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THE PRACTICAL WORSHIP THEOLOGY OF ROBERT E. WEBBER

A Thesis submitted to Middlesex University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

Jonathan Andrew Powers

Middlesex University

Supervised at London School of Theology

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Abstract

This thesis defends the hypothesis that Robert E. Webber's special contribution to the field of worship studies is his development of a practical worship theology for American evangelicals that centers on Christological proclamation and participation through the integration of traditional liturgical practices and contemporary forms. The claim of the thesis is that Webber's practical worship theology is his attempt to guide a "liturgical recapitulation" of American evangelical worship via four key principles. First, Webber emphasizes the recovery of liturgical practices and principles from the early centuries of the church, seeking to root worship in common historic patterns (historic-rootedness). Second, Webber focuses on embedding God's narrative in American evangelical worship, ensuring that all aspects of worship are Christocentric (narrative quality). Third, Webber advocates for the active participation of the congregation in worship, implementing liturgical practices contextually to foster a deeper connection to Christ and to one another (participatory engagement). Fourth, Webber seeks to recalibrate the experiential dynamic of evangelical worship, orienting it as a transformative encounter with Christ's life, death, and resurrection (evangelical experience). All these principles converge around a *Christus Victor* motif that emphasizes Christ's triumph over sin and death, underscoring for Webber the redemptive and transformative power of worship that centers on the risen Christ. Webber thus dedicates his practical worship theology to preserving Christological content and praxis in worship to inspire American evangelicals to adopt practices that evoke congregational participation in proclaiming and enacting the story of Jesus. His goal not only is to provide a guide to evangelicals for planning Christ-centered worship but also to develop good worshipers.

Dedication

For Drew McNeill and Mike Powers. You taught me how to worship and how to keep worship about Jesus.

Acknowledgements

Deepest appreciation goes to my wife, Faith, who has supported me, encouraged me, and extended endless patience to me in our whole life together, but especially over the years I have worked on this thesis. Thank you for bearing with me as I have gone on retreats and stayed up late at night to write. I also thank my daughters, Audrey and Elizabeth, for all the pictures, bracelets, and sculptures they made for me as a way of saying they appreciate me even when I was not able to play with them. I am excited for more family game nights now that this thesis is complete.

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Finally, I would be remiss not to thank the faculty, staff, administration, and Chi cohort at the Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies for orienting me to Robert Webber and his practical worship theology. I hope this thesis affirms and confirms the vital Kingdom work you are doing in carrying out Webber's vision for worship renewal through the person and work of Jesus Christ. *Soli Deo gloria*.

Contents

Introduction to the Thesis

1. Introduction

"The road to the future runs through the past." Such was the refrain of the evangelical thought-leader and worship theologian Robert "Bob" Eugene Webber (1933-2007).[1] The dictum was his battle-cry for reform, a cry that many who identify with Webber's approach to worship renewal echo today. Reliance upon the orienting nature of the past for contemporary improvement was Webber's position in all things related to the Christian faith. He treated the past as a compass and faithful guide, allowing it to direct his work for four decades as he labored as an agent of reform in the field of worship.[2] To proceed into the future heedless of history was to risk embarking on a foolish and fruitless endeavor, he believed. Webber thus urged American evangelicals to retrieve their past, elevating ancient Christian principles and practices as the indispensable vehicle of renewal. If evangelicals desired future prosperity, contemporary recovery of the ancient tradition was essential.[3]

The significance of Robert E. Webber's work in American evangelical worship reform cannot be overstated, though its study has been scarce. At the turn of the twenty-first century, Webber was one of the most influential voices on worship in American evangelicalism. As evangelical church leaders were pre-occupied with conversations over style, Webber offered an approach to worship that focused on both theology and practice centered in historic Christological commitments. His prolific writing and unique perspective made him a much sought-after speaker in churches and at worship conferences. Of the fifty-two books Webber published over his career, twenty-five were on worship. Another nine included sections on worship. Webber also contributed chapters on worship to eight collected works, served as the general editor of *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, wrote a seven-volume worship

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[1] The phrase can be seen in the following books by Webber: *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 7; *Ancient-Future Evangelism: Making Your Church a Faith-Forming Community* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 10; *Ancient-Future Time: Forming Spirituality through the Christian Year* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 11; *The Divine Embrace: Recovering the Passionate Spiritual Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 23; *Ancient-Future Worship Proclaiming and Enacting God's Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 20. Also see Webber's *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail: Why Evangelicals Are Attracted to the Liturgical Church* (Waco: Word Books, 1985), 9-85 for autobiographical material detailing his draw to church tradition.

[2] Webber published his call to "ancient-future" reform in every decade of his career as an author. See *Common Roots: A Call to Evangelical Maturity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), *The Majestic Tapestry: How the Power of the Early Christian Tradition Can Enrich Contemporary Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986), *Ancient-Future Faith* (1999), and *Ancient-Future Worship* (2008).

[3] Webber, *Common Roots*, 14.

curriculum entitled *The Alleluia! Series*, contributed a monthly submission to *Worship Leader Magazine*, and published three prayer books: *The Book of Daily Prayer* (1993), *The Book of Family Prayer* (1996), and *The Prymer: The Prayer Book of the Medieval Era Adapted for Contemporary Use* (2000). Moreover, throughout his career Webber regularly traveled across the United States to consult with churches on worship. In 1999 he founded the Institute for Worship Studies (IWS) to educate church leaders on the biblical foundations, historical development, theological reflection, and cultural analysis he believed necessary for effective worship ministry in the contemporary world.[4] Webber passed away in 2007 following a battle with pancreatic cancer, but his legacy continues via the many books and articles he published, the conferences and workshops he led, and the curricular values he implemented at IWS.

Although Webber believed his worship principles could be applied in any context, his target demographic was American evangelicalism. Despite being confirmed in the Episcopal Church in the United States of America late in life, he was an evangelical who spoke to American evangelicals. His life was immersed in exemplary pillars of American evangelicalism. Webber was the son of American Baptist missionaries. He graduated from Bob Jones University and served as a professor of historical theology at Wheaton College for thirty-one years as well as the William R. and Geraldyn B. Myers professor of ministry at Northern Seminary for seven years. He was familiar with the evangelical tradition and felt his constructive critique of evangelical worship came from an insider's perspective.

Webber sought reform in American evangelical worship through the fashioning of a practical worship theology that he believed allowed the past to appraise the present state of American evangelicalism and influence its future.[5] Such a theology was necessary because Webber saw American evangelicalism standing at a critical crossroad at the end of the twentieth century as it faced unprecedented changes in worship that had taken place over the previous century. He considered the twentieth century a time rife with innovation in worship practice. In *Worship Old and New,* Webber identifies six predominant renewal movements that occurred during the twentieth century: the holiness-Pentecostal movement; the liturgical reform in the Roman Catholic Church; worship renewal among mainline Protestants; the Charismatic renewal movement; the Praise and Worship movement; and the convergence of

[4] Robert E. Webber, "A Letter from our Founding President," The Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies, accessed August 12, 2021, https://iws.edu/about/who/robert-e-webber/.

[5] See Webber, *Common Roots*, 13.

worship traditions.[6] In addition to these six movements, Webber includes in the second volume of his *Complete Library of Christian Worship* entries on twentieth century renewal movements among Eastern Rite Catholic Churches, the Antiochean Evangelical Orthodox Mission, and the Seekers' Service/Believers' Worship movement.[7] Given these changes and innovation in worship practice, disputes had erupted in both evangelical and mainline congregations at the turn of the twenty-first century over stylistic preferences. The result was an ecclesial phenomenon called the "worship wars."[8] Webber perceived two dominant factions in these wars. On one side he saw what he called "traditionalists," namely church leaders and laity who desired to hold to familiar forms of worship handed down by their denomination or particular ecclesial fellowship.[9] On the other side were those he called "pragmatists" who desired a more contemporary approach to worship and set their sights on rejuvenating worship through new, charismatic, and experiential means in lieu of former conventional practices.[10] Disagreements ran rampant between traditionalists and those seeking contemporary expressions. At the end of the twentieth century many American churches were left in a volatile state. David Di Sabatino reflects in response to the debate of traditional versus contemporary forms of worship: "My head is swirling. There is a sense in which I find myself in agreement with whatever I heard last."[11]

The dichotomy between traditionalist and contemporary sympathizers troubled Webber and demonstrated to him that evangelicals were fixated on atheological matters of worship grounded in personal preference.[12] Furthermore, he identified a suppressed historical consciousness among evangelicals on both sides of the divide, resulting in an estrangement from the rich treasury of resources from the collective spirituality of God's people, which he claimed also contributed to a diminished vision of God.[13] Attention needed to be redirected to critical theological concepts more normative to

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[6] See Robert E. Webber, *Worship Old and New: Revised Edition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 121-133.

[7] See Robert E. Webber, *Twenty Centuries of Christian Worship*, *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, ed. Robert E. Webber, vol. 2 (Nashville: Star Song, 1994), 105-141.

[8] See Swee Hong Lim and Lester Ruth, *Lovin' on Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2017), 11-12; and Thomas G. Long, *Beyond the Worship Wars: Building Vital and Faithful Worship* (Herndon: The Alban Institute, 2001), 15.

[9] Robert E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing Challenges of the New World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 187.

[10] See Robert E. Webber, "The Praise-and-Worship Renewal," in *Twenty Centuries of Christian Worship*, 131-134.

[11] Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 187.

[12] See Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 84 and *Signs of Wonder: The Phenomenon of Convergence in Modern Liturgical and Charismatic Churches* (Nashville: Star Song, 1992), 5-11.

[13] Webber, *Signs of Wonder*, 9-10.

worship, Webber insisted, specifically the content of worship rooted in the story of God's mighty acts of redemption through the person and work of Jesus Christ.[14] Such Christological re-centering of worship was necessary for evangelicals to embody a truly evangelical spirit of worship.[15]

Webber's circumvention of style and primary focus on Christological content and praxis made him an important figure in discussions on worship at the end of the twentieth century.[16] He was determined to help evangelical church leaders focus on theological matters of worship amid rapid stylistic changes. He believed the invariable Christological content of worship was central to the evangelical identity and that Christology was expressed and protected within historic liturgy. Contemporary evangelicals simply needed to rediscover it. Webber viewed style as an important contextual factor in the communication, expression, and participation of worship, but he did not advocate dismissing old forms in favor of new advancements. Instead, he challenged evangelical church leaders to approach worship with a healthy respect for the ancient liturgical tradition while being fully committed to contemporary relevance.[17] He therefore advanced a theology of worship in contemporary evangelicalism that remained in tune with the dynamic, historic faith as well as ever-evolving cultural patterns.[18] While the label Webber used for his method shifted over his career, (i.e. first "blended," then "convergent," and finally "ancient-future"), the underlying spirit of his paradigm remained consistent: worship should maintain a healthy respect for tradition while staying fully committed to present-day significance and applicability.[19] By drawing spiritual insights and experiences from a variety of liturgical traditions, not only would worship be enriched but evangelical churches would see their own tradition in light of a greater theological whole.[20] Combining the old with the new held power to nourish, sustain, and bring healing.

