tough decisions about what, if anything, we could continue to do. Maintaining two different worship services certainly looked like more effort than it was worth. After a process of soul-searching around the question of what things we had to do to justify our ongoing existence, the congregation named its core business as worship and the spiritual formation of people. Outreach was seen as a question we would have to return to if our viability was established, but as something we could give ourselves permission to put to one side while we got our core business in order.

So discussions began about what direction our worship might take, with the participants from both worship services sharing their views about what mattered most in worship. Suddenly, an important realisation dawned: we hadn't lost any of the people who had been regularly involved in the Wednesday night Eucharist. Obviously we needed to try to answer the question why, and so we created an opportunity for those people to tell their stories to the rest of the congregation. They all spoke of considerable growth in their faith, and especially in their abilities to pray. The recent history proved that they had gained some strength and perseverance from it, unmatched in the Sunday service. The rest of the congregation agreed that since we seemed to be facing extinction anyway, there was nothing to lose and they'd be willing to try going that direction. Perhaps it was a failure of nerve, but we first tried to hybridise the styles of our two services, and successfully achieved the worst of both worlds! After three months of that (and much to my surprise because I didn't foresee it) a church meeting voted to abolish the Sunday morning service completely and go the whole way with what had been our alternative Wednesday night service. We shifted it to Sunday night, and revamped it with the addition of preaching and some hymns, but essentially we went for broke: a classically catholic high church liturgical style - minus the clerical monopoly - in a Baptist church!

In the process of introducing it to the wider congregation, we first had a series of three or four Sunday afternoon workshops, where we explored the different parts of the liturgy,

talking about what they meant and practising the music and action. In the course of doing this, a number of minor revisions were proposed to improve the clarity or beauty of various texts, or to remove possible unfortunate misunderstandings in some of them. This process set a precedent for a congregational approach to future liturgical revisions. There is now a well established process in place which is followed whenever the pastors (or anyone else, but it is usually the pastors) wish to propose a significant change. A written description of the proposal and an explanation of the reasons are circulated to the congregation on our email discussion list. Discussion continues for as long as necessary, and is sometimes quite lively. If there is enough good will emerging, the proposal is usually given a trial run during one of the shorter seasonal liturgies. A final consensus is then sought in a congregational business meeting. So far, the only proposed changes that were rejected were when the pastors got it into their heads that the liturgy was too long and tried to shorten it (it usually takes 100 to 110 minutes). There was barely a line we could cut that the congregation was willing to give up. A Baptist congregation had become deeply wedded to its liturgical texts, and we pastors eventually realised that no one was actually asking for a shorter liturgy!

Over the next two and a half years, the decision to commit ourselves entirely to this “bapto-catholic” Eucharistic liturgy continued to feel right because it was deeply healing and nurturing to our people. However, our belief that it would ultimately bear fruit in growing numbers of attenders grew thin as we continued to dwindle. The decline continued until we were averaging only twelve people at worship, and when a young couple announced that they were moving interstate, we thought that it would probably finish us off. But about that time, two things happened. Firstly, something quite intangible that we still can’t adequately explain: several people noticed that we seemed to have crossed an invisible line in our journey into this new liturgical style. It no longer felt like we were pretenders trying to be something. It was now really us. We’d somehow grown into it, or it had taken root in us. And secondly, we began to run some workshops advertised widely among Baptist churches, called “Ancient Wisdom for Tomorrow’s Worship”. The workshops were basically an introduction to the theology and practice of our liturgy, designed to overcome some of the uncomprehending shock many Baptist people had when first encountering it. Some of the people who came to the workshops started coming back, and others told their friends and their friends came for a look, and some of them stayed. Two and a half years later, we are averaging about thirty five at worship, and the

problem we were talking about was the problem of growing too fast. It does have its problems, but of the range of problems a church can face, it is one of the better ones!

So that's the story of how we became the "bells and smells" Baptists from down under! We are something of an oddity in Baptist circles, but we were not the first, and we continue to hear reports of other such experiments emerging as the free-churches encounter postmodernity and the ecumenical fruits of liturgical renewal. For us, there is no going back now; it has taught us to drink even more deeply from the wells of salvation and to share our life and hope with others in an increasingly all-inclusive life-giving community.

Conclusion

The theologically and sensually rich liturgies of the South Yarra Community Baptist Church are a classic example of an emerging postmodern liturgical form which some have dubbed the Ancient-Future Worship movement. There are at least two different ways of explaining the impetus behind this movement, and the truth is probably in some combination of both. One would describe it as a pragmatic response to the post-modern generation's rising interest in forms of communal ritual which are rooted in ancient forms, engage the full range of senses, and lead to a more integrative and contemplative spirituality. If this explanation is followed, the thing which sets the movement apart from those groups that have drifted into various new-age mysticisms is the conviction that the necessary forms and resources are to be found in the theological and liturgical heritage of the early Church. The second explanation would see this movement as a belated evangelical appropriation of the fruits of the twentieth century liturgical renewals in the wider Christian Church. If this explanation is followed, the things which set the movement apart from the established liturgical churches is a very free-church attitude to the authorisation of liturgical practices and texts. In their use of space, ceremony, and texts, varying styles are seen within the movement. Some appear deliberately archaic, while many others exhibit a playful juxtaposition of the ancient and modern. Generally, though, they tend to exhibit clear connections with both classical Christian traditions and contemporary and local creativity, and it is from and through this fluid and eclectic mix that these congregations seek to offer themselves as vibrant communities of worship to the glory of God.