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[14] Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 84.

[15] Webber, *Common Roots*, 17. Cf. Webber: *Worship Old and New* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 16-17; *Worship is a Verb*, 27-46; *Signs of Wonder*, 76-77; *The Majestic Tapestry*, 80-83; *Worship Old and New*, revised ed., 67-68; *Ancient-Future Faith*, 102-104; *Ancient-Future Worship*, 108-111.

[16] For more on the impact of Webber's career, see Joan Huyser-Honig and Darrell Harris, "Robert E. Webber's Legacy: Ancient Future Faith and Worship," last modified May 18, 2007, accessed August 5, 2018, https://worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource-library/robert-e-webber-s-legacy-ancient-future-faith-and-worship/

[17] Webber, *Worship Old and New*, revised ed., 13.

[18] Ibid., 15.

[19] The term "ancient-future" is used in this thesis to describe Webber's practical worship theology.

[20] Webber, *Signs of Wonder*, 56.

Offering his corrective to American evangelicalism, Webber approached worship theologically and practically while also attempting to maintain a distinct, historic evangelical character. As a trained historical theologian, Webber was interested in how practices of worship in the early centuries embodied theological truth claims. His way of making those truth claims accessible and connecting them to the experiences and practices of lived religion in the present-day church made him a sought-after pastoral leader and teacher.[21] Moreover, his commitment to Christological content in worship through the proclamation of the story of God's saving work through Jesus Christ meant he did not abandon his evangelical heritage even though he was devoted to the regular liturgical and sacramental rhythms of the Book of Common Prayer (BCP) in Anglicanism. Webber held Anglican worship in high regard precisely because he believed the liturgy in the BCP fosters congregational participation in Christological content and proclamation. Anglicanism thus provided him an accessible framework for offering historic liturgical practices to contemporary evangelicals.

Considering his commitments, Webber's practical worship theology was integrative, attempting to maintain a unique Christological and evangelical character while harmonizing theological principles and ecclesial practices. Webber also was mindful of the importance of context when developing his practical worship theology, especially as it related to fostering active participation in local worshiping communities. His attention to contextual factors in worship kept him attuned to the living reality of the universal church as well as the life and local expression of the Christian community, a characteristic Pete Ward suggests is fundamental to the discipline of practical theology.[22] Webber did not set out to prescribe a single expression of worship but to articulate principles that put each local worshiping community in a good place to think clearly about its own worship.[23] Moreover, his practical worship theology paid attention both to how liturgical activity preserved theology and doctrine and to how cultural forms fostered congregational participation in worship. He was convinced that theology, liturgy, experience, and culture work together in an inseparable relationship to faithfully embody the Gospel through word and action in worship.[24] At its most fundamental level, therefore, Webber constructed his practical worship theology to return evangelical worship to its historic

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[21] Huyser-Honig, "Robert E. Webber's Legacy."

[22] Pete Ward, *Participation and Mediation: A Practical Theology for the Liquid Church* (Norwich: Hymns Ancient & Modern, 2008), 35.

[23] Webber, *Worship Old and New*, revised ed., 151.

[24] Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 168.

Christological character conveyed in liturgical practice and lived out in its varied mosaic of cultural expression.[25] His approach not only sought to honor the richness of Christian tradition but also to ensure that worship remains a dynamic, living expression of faith that resonates within diverse congregational contexts, thereby fostering an authentic and a participatory worship experience.

2. Worship and practical theology

This thesis is an analysis of Robert E. Webber's practical worship theology. The thesis categorizes and positions Webber's work within a framework of practical theology. The term "practical worship theology," therefore, warrants definition and description.

Practical theology is a complex field of study, not least of all due to its varied history. Practical theology first originated in Europe as an academic specialization through the work of Fredrick Schleiermacher (1768-1834), who set forth the discipline as an academic subject worthy of inclusion in the university curriculum. Schleiermacher advocated that practical theology should follow a clear scientific process beginning with philosophical reflection on cognate disciplines like systematic theology, historical theology, biblical studies, doctrine, and ethics, and ending in general ministry application.[26] Schleiermacher's vision for practical theology was the professional training of clergy through academic engagement with source criticism and evidential argumentation. He believed academic rigor was necessary if professional clergy were to develop theories and practices necessary for the formation of ecclesial life through worship, song, prayer, preaching, catechesis, mission, and pastoral care.[27] All theological disciplines exist under the umbrella of practical theology, according to Schleiermacher, and are employed through it to accomplish the goal of shaping the life of the church.[28]

As practical theology spread to English universities, the discipline found a home in church colleges rather than research universities. Attention was given to pastoral interests over academic research. From the outset, practical theology in the United Kingdom was separated from other academic disciplines and designated as "pastoral theology." Students of practical theology were expected to commit to the

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[25] See Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 192-193.

[26] Wilhelm Gräb, "Practical Theology as Theology of Religion: Schleiermacher's Understanding of Practical Theology as a Discipline," in *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 9 (2005): 181–96.

[27] David Grumett, "Practical theology: The past, present and future of a concept," in *Theology in Scotland*, 22 (2015): 5-26.

[28] Gräb, "Practical Theology as Theology of Religion," 181.

practice of ministry and learn from a combination of theoretical clerical sources and ministerial services.[29] Until recent decades, the United Kingdom (save for schools in Scotland like the Universities of Edinburgh, Glasgow, and St. Andrews) has continued to refer to education for ministry training in subjects like preaching, worship and the sacraments, pastoral care, catechesis, church administration, and missiology as pastoral theology rather than practical theology.[30]

By contrast, ministerial training in America retained the designation of practical theology while "pastoral theology" has been used to describe practical approaches to pastoral care and counseling.[31] In recent years, new theories and models of practical theology have emerged in both America and the United Kingdom. These models and theories focus on societal realities outside of the church in addition to ecclesial concerns. Practical theologians are taught to engage with the social sciences and with anthropology to interpret and evaluate social situations and to develop new praxis. The discipline includes the relationship between theological learning, inter-disciplinary research, and the actual experience and needs of Christian communities. While practical theology continues to be a method of training pastoral leaders in ecclesial, academic, and social institutions—critically evaluating theological approaches to religious practices, traditions, and experiences—there is no set model or approach.[32]

At its most basic level, practical theology is defined as "the relation of theory to practice" which "extends systematic theology into the life and praxis of the Christian community."[33] What distinguishes practical theology as a discipline today and makes it a difficult area of study is that practical theology does not exist in isolation but finds itself situated within a larger body of theological activity. Practical theology is committed to unifying Christian thought and praxis by bringing together varied aspects of the faith that cannot and should not be separated from one another. The discipline holds a number of factors in creative tension, such as: theory and practice; doxology

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[29] Pete Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology: Mission, Ministry, and the Life of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 72.

[30] David Grumett, "Practical theology: The past, present and future of a concept," 7-8.

[31] See Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 71.

[32] For a treatment of the varied approaches to practical theology, see: Ray S. Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis*, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2001); Paul Ballard and John Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action: Christian Thinking in the Service of Church and Society*, 2nd ed. (London: SPCK, 1996); Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1991); Glenn Packiam, *Worship and the World to Come: Exploring Christian Hope in Contemporary Worship* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2020); Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*. The work of Hellen Collins is especially noteworthy as she seeks to set forth a distinctly evangelical approach to doing practical theology. See Hellen Collins, *Reordering Theological Reflection: Starting with Scripture* (Norfolk: SCM Press, 2020).

[33] Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology*, 3, 14.

and mission; religious tradition and contemporary religious experience; description (i.e., what is) and prescription (i.e., what ought to be); the religious community and the society outside of it; particular situational realities and transcendent theological principles; and virtue development and cultural engagement.[34] According to Richard Osmer, the four core questions to be asked in practical theology are: What is going on?; Why is this going on?; What ought to be going on?; How might we respond?[35] These questions guide the practical theologian through attentive observation and listening in order to apply theological theories to situations, episodes, and contexts, to gain new perspectives on what is going on in the life of a local congregation, and to develop strategies for what ought to be happening in ecclesial praxis.[36]

As can be seen in Osmer's approach, the overarching objective of practical theology is to bridge abstract theology to the theology embodied in the life of a local church, and vice versa. Through the wedding of theory and practice, practical theologians seek to increase knowledge of a theological subject while also honing skills that communicate and apply attained knowledge in the lived, cultural expressions of the church in a particular place and time. An axial relationship exists between practical theology and other theological disciplines. While other disciplines inform, influence, and guide practical theology, practitioners keep theologians aware of the importance of ecclesial praxis. Likewise, practical theology emphasizes the value of praxis and claims that practices carry theological meaning. Ray Anderson observes:

> The church, in its reflection on its existence as a missionary community, becomes the "base community" for practical theology. This provides the ecclesial focus for critical reflection on the church's nature with a view to its understanding of the nature of God and the triune life of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As the church is involved in its mission, understood as the continuing mission of Jesus Christ through the praxis of the Spirit, its theological reflection opens up the more comprehensive discipline of exegetical and systematic theology.[37]

Practical theologians uphold that all theology is practical and find its reference point in the life of the church.[38] Additionally, practical theologians are concerned with the culture outside of a church as they examine ideas about God that have been connected

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[34] Helen Cameron, Deborah Bhatti, Catherine Duce, James Sweeney, and Clare Watkins, *Talking about God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2010), 20.

[35] Richard Robert Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2008), 4.

[36] Henk de Roest, *Collaborative Practical Theology: Engaging Practitioners in Research on Christian Practices* (Leiden: Brill, 2019) 93.

[37] Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology*, 32.

[38] See Packiam, *Worship and the World to Come*, 13; Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 2.

and conditioned by historical and social realities.[39] Practical theology, therefore, is fundamentally theological, practical, and ecclesiological, and takes place within a particular social and cultural context.[40] Such interdisciplinary study challenges scholars to continuously interpret and re-interpret theological concepts in light of ever-changing dynamics, fostering a rich dialogue between tradition and contemporary contexts.

2.1 Practical theology in context

Since practical theology involves theological reflection on a particular experience or practice, an essential component of practical theology is the contextual setting of the work being researched. Practical theology acknowledges that a practice or situation cannot be examined properly outside of the culture in which it is practiced. Elizabeth Phillips argues that practical theologians must be "serious apprentices of sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers, and historians."[41] She posits that ethnography—i.e., description of a particular people, culture, or subculture with the goal of discovering cultural meaning—is necessary for doing practical theology.[42] Ethnography is a tool that helps the practical theologian open up conversation with and hear wisdom from people inside the culture being studied.[43] It requires the researcher to be a reflective listener and learner.

Ethnography is useful when examining worship within the discipline of practical theology, especially when looking at worship practices from the standpoint of ritual. While ritual typically falls under the purview of anthropology and sociology, studying worship as ritual practice through the lens of ethnography illuminates for the practical theologian influential cultural factors that undergird approaches to and mindsets of worship. The goal of an ethnographic study of worship is to provide description of a social context, to interpret the impact of the culture on worship practice, and to identify the theology embodied in those practices of worship.

Glenn Packiam observes that the archetypal form of ethnographical research is participant observation, i.e., long-term personal investment in a particular culture so that the researcher understands the culture from an inside perspective rather than an outside observer.[44] Since participant observation is not possible in many situations,

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[39] Ward, *Participation and Mediation*, 47.

[40] Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 3.

[41] Elizabeth Phillips, "Charting the 'Ethnographic Turn': Theologians and the Study of Christian Congregations," in Pete Ward, *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, 105.

[42] Ibid., 97-98

[43] Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 112.

[44] Packiam, *Worship and the World to Come*, 22.

Packiam notes that ethnography requires a "cluster of techniques" that allow the researcher access into the culture, to its meaning-making narratives, and to those "key informants" who can translate, interpret, narrate, or relate their experiences to the researcher.[45] Beneficial techniques include conducting personal interviews, examining insider testimonies, inspecting historical artifacts, and evaluating the expectations, assumptions, and critiques from those related to the culture.[46] Such techniques help the researcher gain a better insider's perspective.

The value of ethnography is its ability to study the social, cultural, and theological complexities embedded in Christian practice; however, reliance upon social-scientific methods can impede research from being shaped by the theological tradition of the church. Because ethnography is observational and interpretive in nature, it provides no framework for evaluating constructions of meaning. Consequently, normative theological concerns can be replaced by cultural ones.[47] This is why Phillips suggests "theological ethnography" should be used to describe the work of ethnography within the context of practical theology.[48] The goal of theological ethnography is to utilize social-scientific methods insofar as they provide cultural insights and to keep theological reflection as the primary concern of ethnographic examination. Phillips' corrective is important, especially as she distinguishes a theological from a secular approach to ethnography. While ethnography is necessary in doing practical theology, theological priorities must remain intact.

2.2 Worship as practical theology

A case can be made for studying worship as practical theology. Since practical theology focuses on the application of theological knowledge to real-life situations and practices, it explores how theology informs and shapes human actions, experiences, and communities to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Webber himself reflects, "Indeed [worship] is an interdisciplinary study demanding expertise in biblical, historical, and systematic theology as well as the arts, practical expertise, and personal formation."[49] Worship falls within the purview of practical theology, therefore, because it embodies and enacts theological beliefs in concrete and transformative ways within a

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[45] Ibid.

[46] See Charlotte Aull Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide to Researching Selves and Others*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 81-90.

[47] Packiam, *Worship and the World to Come*, 23.

[48] Phillips, "Charting the 'Ethnographic Turn,'" 102.

[49] Robert E. Webber, "Evangelical and Catholic Methodology," in *The Use of the Bible in Theology: Evangelical Options*, ed. Robert K. Johnston (Louisville: John Knox, 1985), 140.

local worshiping community. Practical theology frames worship not as a theoretical or abstract concept but as a participatory practice that involves the entire person intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. Moreover, practical theology recognizes that worship is more than a ritualistic exercise but also a transformative encounter with God, which shapes the identity, beliefs, and practices of worshipers. Consequentially, worship serves as a means of theological formation, inviting individuals to learn, reflect, embody, and deepen their understanding of theological truth through participation in the liturgical activity of the Church.

A deeper understanding of the term "liturgy" further illustrates the connection between worship and practical theology. Liturgy (*leitourgia*) is a Greek composite word meaning "public work," often translated as "the work of the people."[50] *The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship* states:

> In the singular, the word 'liturgy' denotes an act of worship, more specifically the Eucharist. Derived from the Greek *leitourgia,* it was used in Hellenistic Greek of an act of public service. In the NT it is employed as an act of service or ministry (e.g. Phil. 2:30). In time it was confined in Christian usage to the idea of service to God and finally, since worship was regarded as the supreme service to God, it was applied to the Eucharist.[51]

Based on its Hellenistic and Christian usage, liturgy encompasses every act of worship as a means for leading a local congregation corporately into acts of public service to God.[52] Worship is thus housed within practical theology, if for no other reason, because orthodoxy (right glorification of God) and orthopraxy (right activity before God) are harmonized through a church's liturgical activity in a local cultural (ethnographic) and ecclesial (church) context. Practical theologians of worship place theology and practice in mutual dialogue with one another, discovering the theology embedded in liturgical practice and interpreting how theology is expressed and experienced in a local church community. Pete Ward espouses that worship provides a basis for all practical theology because worship enables a theology that is relational and begins in the encounter and

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[50] Adrian Fortescue, "Liturgy," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910), 13.

[51] *The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, ed. J.G. Davies (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986), s.v. "Liturgies," 314.

[52] The definition also recognizes that the whole of worship can be seen as the liturgy of the Eucharist, though that is not always the case, especially in evangelical approaches to worship that do not regularly practice the Eucharist. See Ilion T. Jones, *A Historical Approach to Evangelical Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1954), 264-265. Webber himself often separates the idea of liturgy from the Eucharist in his writings. Despite his advocacy for regular Eucharistic practice, he uses the term generically to encompass any activity of worship, treating the Eucharist as one of the liturgical acts.

wonder of God.[53] For Ward, practical theologians of worship need to consider the intentional implementation of liturgy because every utterance and action in worship is a public theological work framed in an encounter with God. Through the liturgy, Christians proclaim and embody theological truth claims about God, God's activity in worship, God's relationship with humanity, and God's desire for the world.[54] To examine worship as a practical theology, therefore, is to see how the words and actions of worship serve as a source of theology in a local congregation, forming corporate and personal knowledge, behavior, prayer, practice, and delight of God.

In addition to its theological and practical commitments, practical theology recognizes the importance of ethnography in local expressions of worship. Worship is ethnic, if for no other reason, because liturgical forms and approaches to worship are developed, accepted, rejected, and passed down through local cultures and in church communities. The work of practical theology differs from liturgical studies. Whereas liturgical studies concentrates on the historiography of a specific liturgy in order to explore its theological meaning, practical theology also considers how worship practices spur from, impact, influence, and seek to reform a local culture.[55] Ethnography is a method that can be used to discern the relationship between the cultural context and practices of worship, especially when evaluating a local church's commitments in worship or in order to develop or propose new liturgical practices and approaches. Moreover, by embracing ethnography, practical theology not only acknowledges the significance of local worship practices but also delves deeper into understanding how these practices are shaped by and in turn shape the cultural milieu. This sets it apart from the more focused approach of liturgical studies, which primarily concerns itself with the historical and theological dimensions of specific liturgies.

To situate Webber as a practical theologian of worship, the current thesis uses the category of worship studies instead of liturgical studies. There is a distinction in that worship studies constitutes an interdisciplinary approach to academic inquiry and ecclesial praxis, investigating the multifaceted dimensions of religious worship while aiming to discern and articulate the theological, sociocultural, and experiential aspects inherent to worship practices within diverse religious traditions. Likewise, worship studies seeks to elucidate the dynamic interplay between faith and practice, discerning

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[53] Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 7.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Joris Geldhof, "Liturgical Studies," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. John Barton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), accessed February 12,2023, https://oxfordre.com/religion/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-14.

transformative encounters that occur within worship contexts. Worship studies not only encompasses the theoretical analysis of liturgical expressions but also emphasizes their practical implications for the lived experiences of individuals and faith communities. By engaging in theological reflection, ethnographic observations, and historical investigations, scholarship in worship studies contributes to the development of worship praxis that resonates with a contemporary context, fostering a holistic understanding of worship as a vital component of religious life. Conversely, liturgical studies operates within a distinct field that centers inquiry upon examination of liturgical texts and rituals, emphasizing historical and theological analysis of liturgical rubrics. The distinctive is that liturgical studies pertains to the systematic study of liturgical forms and the historical development of liturgical traditions, seeking to uncover the origins, evolution, and theological underpinnings of liturgical texts and rubrics rather than the immediate or contemporary application of liturgical elements. This thesis, therefore, characterizes liturgical studies as a commitment to the preservation and elucidation of liturgical heritage, facilitating a deeper comprehension of the liturgical elements themselves, while often leaving the practical application of such insights to worship studies and practical theology.

To study worship as practical theology requires placing theology, practice, and ethnography in dialogue. Richard Osmer's book, *Practical Theology: An Introduction*, provides a helpful pathway for integrating these dynamics through what he calls the "four tasks of practical theology."[56] Osmer believes the following four tasks allow for practical theological reflection on any given topic of ministry:

1. The descriptive-empirical task: This task asks the question, "What is going on?" and involves understanding the lived experiences and contexts of individuals and communities. It aims to describe and analyze the empirical realities of people's lives and the broader social, cultural, and historical factors that shape their experiences.[57]
2. The interpretive task: This task asks the question, "Why is this going on?" and involves interpreting the data collected in the descriptive-empirical task. It seeks to identify and analyze the underlying meanings, beliefs, values, and symbols that inform individuals' actions and experiences. The task also involves engaging in hermeneutical reflection

[56] Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 10-14, 220-222.
[57] Ibid., 11-14.

to interpreting underlying meanings in light of theological and ethical frameworks.[58]

3. The normative task: This task asks the question, "What ought to be going on?" and focuses on theological norms and ethical frameworks. It involves drawing on theological resources such as Scripture, tradition, and doctrine to discern and articulate normative principles and values. The goal of the task is to provide guidance and normative criteria for shaping and evaluating practices, beliefs, and behaviors.[59]
4. The pragmatic task: This task asks the question, "How might we respond," and considers the practical implications and applications of the previous three tasks. It involves developing practical strategies, methods, and interventions based on the insights gained from the descriptive-empirical, interpretive, and normative tasks. The task aims to address specific challenges, promote transformative practices, and foster positive change in individuals and communities.[60]

There are numerous benefits to Osmer's four-task approach. First, the four tasks—descriptive-empirical, interpretive, normative, and pragmatic—provide a comprehensive structure for engaging in practical theological reflection. They offer a systematic way to approach complex issues, allowing practitioners to navigate the various dimensions involved in understanding and addressing practical concerns. Secondly, Osmer's framework encourages integration of disciplines in the practical theological method. The tasks call the researcher to observe and evaluate culture, theory, and practices. Integration allows for a holistic understanding of lived experiences and facilitates informed action. Third, the normative task in Osmer's model helps practitioners ground their reflections and actions in theological norms and ethical principles. Researchers and practitioners seek theological guidance to ensure their work aligns with their religious tradition and convictions. Fourth, the pragmatic task of Osmer's framework emphasizes the necessity of practical implications and applications prompted by theological reflection. The practical dimension ensures that theological reflection translates into real-world impact and transformative practices. Finally, Osmer's framework provides a structured process for theological reflection. The four tasks invite practitioners to engage in critical self-reflection, interact with the

[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid.

experiences of others, and consider social, cultural, and historical contexts of the topic at hand. This reflective approach enables practitioners to be intentional, discerning, and responsive in their theological engagement.

Critiques can be made of Osmer's four tasks of practical theology. To begin, Osmer's framework tends to simplify and separate complex processes into distinct tasks. Practical theological reflection often involves interconnected movements between the four tasks rather than following a linear progression. A linear approach may overlook the inherent complexity and messiness of lived experiences in the theological reflection process. Second, Osmer's framework does not address the role of context in practical theology adequately. While the descriptive-empirical task acknowledges the importance of cultural influences and people's lived experiences, more attention should be given to broader social, cultural, and contextual factors that shape individuals and communities. The framework would benefit from robust engagement with social analysis and critical reflection on power structures and systemic factors that contribute to lived experience. Third, Osmer's framework emphasizes normative principles, but the question must be asked, what constitutes normal, especially when considering varying contexts? There is danger of prioritizing certain theological norms over the lived realities and experiences of individuals and communities. A more dialogical and relational approach, which values diverse voices and perspectives, needs to be incorporated into the framework.

The critiques do not dismiss the value of Osmer's framework, however; rather, they suggest areas for further development and refinement. Although not a perfect model in and of itself, Osmer provides a good starting point for understanding and applying a practical theological process to the study of worship. It is important to begin where Osmer begins, namely with a descriptive-empirical question: What is happening when worship takes place within a particular context? The question invites observation of patterns, practices, and dynamics of worship in a local context through description of the rituals, practices, and experiences that occur during corporate worship services. Observation should also include describing the social, cultural, and historical context in which the worship is taking place. Engaging the descriptive-empirical question allows exploration of specific forms and practices of worship and growth in understanding how these forms and practices function and impact participants.

Following the descriptive question, an interpretive question should be asked: Why is this happening in worship? The interpretive question moves from general description to identification of theological commitments reflected in and through a

local church's liturgical content and practices, probing for deeper insights into the theological and practical implications of worship. Once these commitments are identified, the underlying beliefs, dispositions, and values that inform worship practice can be discerned.

Next is the normative question: How should worship be done? The normative question addresses how worship ought to be conducted based on theological and practical considerations. The question involves identifying what the normative dimensions of worship should be in general—such as the theological principles, historical traditions, and scriptural teachings on worship—considering particular cultural and contextual dynamics. Weighing what is being done in worship against what should be done helps identify changes that need to be made in a local church's liturgical content and practices to foster ethnic congregational participation in the glorification of God. As such, the normative question—when engaged appropriately—invites reflection on the ideal practices, forms, approaches, and goals of worship as it informs discussions on worship renewal and frames theological, practical, and contextual critique.

Finally, the pragmatic question is proposed: How might the local church respond in worship practice? The pragmatic question focuses on practical outcomes and effects of worship practices and considers how they orient worshipers to God, to God's relationship with humanity, and to God's desire for the world. The researcher examines the transformative potential of worship, exploring how worship impacts ongoing praxis through personal spirituality, communal bonding, ethical commitments, and/or social engagement.

Like practical theology in general, studying worship as practical theology requires engaging with the above four tasks in an integrated manner. A multifaceted approach is necessary to inspect how worship practices embody and shape religious beliefs, how they contribute to the formation of faith communities, and how they engage with broader social, cultural, and historical contexts.

2.3 Studying Webber's work as a practical worship theology

This thesis is a critical examination of Webber's practical worship theology. Considering Webber's work in worship as practical theology, the thesis seeks to discern the theological and the cultural factors that influenced Webber's work in worship, to uncover how Webber translated theological concepts into real-life worship practices within his context of American evangelicalism, and to interpret and assess his

work in worship renewal. Conducting such a study of Webber's work in worship is valuable for several reasons. First, the study offers the researcher an opportunity to evaluate the significance and impact of Webber's ideas on the experiential aspects of worship within his religious community of American evangelicalism. Additionally, examining Webber's work as a practical worship theology prompts the researcher to pinpoint the problematic aspects of worship Webber identified within his own religious context and how he sought to address them. Moreover, the study invites the researcher to discern the ways Webber attempted to bridge the gap between theory and practice through his application and integration of theological insights in the practices of worship and in the everyday life of worshiping communities. Finally, the study allows the researcher to observe and discern Webber's interplay between theology, tradition, and his contemporary cultural environment.

In summary, analysis of Webber's body of work on worship within the framework of practical theology underscores the crucial role the discipline plays in Webber's attempt to shape the religious experiences of both individuals and evangelical religious communities in their ongoing pursuit to comprehend and actively engage in the practice of worship. An advantage of examining Webber's work within the framework of practical theology, therefore, is its potential to allow the researcher to extract significant lessons and insights that bear relevance to ongoing discourse concerning worship within contemporary evangelical church settings and to provide valuable tools for navigating the constant shifting terrain of worship in a diverse and interconnected world.

3. Navigating evangelical complexities

Since this thesis examines Webber's work within the context of American evangelicalism, some explanation of the evangelical term is needed. To begin, it must be acknowledged that the evangelical tradition has had a significant impact on global religion and culture. Gina A. Zurlo reports in *Evangelicals Around the World*:

> As of 2010, the nine largest 100% Evangelical denominations in the world are all Protestant and the five largest 100% Evangelical denominations are found in Brazil, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Indonesia, reflecting the global scope of the movement… Some of the [Non-100%Evangelical] denominations with the most Evangelicals are within Anglicanism in the Global South, such as the Anglican Church of Nigeria and the Church of Uganda. Chinese house churches (classified

> as Independents) taken together constitute the denomination with the third most Evangelicals globally.[61]

As is the case with any global and historic movement, the evangelical tradition is varied and diverse, making it a difficult subject of study.[62] Despite its common usage in American religion and culture, the evangelical term is fraught with ambiguity, which is to be expected since continual adaptation and fluidity characterize the movement.[63]

Evangelicals are a motley crew. As historian Mark Noll notes, evangelicalism is an "extraordinarily complex phenomenon."[64] There is no monolithic definition of evangelical, nor is there a singular standard for evangelicalism. The movement has no set model, structure, ecclesiology, or distinguishable goal. Those who claim to be evangelical come from a variety of social, political, and economic backgrounds, not to mention disparate religious doctrines. Douglas Sweeney comments in *The American Evangelical Story*:

> There has never been – and there never will be – an evangelical denomination, despite the references one hears to the evangelical church. We have no evangelical constitution, no formal guidelines for faith and practice. Though there are plenty of famous leaders and institutions around which we rally (Billy Graham, *Christianity Today*, the World Evangelical Alliance, etc.), none of these has final authority in shaping the evangelical movement. We have no card-carrying membership, not even an official membership list. Distinguishing "insiders" from "outsiders" can prove to be tricky business.[65]

Sweeney acknowledges the difficultly of characterizing evangelicals, the ubiquity of the evangelical movement notwithstanding. Though Sweeney's observation is true in a broad ecumenical sense, he fails to recognize how the evangelical title appears in the nomenclature of various historical movements and denominations, such as the Evangelical Church of North America (originally the Evangelical Association), whose main college and seminary was in Naperville, Illinois, only 5 miles from Wheaton,

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[61] Gina A. Zurlo, "Demographics of Global Evangelicalism," in *Evangelicals Around the World: A Global Handbook for the 21st Century*, eds. Brian C Stiller, Todd M. Johnson, Karen Stiller, Mark Hutchinson (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2015), 38.

[62] While the global span of evangelicalism is significant and worthy of study, it is far too broad in scope to consider in the current thesis; therefore, the following material will focus on the American evangelical movement.

[63] There also is discrepancy between the terms *evangelical* and *evangelicalism*. The word *evangelical* often identifies those who hold to certain religious (and, more recently, political) convictions, while *evangelicalism* refers to a broader religious movement and mentality. Both terms have become highly politicized in recent decades and tend to be associated with American conservativism. For this thesis, the terms are considered as they appear in Webber's work and thus are used interchangeably.

[64] Mark Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 14.

[65] Douglas Sweeney, *The American Evangelical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 19-20.

Illinois where Webber spent much of his career teaching. Regardless, Sweeny identifies an important aspect of evangelicalism, namely its lack of a coherent ecclesial identity.

In addition to lack of ecclesial and structural clarity, the evolution and mutation of evangelicalism from one location to another (i.e., Germany, Great Britain, the United States, and Latin America) and from one time period to the next (i.e., the Protestant Reformation in mainland Europe; the Anabaptist, Puritan, and Pietist/Moravian convergence in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and mid-eighteenth centuries; the Evangelical Revival in England in the eighteenth century; America's two Great Awakenings in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; the Mercersburg controversy in the nineteenth century; and the fundamentalist-modernist debates of the early twentieth century) contribute to the complexity of the movement.[66] The constant adaptation of evangelicalism from location to location over time is indicative of the multitude of peculiarities that arise within each expression of the evangelical tradition. Fittingly, in *The Westminster Handbook to Evangelical Theology*, Roger Olson identifies seventeen disparate movements just within North American evangelicalism, each one containing its own particular theological and sociological nuances: The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, The Charismatic Movement, Dispensationalism, The Evangelical Theological Society, Fundamentalism, The Holiness Movement, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, The Keswick Movement, The Lausanne Conference, The National Association of Evangelicals, Pentecostalism, Pietism-Revivalism, Princeton Theology, Progressive/Postconservative Evangelicalism, Puritanism, The Third Wave Movement, and The World Evangelical Alliance.[67]

Olsen's list confirms plurality as a common feature of the evangelical movement. Similarly, Brian Harris observes, "Evangelicalism is in danger of becoming a hyphenated movement. Increasingly its adherents find it necessary to qualify what kind of evangelical they are."[68] To Harris' point, in his book *Common Roots*, Robert

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[66] See: Barry Hawkins, *American Evangelicals: A Contemporary History of a Mainstream Religious Movement* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 1-180; Mark Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitfield, and the Wesleys* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 13-25, 155-190. Cf., Randall Balmer, *Blessed Assurance: A History of Evangelicalism in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999); Randall Balmer, *The Making of Evangelicalism: From Revivalism to Politics and Beyond* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010); David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730's to the 1980's* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989); Mark Noll, David W. Beibbington, and George A. Rawlyk, eds, *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles, and Beyond, 1700-1990* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Douglas Sweeney, *The American Evangelical Story*.

[67] See Roger Olson, *The Westminster Handbook to Evangelical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 69-100.

[68] Brian Harris, "Beyond Bebbington: The Quest for Evangelical Identity in a Postmodern Era," *Churchman*, 122, no. 3 (2008): 201.

Webber recognizes fourteen varying evangelical "subcultures": Fundamentalist Evangelicalism, Dispensational Evangelicalism, Conservative Evangelicalism, Nondenominational Evangelicalism, Reformed Evangelicalism, Anabaptist Evangelicalism, Wesleyan Evangelicalism, Holiness Evangelicalism, Pentecostal Evangelicalism, Charismatic Evangelicalism, Black Evangelicalism, Progressive Evangelicalism, Radical Evangelicalism, and Main-line Evangelicalism.[69] Olson's and Webber's subcategorizations reveal how no singular custom, movement, or doctrine properly exemplifies what it means to be evangelical. One self-identifying evangelical is as likely to differ from another as much as one historic form of evangelicalism differs from another. The result is a growing desire to qualify an evangelical by "types" rather than through a singular definition.

Another problematic issue within the study of evangelicalism is the erratic use of evangelical terminology. The history of the evangelical movement is rife with a variety of particularities in how the terms Evangelical/evangelical, and Evangelicalism/evangelicalism have been used to label religious groups in specific locations. Whereas the scope of this thesis is to look specifically at the American evangelical worship culture, it is important to note the disparity of American and European usage of Evangelical/evangelical terminology to identify differences in how the labels have been applied throughout history. Likewise, an analysis of the usage of Evangelical/evangelical terminology is advantageous for establishing certain evangelical properties that will later be examined in Robert Webber's work.

To begin, it is important to note that the word "evangelical" comes from a transliteration of the Greek noun *euangelion*, which translated means "good news" or "gospel." Mark Noll notes how English translators of the New Testament often use the word "gospel" for *euangelion*, like in the King James translation of Romans 1:16: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel (*euangelion*) of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth…"[70] Accordingly, "evangelical" was broadly applied to signify any message, movement, or person focused on proclaiming the good news of salvation.

By the medieval era, "evangelical" was used in a variety of ways. Noll observes, "[evangelical] was used to describe the message about salvation in Jesus, to designate the New Testament that contained this message, and to single out specifically the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) in which the life, death, and

[69] See Webber, *Common Roots*, 32.
[70] Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism*, 16.

resurrection of Jesus are portrayed."[71] Similar to the New Testament usage of the term *euangelion*, "evangelical" was used in Medieval Europe to reference not only the saving works of Jesus Christ but also the Scriptures and any of its authors who testified to Jesus' works and teachings. Accordingly, Noll remarks that "medieval students of the Bible also referred to the Old Testament book of Isaiah as 'the evangelical prophet,' because Christian interpreters held it to be a forecast of the life and work of Christ."[72]

In the sixteenth century, "evangelical" took on a more formal and designated meaning as it was principally associated with the Protestant Reformation. In particular, Martin Luther used "evangelical" to pose a contrast between what he believed to be faithful adherence to the gospel message of the New Testament, (namely justification by faith, the sufficiency of Christ for salvation, the final authority of the Bible, and the priesthood of all believers), against what he considered to be corrupt teachings of the Roman Catholic Church (namely justification through works, the need for human mediation to Christ, the authority of the Catholic Church, and reliance upon an ordained priesthood).[73] As a result, "evangelical" was equated with Protestantism. To this day the association between "evangelical" and "Protestant" has remained strong in the context of mainland Europe.[74]

Nevertheless, even in mainland Europe nuances exist in the use of "evangelical." For example, modern-day Germany makes a distinction between the terms *evangelisch*/Evangelical and *evangelikal*/evangelical, even though the same word is used in English. Mark Ellingsen writes, "…in German-speaking lands…the new word, *evangelikal*, has been coined in order to distinguish members of the Evangelical movement from the historic Protestant community in general [*evangelisch*]."[75] Since the Reformation, *evangelisch*/Evangelical has been used as the formal, ecclesial title for the German Protestant Church where a confessional adherence to the church is emphasized. The German term *evangelikal*/evangelical, however, was coined in the twentieth century to be descriptive of the free-church movement that emphasized salvation through the experience of the new birth. In other words, neo-Pietist free-church movements in Germany today are qualified by the term *evangelikal*, versus the Protestant *evangelisch* state church, such as *die Evangelische Kirche in Deutchland*,

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[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid., 16-17.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Mark Ellingsen, *The Evangelical Movement: Growth, Impact, Controversy, Dialogue* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1989), 46.

which is a union of all Lutheran and Reformed churches. Other established ecclesial churches such as the Methodist Church also use the *evangelisch* terminology, i.e., *die Evangelisch Methodistiche Kirche*.[76] Similar examples can be found globally, such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, and the Evangelical Church of Iceland, where the proper name of "Evangelical" is used as the proper title of a church and the generic "evangelical" term is applied to free-church Christian movements based in pietism.[77]

The eighteenth-century British revivals showcase yet another gradation of "evangelical," where it was used to describe the Christian renewal movement sweeping throughout England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, and the North American British colonies. Both David Bebbington and Mark Noll assert that this British renewal movement marked the origin of a distinct evangelical history.[78] In particular, a pattern of specific evangelical convictions and attitudes emerged in the eighteenth-century revivals that would be maintained over the centuries and across the globe, specifically the experiential nature of the Christian faith and the focus on personal salvation in conjunction with a commitment to spiritual piety. Bebbington's evangelical quadrilateral gives a good description of four main tenets of eighteenth-century British evangelical conviction: conversionism (the belief that lives need to be changed); activism (the dedication of all spiritual believers, including laypeople, to lives of service in God, especially manifested in evangelism and mission); Biblicism (a particular regard for the Bible as the source of truth); and crucicentrism (the conviction that Christ's sacrifice on the cross was the crucial matter in providing atonement for sin).[79] Of Bebbington's quadrilateral, however, Ryan Danker notes, "The call to conversion was at the heart of what it meant to be an evangelical" in eighteenth century Britain.[80] Conversion was thus the very essence and driving force that ignited the British revivals as transformative movement, forever shaping the course of evangelical

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[76] Likewise, although Germany commonly applied the proper title of *evangelisch*/Evangelical during the Reformation, when the evangelical movement based in the English and American revivals made its way to Germany in the twentieth century, it caused the need for a distinction between the proper Evangelical churches and the general evangelical movement. Relatedly, today most European free-church movements are qualified by the general evangelical term rather than the formal usage.

[77] While in American colloquial usage "free-church" often refers to a church that is free from any denominational administration or hierarchy, the term has historically stood for a church that is free from any government support or sponsorship.

[78] See Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 2-3 and Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism*, 18.

[79] Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 2-3.

[80] Ryan Nicholas Danker, *Wesley and the Anglicans: Political Division in Early Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2016) 34.

history and giving rise to an enduring legacy of experiential faith centered on the "new birth" (i.e., the profound personal experience of Christ's salvation) within evangelicalism.

Some nuance still applies in the appropriation of the evangelical label in eighteenth-century British studies. When applying the label, scholars of the British evangelical movement make a distinction between the use of capitalization and non-capitalization of Evangelical and evangelical, though they are not unified on how the two variations of the label should be utilized. Henry Rack argues that the capitalized form of Evangelical should be used to distinguish those who remained in the Church of England during the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English revivals while the non-capitalized form should refer to the evangelical dissenters, namely Presbyterian, Baptist, and independent congregations who left the established Church.[81] Noll uses the same differentiation in capitalization as Rack, applying the upper-case Evangelical to distinguish those within the Church of England, particularly those within the Evangelical party, whereas the lower case evangelical is applied to any generic use of the movement.[82] Danker's work also uses the capitalized Evangelical in reference to those within the Church of England, such as those he terms the Evangelical Fraternity, in order to distinguish a particular movement inside the church from the broader movement that took place both within and outside of the Church of England.[83] Conversely, D. Bruce Hinmarsh contends that the use of capitalization to differentiate those within the Church of England from dissenters is too simplistic as it creates too clean of a division that was not easily discernable in the eighteenth century.[84] Taking a more general stance, Bebbington uses the capitalized form of both Evangelical and Evangelicalism as a label for "the standard descriptions of the doctrines or ministers of the revival movement, whether inside or outside the Church of England…" and claims them as indicative of "any aspect of the movement beginning in the 1730's."[85]

Although examining scholars' varying qualifications for when to capitalize or use the lower-case in treatment of the eighteenth-century British evangelical movement may seem pedestrian, the desire for specificity in their work reveals a concern for

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[81] Henry D. Rack, *The Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 2002), xii.

[82] Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism*, 18.

[83] Danker, *Wesley and the Anglicans*, 14; 34-38.

[84] D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the English Evangelical Tradition: Between the Conversions of Wesley and Wilberforce* (Grand Rapids: Eermands, 2001), ix. Danker will agree with Hinmarsh, but cautiously follows Rack's usage "as a means of providing clarity to a picture that is undoubtedly murky." See Danker, *Wesley and the Anglicans*, 14.

[85] Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 1.

clarity on how to properly categorize certain parts of the evangelical movement over and against the general, overall movement in British Christianity. Regardless, the distinction is one of grammar, not terminology, seeking a way to designate a specific group within an indiscriminate movement. In general, scholars agree the evangelical label is fitting for any eighteenth-century British Christian who adhered to the core commitments of the movement; thus, in its generic sense, evangelical is a broad way of identifying the large system of churches, societies, and networks in eighteenth-century Britain that emphasized works of piety and the experience of personal salvation through the new birth.

The application of "evangelical" in American usage is akin to its usage in the eighteenth-century British evangelical revival movement insomuch as it has been applied to a wide range of Christians who adhere to an experiential faith but have no clear-cut ecclesial identity. Alan Rathe considers evangelicalism to have a transdenominational ecclesial kinship, making it a para-ecclesial movement that paved the way for the rise of American parachurch institutions in the twentieth century.[86] A significant difference between America and Britain, however, is that there never has been an established state church for the entire nation of the United States of America. By the time of the First Great Awakening in the eighteenth century, American religion was already denominationally diverse. The Congregational Church was the primary established church in New England, while the Quakers, Dutch Reformed, Anglican, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Congregational, and Baptist churches all contended with each other in the more religiously lenient middle colonies.[87] Furthermore, although the Anglican church was established in the southern colonies, a significant number of Baptists, Quakers, and Presbyterians were also present.[88] The evangelical term in America thus does not apply to a movement antithetical to any particular established state-church but rather to an ever-evolving free-church religious movement born in the revivals of the First Great Awakening in mid-eighteenth century America.[89] The religious freedom the evangelical movement found in America allowed it the freedom to adapt and develop alongside the nation, and has led a number scholars to claim that throughout its history the American evangelical movement both influenced and typified

[86] Rathe, *Evangelicals, Worship, and Participation*, 21.

[87] Howard John Smith, *The First Great Awakening: Redefining Religion in British America, 1725–1775* (Vancouver: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2015), 1.

[88] Ibid.

[89] Sweeney, *The American Evangelical Story*, 29.

American ideology.[90] As evangelical Christianity settled into American society, carrying with it a message of experiential faith and personal piety, it adapted itself to the circumstances of its new locale by taking advantage of the sense of independence and self-made opportunism found first in the colonies and later in the independent nation.[91] Although American evangelical piety had its origins in the eighteenth century, there are many ways by which both American society and American evangelicalism emerged synchronously. Barry Hankins observes:

> …evangelicals in America are quite at home in the culture, even as some of them insist that the culture is hostile to them. This at-homeness is the result of the fact that American culture itself was shaped by evangelical Protestants, especially in the nineteenth century. While the evangelical dominance of that era is long past, American culture still bears the marks of evangelical Protestantism, often in secular guise. A key example would be the American emphasis on freedom of choice. Most evangelicals believe, or at least act as if they believe, that the most fundamental aspect of human life, one's relationship with God, is a matter of choice…In short, they are quintessentially American in their quest to shape their own destinies, religious or otherwise."[92]

The ever-progressing nature of the American evangelical movement has caused the evangelical label to be quite nebulous in its application since it has never been bound in America to any ecclesial hierarchies, creedal formulas, or liturgical rubrics.[93] Along with Hankins, Randall Balmer—a historian who views the evangelical movement primarily through a political lens—claims that American evangelicalism is and throughout its history has been a populist movement reliant on pliability and innovation.[94] Balmer writes:

> The genius of evangelicalism throughout American history is its malleability and the uncanny knack of evangelical leaders to speak the idiom of the culture, whether embodied in the open-air preaching of George Whitfield in the eighteenth century, the democratic populism of Peter Cartwright and Charles Finney on the frontier, or the suburban, corporate-style megachurches of the twentieth century… This ability to discern and to speak the cultural idiom lends an unmistakably populist cast to evangelicalism in America.[95]

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[90] See: Balmer, *The Making of Evangelicalism*, 13-25; Balmer, *Blessed Assurance*, 2-12; Hankins, *American Evangelicals*, x, 1-16; Frances Fitzgerald, *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017), 1-11; and Douglas Sweeney, *The American Evangelical Story*, 55-76.

[91] Balmer, *The Making of Evangelicalism*, 19-22.

[92] Hankins, *American Evangelicals*, ix-x.

[93] Balmer, *The Making of Evangelicalism*, 3.

[94] See Balmer, *The Making of Evangelicalism*, 3-4; Balmer, *Blessed Assurance*, 7; and Hankins, *American Evangelicals*, x.

[95] Balmer, *The Making of Evangelicalism*, 3-4.

The lack of any bounded categorization has allowed evangelicalism in America to continuously read the culture and adapt, either taking counter-cultural stances or accommodating to the culture, which is why Balmer considers evangelicalism to be America's "folk religion."[96] The emphasis on populism, along with the desire to maintain a widespread appeal, has resulted in an evangelical pluralism through the constant rearranging of beliefs and practices from group to group, meaning the evangelical label in American culture from the eighteenth century to the present day could be applied to a great variety of Christian religious groups, beliefs, movements, convictions, or people. Consequentially, the American usage of the evangelical term is quite intermittent as both an adjective and a noun. Its application to Christianity has been quite common, but in America the meaning of "evangelical" is rather vague.

Another factor that has contributed to the complexity of the evangelical label in American usage is the co-opting of the term in American politics, especially in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century.[97] Frances Fitzgerald observes in her book, *The Evangelicals*:

> [Evangelicals are] the most American of religious groups, and during the nineteenth century they exerted a dominant influence on American culture, morals, and politics. By the mid-twentieth century the United States was becoming a more secular nation, but since 1980 many evangelicals, led by the religious right, have struggled to reverse the trend, and while they have not entirely succeeded, they have reintroduced religion into public discourse, polarized the nation, and profoundly changed American politics.[98]

At its root evangelicalism is a religious movement. Nonetheless, the rise of the religious right within the American political landscape of the 1970s and 1980s resulted in the marriage of nationalism to evangelical religious convictions (and, by way of reaction, many leftist responses). Fitzgerald notes the merger ultimately produced a dominant evangelical political identity marked by a "conservative" political ethic focused on issues such as abortion, religious freedom, and faith-based initiatives.[99]

Not all Christians see eye-to-eye on culture, morals, and politics, however, nor do they agree on the government's role in matters of faith and welfare. The association of evangelicalism with a particular political movement has, in Balmer's words,

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[96] See Balmer, *The Making of Evangelicalism*, 2; and *Blessed Assurance*, 9.

[97] The purpose of mentioning the American political landscape here is to further point out the complexities of the study of the American evangelical movement. Certainly, in its European context, especially in Germany and England, the evangelical movement had many political ramifications as well.

[98] Fitzgerald, *The Evangelicals*, 2.

[99] Ibid., 2-11. Cf., Balmer, *The Making of Evangelicalism*, 73; cf. 59-60; 65-66.

"[obfuscated] the real origins of the movement…" and thus "[delivered] the faith into the captivity of right-wing politics."[100] The nominations and elections of political leaders supported by evangelicals in recent years has been a sign to many Americans of evangelicalism's captivity to right-wing politics. Consequently, the political appropriation of the evangelical term has resulted in mass confusion of what constitutes an evangelical in America; thus, American Christians are increasingly found to be abandoning the evangelical label regardless of religious belief or experience.[101]

Certainly, evangelicalism is a complex and nuanced movement, adapting as it moves across time and to new locales. Kenneth Collins posits that evangelicalism must be considered in a relational and participatory manner rather than studied from the view of an outside spectator. Because evangelicals "situate themselves in a distinct narrative that gives meaning and purpose to their ongoing efforts," Collins believes there are a host of narratives that comprise a wealth of evangelical identities and purposes.[102] Collins writes in his book, *The Evangelical Moment*:

> [The study of evangelicalism] calls, therefore, for an examination of evangelicalism not simply as an isolated entity, one defined apart *by itself* in terms of any number of attributes or traits. Though this popular approach is both helpful and necessary, this book will not leave the matter there. Instead, it will also view the movement as a historical phenomenon that has had not only a number of distinct social locations but also a number of "dialogue partners" across generations. In other words, American evangelicalism, if it is ever to break through the myths and stereotypes, must be considered not in a static way, simply in terms of self-identified attributes and traits, but in a dynamic and *relational* way, as a movement engaged in various conversations, some of them quite heated, all of which are for the sake of reform. Simply put, given the mission of evangelicalism, which is intimately tied to its identity, the movement must always reckon with "the other," whether it be Roman Catholicism or theological liberalism...[103]

The significance of Collins' approach to evangelical studies is that he does not focus on one particular historic expression or social strand of evangelicalism and make it the be-

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[100] Balmer, *The Making of Evangelicalism*, 76.

[101] See Peter Wehner, "Why I Can No Longer Call Myself an Evangelical Republican," *New York Times*, December 9 2017, accessed December 11, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/column/peter-wehner; Dale M. Coulter, "Evangelical Identity and Its Crises," *First Things*, November 30, 2017, accessed December 11, 2017, https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2017/11/evangelical-identity-and-its-crises; Ross Douthat, "Is There an Evangelical Crises?," *New York Times*, November 25, 2017, accessed December 11, 2017, https://nyti.ms/2i6svPz; and Tony Campolo, "Why I No Longer Call Myself an Evangelical," *Christian Today*, September 27, 2016, accessed December 11, 2017, https://www.christiantoday.com/article/tony-campolo-why-i-no-longer-call-myself-an-evangelical/96407.htm.

[102] Kenneth J. Collins, *The Evangelical Moment: The Promise of an American Religion*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 13-14.

[103] Ibid., 12-13.

all and end-all of the movement; instead, Collins utilizes story as "a useful device to gather up both the similarities and the differences among evangelicals."[104] Such utilization of story places each period of the evangelical movement within a particular theological, chronological, and regional context by which evangelicalism can be understood and evaluated, especially regarding its dialogue partners and areas of self-renewal and reform. The methodology engages conversation contextually and relationally rather than empirically. Collins' approach is like that of W.R. Ward, who believes evangelicalism is defined "in terms of its inner religious content rather than from the outside."[105] Ward seeks to establish an evangelical narrative that considers the development of elements such as cosmology, eschatology, and mysticism rather than qualify evangelicals by static categorizations.[106]

In sum, Collins' narrative-driven approach to evangelical studies illuminates the dynamic nature of the movement, allowing for nuanced understanding that transcends rigid categorizations. His contextual and relational methodology unveils evangelicalism's ongoing dialogues, adaptations, and transformative potential within the diverse tapestry of Christian history. For the sake of this thesis, Collins' methodology provides a lens for exploring the historical and theological context in which Webber developed his practical worship theology.

Although this thesis is not an exhaustive examination of the historical, political, and social dimensions of evangelicalism, the thesis examines the worship culture Webber believed had developed in American evangelicalism by the end of the twenty-first century, which he claimed, like the American evangelical movement itself, had been influenced by the revivalism and pragmatism of the American Great Awakenings and was characterized by its emphasis on personal experiences related to spiritual conversion. The thesis seeks to uncover the intricate interplay between Webber's ideas on worship and the broader evangelical worship landscape of his time, examining his experiences in it and his critiques of it while also considering the transformative potential of his work for it.

3.1 Evangelical advocates for historical renewal

[104] Ibid., 20.

[105] W.R. Ward, "Evangelical Identity in the Eighteenth Century," in *Christianity Reborn: The Global Expansion of Evangelicalism in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Donald M. Lewis (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 12.

[106] Ibid., 11-30.

Since this thesis focuses on Webber's reformational work within American evangelical worship, it is helpful to situate him alongside others who sought reform within the movement. In particular, the contributions of J.I. Packer (1926-2020), Thomas Oden (1931-2016), Carl Trueman, Thomas Howard (1935-2020), and Michael Harper (1931-2010), along with Webber, highlight diverse approaches to reform within American evangelicalism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Despite their varied methods and emphases, these figures were united in their belief that the renewal depended upon a return to the wisdom and practices of the past.

J.I. Packer's contributions to evangelical theology are significant, particularly in how he bridged historical theology with contemporary evangelical thought. His work, *Knowing God*, stands as a cornerstone of evangelical spirituality, emphasizing the importance of knowing about God and cultivating a profound, experiential relationship with Him. Packer's broader theological emphasis is the centrality of Scripture and the need for a personal, transformative knowledge of God that shapes the believer's entire life.[107]

Packer's deep appreciation for the Puritans is a key aspect of his work. He viewed the Puritans not just as historical figures, but as vital theological voices for the modern church. He reintroduced their writings to evangelicals and emphasized their focus on sanctification, the sovereignty of God, and the seriousness of sin, seeking to enrich evangelicalism with a robust theological framework rooted in its Puritan past. His work mirrors Webber's efforts to bring ancient Christian practices into contemporary evangelical worship, as both theologians sought to draw from historical sources to renew and deepen modern faith expressions.

Moreover, Packer's role in the Evangelicals and Catholics Together (ECT) highlights his commitment to ecumenical dialogue and his desire to foster understanding between traditions that have often been at odds. While Packer remained firmly evangelical in his convictions, he recognized the value in engaging with Roman Catholicism, especially in areas where there was common ground, such as the importance of Scripture, the Trinity, and the necessity of grace for salvation.[108] Packer's ecumenical approach, though different in focus from Webber's, shares a similar spirit of bridging traditions. Where Webber concentrated on integrating ancient liturgical practices within evangelical contexts, Packer worked to create a dialogue that

[107] J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 17-25.

[108] See J.I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit: Finding Fullness in Our Walk with God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 25-52.

would allow for mutual enrichment and a better understanding between evangelicals and Roman Catholics. Both men understood that historical continuity and theological depth were essential for a vibrant, living faith, so both sought to lead their communities towards a greater appreciation of their heritage.

Thomas Oden's work, particularly his advocacy for "paleo-orthodoxy," represents another effort to reconnect contemporary Christianity with the doctrinal and spiritual riches of the early church.[109] His approach was not merely a return to ancient practices but a comprehensive retrieval of classical Christian orthodoxy. Oden believed that by recovering the theological insights of the early church, modern Christianity—especially within evangelical circles—could find renewed depth, unity, and vitality.

Oden's paleo-orthodoxy was characterized by a deliberate turn away from modern theological innovations, which he viewed as often disconnected from the core truths of the Christian faith. Instead, he urged Christians to return to the consensual teachings of the first few centuries of the church, focusing on the wisdom of the church fathers and the ecumenical councils.[110] This was not just an academic exercise but a deeply pastoral one, as Oden sought to provide a stable, orthodox foundation for Christians in a time of theological confusion and fragmentation. He believed that the retrieval of classical orthodoxy could address many of the pastoral and theological challenges facing the modern church.[111] Oden sought to provide a way forward for evangelicals seeking to maintain fidelity to the core tenets of Christianity while navigating the complexities of the modern world, grounding contemporary faith in the teachings of the early church.

In contrast to Webber, whose *Common Roots* emphasized a return to historical and liturgical practices to address specific deficiencies within evangelicalism, Oden's paleo-orthodoxy had a broader scope. Webber focused on renewing worship and the life of the local church through the reclamation of historical practices; however, through works like his *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, Oden revisited the doctrines that shaped the early church to renew the theological foundations of evangelical Christianity. Additionally, he sought to build a theological bridge across Christian denominations, highlighting the shared theological heritage of the early

[109] Thomas C. Oden, *The Rebirth of Orthodoxy: Signs of New Life in Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2003), 25-27.

[110] Ibid. 38-50.

[111] Thomas C. Oden, *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology* (New York: HarperOne, 1992), 15-20.

centuries of Christianity.[112] Oden's approach, while intellectually rigorous, sometimes lacked the practical application necessary for renewing the day-to-day life of local churches. Unlike Webber, who directly engaged with worship practices and the lived experience of faith communities, Oden's focus remained more academic, which, though important, may have limited the immediate impact of his ideas on the spiritual life of believers.

Carl Trueman's work is significant for its incisive critique of modern evangelicalism and its engagement with the broader cultural and philosophical shifts that have shaped contemporary society. His book *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* is particularly influential, offering a thorough analysis of how the modern understanding of identity, influenced by expressive individualism and cultural amnesia, has led to significant challenges for the church.[113] Trueman traces the intellectual history of these ideas, showing how they have eroded traditional Christian conceptions of self, community, and morality.

Trueman's approach stands out for its critical and analytical depth, which contrasts with the pastoral or historical focuses of figures like Oden and Webber. While Oden and Webber emphasize the retrieval of historical practices and theological traditions to renew evangelicalism, Trueman is concerned with equipping the church to respond to the contemporary cultural landscape. He argues that understanding the philosophical underpinnings of modernity is crucial for Christians who seek to navigate and resist the pressures of a society increasingly detached from its Christian roots.[114] Trueman acknowledges the value of historical theology, but his primary focus is on addressing the present and future challenges that these cultural shifts pose to the church. He believes that a robust response requires not only a return to the truths of historical Christian orthodoxy but also a clear-eyed analysis of the cultural forces at play. This makes his work particularly relevant for those within evangelicalism who are looking to understand broader societal trends that influence faith and practice.

In *Histories and Fallacies*, Trueman reflects on the importance of historical methodology and the need for careful, critical engagement with the past.[115] While he values the insights of historical theology, he warns against an uncritical romanticization

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[112] Thomas C. Oden, *After Modernity… What?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 67-70.

[113] Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 23-30.

[114] Ibid., 145-150.

[115] Carl R. Trueman, *Histories and Fallacies: Problems Faced in the Writing of History* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 115-120.

of history, emphasizing the importance of rigorous scholarship in understanding both the past and its implications for the present. This dual focus on cultural critique and historical analysis gives Trueman's work a unique place in contemporary evangelical thought, providing a framework for both understanding and responding to the complex challenges facing the church in the modern world. Trueman's insistence on rigorous historical methodology serves as a counterbalance to Webber's more pastoral and experiential focus, reminding the church that while history can provide valuable insights, it must be approached with discernment and scholarly rigor. Together, Trueman and Webber offer complementary perspectives, one grounded in the careful critique of historical understanding and the other in the practical application of historical practices in contemporary settings.

Packer, Oden, and Trueman all labored as agents of reform within American evangelicalism, each engaging with historical traditions to address the challenges of their time. What distinguishes Webber from them, however, is his unique focus on worship as the key to evangelical renewal. While Packer emphasized Puritan theology, Oden pursued a comprehensive retrieval of early Christian doctrine, and Trueman offered cultural critique, Webber centered his efforts on constructing a practical worship theology rooted in historical principles yet adaptable to contemporary contexts. For Webber, worship was essential for shaping the spiritual lives of believers. He believed that through historically informed and contextually sensitive worship, which actively involved the congregation, evangelicals could cultivate a more intimate relationship with God. This, in turn, would foster spiritual maturity and empower congregants to live out their faith with renewed vitality. Webber's practical approach to worship planning thus provided a flexible framework that he saw as crucial for the profound renewal of both the church and the daily lives of its members.

Webber's focus on worship as key to evangelical reform most closely mirrors the contributions of Thomas Howard, whose efforts played a crucial role in cultivating dialogue and mutual respect between the Roman Catholic Church and evangelicals. Howard, born into a prominent evangelical family, initially gained recognition within evangelical circles as a writer and scholar.[116] His early works, such as *Christ the Tiger*, reflect a deep engagement with evangelical thought and a desire for a more profound mystical understanding of faith; however, Howard's spiritual journey led him to convert to Catholicism in 1985, a transition that marked a significant shift in his

[116] Thomas Howard was the son of Philip and Gwendolen Howard. Philip was a prominent evangelical figure and editor of *The Sunday School Times*.

theological perspective. Howard's conversion was driven by his appreciation for the liturgical and sacramental richness of Roman Catholicism, characteristics of worship he found lacking in evangelicalism.[117] His seminal works, *Evangelical is Not Enough* and *Lead, Kindly Light*, articulate his journey to Roman Catholicism and the theological and spiritual struggles he faced. His writings have been instrumental in fostering a deeper understanding of Catholic traditions among evangelicals, highlighting the importance of liturgy, sacraments, and an appreciation of historic Christianity. Howard emphasized the continuity of faith practices from the early Church to the present, advocating for an approach to worship rooted in tradition and postured in reverence. His perspective challenged evangelicals to reconsider the role of history and tradition in shaping their spiritual lives, seeking to bridge a gap between evangelical and Catholic understandings of worship and piety.[118]

In *Evangelical is Not Enough*, Howard critiques the evangelical tradition for its lack of structured liturgical worship, arguing that the liturgy provides a profound sense of order, beauty, and reverence. He discusses how the liturgical calendar and the repetition of set prayers and rituals can deepen the worship experience.[119] Howard also emphasizes the centrality of the sacraments in Christian life, particularly the Eucharist. He views the Eucharist as the source and summit of Christian worship, which, under the appearances of bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ are truly present, offered in sacrifice, and received in communion. Howard also contrasts the sacramental focus of Roman Catholicism with what he perceives as the evangelical tendency to minimize or overlook the sacraments. Additionally, Howard argues that the Roman Catholic Church's liturgical practices and sacramental theology are deeply rooted in the traditions of the early church, providing a continuous link to the faith and practices of the Apostles and early Christians.[120]

Additionally, in *Lead, Kindly Light*, Howard details his conversion to Roman Catholicism, highlighting his growing appreciation for the historical continuity of the Roman Catholic Church.[121] He recounts his discovery of the richness of Roman

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[117] See Thomas Howard, *Evangelical is Not Enough: Worship of God in Liturgy and Sacrament* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984), 3.

[118] Ibid., 41-62.

[119] Ibid., 131-148.

[120] Ibid., 105-129.

[121] Thomas Howard, *Lead, Kindly Light* (Steubenville: Franciscan University Press, 1994), 17-22. See also the recently edited volume *Pondering the Permanent Things*, which provides a comprehensive overview of Howard's reflections on faith, culture, and the enduring truths of Christianity. This volume encapsulates Howard's journey and his contributions to the dialogue between evangelicalism and Catholicism. It highlights his emphasis on the sacramental and liturgical aspects of

Catholic liturgical worship and the depth of its sacramental theology, discussing how the Church's adherence to tradition and connection to the early church Fathers provided a sense of historical rootedness and theological stability lacking in evangelicalism.

Howard's influence extended through his academic roles at institutions such as St. John's Seminary and Thomas More College of Liberal Arts, where he integrated his appreciation for liturgy, sacraments, and historical continuity into his teaching. He exposed students to the historical and theological foundations of Roman Catholic worship practices and encouraged them to explore the depth and richness of these traditions. Additionally, Howard frequently spoke at conferences, seminars, and public lectures, articulating his views on the importance of liturgy and sacraments and sharing personal anecdotes and theological insights that illustrated how Roman Catholicism had transformed his own faith journey. Howard's conversion itself was a powerful testament to the importance he placed on liturgy, sacraments, and historical continuity. His public testimony and writings about his conversion provided a narrative that many evangelicals found compelling and thought-provoking, inspiring them to explore Roman Catholic liturgical and sacramental practices.

Howard's work is helpful in further illustrating Webber's unique position in late twentieth and early twenty-first century American evangelical reform. While both Webber and Howard advocate for a return to ancient Christian practices in their work, their approaches and goals differ. A significant distinction between Howard and Webber lies in their understanding of historical continuity. Howard embraced the Catholic view of historic continuity, which emphasizes an unbroken apostolic succession and the preservation of doctrines, sacraments, and ecclesiastical authority directly from the apostles. For Howard, this meant accepting the centralized and consistent doctrinal authority of the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church.[122] In contrast, Webber, while deeply interested in historical continuity, approached it from an Anglican perspective that values a balance between tradition and reform. Webber's understanding of continuity involved maintaining historical ties through practices like the liturgical calendar and creeds, but with a flexible approach that allowed for adaptation and reform within an evangelical context.[123] The difference highlights Howard's alignment with a more centralized and unaltered preservation of tradition,

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faith, underscoring the depth and richness of Catholic traditions: Thomas Howard, *Pondering the Permanent Things: Reflections on Faith, Art, and Culture* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002).

[122] Howard, *Evangelical is Not Enough*, 120-125.

[123] Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*, 68-73.

while Webber favored a more adaptable approach that allowed tradition to blend with contextual developments.

Michael Harper fits into this discussion as another significant figure in the broader movement of evangelical reform, particularly through his contributions to the Charismatic Renewal within evangelicalism and his eventual journey toward Eastern Orthodoxy. Like Howard and Webber, Harper was concerned with the renewal of worship and the recovery of historical Christian practices; however, Harper's focus was more on the experiential and pneumatological aspects of worship, emphasizing the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church.[124]

Harper's journey reflects a different path toward reconnecting with the historic church, one that led him to embrace the liturgical and sacramental richness of Eastern Orthodoxy.[125] In this sense, Harper's work complements the efforts of figures like Webber by highlighting the diversity of routes through which evangelicals sought to recover a sense of continuity with the historic Christian faith. His emphasis on the charismatic life of the church provides an important contrast to the more theologically and liturgically focused approaches of Webber and Howard. While Webber's approach to worship was characterized by contextual flexibility, adapting historical practices to contemporary evangelical contexts, Harper's work offers a different perspective. His emphasis on the charismatic experience provided a dynamic and Spirit-led dimension to worship, while his later embrace of Orthodoxy highlighted a commitment to the unchanging liturgical and sacramental traditions of the early church. Together, Harper's contributions demonstrate how the renewal of worship can be both Spirit-filled and deeply rooted in historic Christian practices, offering a complementary path to Webber's vision of evangelical reform.

The figures listed above underscore the diversity of approaches of historical renewal within evangelicalism, but it is Webber's flexible and historically grounded method rooted in Christological principles that establishes his place as a central figure in the movement for worship renewal. His objective was to assist evangelical pastors and congregations to critically assess their worship practices, encouraging them to take actionable steps that draw on the richness of historical Christian traditions. Rather than prescribing a fixed liturgy, Webber's adaptable theological framework accommodates cultural and contextual differences, allowing congregations to shape their worship in

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[124] Michael Harper, *A New Way of Living: How the Church of the Redeemer, Houston, Found a New Life-Style* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1974), 32-38.

[125] Michael Harper, *The True Light: A Pilgrimage to Orthodoxy* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1997), 15-22.

ways that resonate with their specific communities. Central to Webber's vision for evangelical reform is the balance between rootedness in traditional principles and practices and adaptability to contemporary contexts. He played a pivotal role in the internal renewal of evangelicalism, advocating for a deeper engagement with its historic Christological heritage while ensuring worship remained vibrant and meaningful. His legacy as an evangelical reformer lies in his ability to bridge the ancient and the contemporary, reshaping evangelical worship in a way that honors the past while embracing the future.

4. Thesis problem statement

Critical examination of Webber's practical worship theology is needed; however, prior to the current study, no such research has been conducted. Webber has impacted worship scholarship and practice in American evangelicalism since the late 1970s. Citations to Webber are found in worship publications that cover a broad spectrum of topics: historical research; philosophical examinations; practical guides and practices; theological analysis; missional canvasses; technological assessments; cultural surveys; and ecclesial studies.[126] Moreover, Webber's influence transcends ecclesial and denominational boundaries. The scholars and practitioners who interact with Webber's writings and acknowledge his influence on worship come from a variety of church traditions, such as: the Anglican Church of North America; the Assemblies of God; the Christian and Missionary Alliance; the Episcopal Church; the Evangelical Covenant Church; the Lutheran Church; the Presbyterian Church - USA; the Roman Catholic Church; the Southern Baptist Church; and the United Methodist Church.[127]

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[126] For example, see respectively: Lim and Ruth, *Lovin' on Jesus*; James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009); Constance Cherry, *The Worship Architect: A Blueprint for Designing Culturally Relevant and Biblically Faithful Services* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010); Allen P. Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory: Biblical Worship from the Garden to the New Creation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006); Clayton J. Shmit, *Sent and Gathered: A Worship Manual for the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009); Quentin J. Schultze, *High-Tech Worship?: Using Presentational Technologies Wisely* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004); Pedrito U. Maynard-Reid, *Diverse Worship: African-American, Caribbean, and Hispanic Perspectives* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2000); Simon Chan, *Liturgical Theology: The Church as Worshiping Community* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006).

[127] See: Winfield Bevins, *Ever-Ancient, Ever-New: The Allure of Liturgy for a New Generation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018); Simon Chan, *Liturgical Theology*; Alan Rathe, *Evangelicals, Worship, and Participation: Taking a Twenty-first Century Reading* (Dorchester: Ashgate, 2014); Reggie Kidd, *With One Voice: Discovering Christ's Song in Our Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005); Allen Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory*; Todd E. Johnson, ed., *The Conviction of Things Not Seen: Worship and Ministry in the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002); Clayton J. Schmit, *Sent and Gathered*; Long, *Beyond the Worship Wars*; Howard, *Evangelical is Not Enough*; Timothy George, ed., *Evangelicals and Nicene Faith: Reclaiming the Apostolic Witness* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011); Constance Cherry, *The Worship Architect*; Lim and Ruth, *Lovin' on Jesus*.

Given the lack of scholarly treatment of Webber, no conceptual framework for his worship theology exists; thus, his work is prone to reductionist treatment. As the following literature review reveals, it is common for scholars and practitioners to look at what Webber did through his work in worship (i.e., reclaim traditional practices through contemporary forms), and to focus on who he did it for (i.e., American evangelicalism), but they miss out on why he did it (i.e., to retrieve and preserve Christological proclamation and participation in the content and practices of worship). Such reductionism risks misunderstanding and misappropriating Webber's work.

For example, the faith community known as Epiclesis, established by Chris Alford in Pasadena, California, lays claim to the distinction of being the first church plant in North America consciously founded upon Webber's principles of ancient-future worship.[128] The stated vision of the church asserts: "Our worship and spirituality are deeply rooted in classic Christianity– and we're convinced that the faith and practice of the ancient Church will engage our culture more effectively and provide a way forward in a time of almost unbelievable transition and change."[129] While Epiclesis' vision statement aligns with Webber's commitment to the recovery of historic practices, it is silent on the matter of Webber's Christological commitments. The lack of Christological focus is seen further in the church's instructional resource, "Worship in Our Community": "Our worship and our spirituality are deeply rooted in the classic Christianity of the ancient church."[130] The resource then delineates several ancient liturgical practices and symbolic representations included within the services conducted at Epiclesis. Again, Epiclesis' dedication to historical retrieval is unmistakable; however, it is noteable that Epiclesis' emphasis in worship diverges from Webber's core Christological commitments.

Webber believed the essence of Christian worship and spirituality lies in Jesus Christ and His redemptive work, rather than in the mere adherence to traditional practices. He valued historic Christian practices because they maintain a Christological focus in worship. For Webber, these practices were not ends in themselves but were means to facilitate transformative engagement with the risen, victorious Christ. The practice of Epiclesis thus underscores the significance of historical retrieval in worship;

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[128] Chris Alford, "Worship – Epiclesis," accessed September 19, 2023, https://www.epiclesis.org/worship/;

[129] Chris Alford, "About Our Church – Epiclesis," accessed September 19, 2023, https://www.epiclesis.org/about-our-church/.

[130] Chris Alford, "Worship in Our Community," accessed September 19, 2023, https://www.epiclesis.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Worship-in-Our-Community-2016.pdf.

however, Webber's theological perspective insists that the goal of embracing historical practices is to encounter and participate in the redemptive work of Jesus. A Christological focus is therefore essential to fully appreciating Webber's contributions to worship and practical theology. Given the extensive influence, diverse interpretations, and ecumenical recognition of Webber's work in worship, there is a need for a conceptual framework that allows for the proper evaluation and faithful implementation of his practical worship theology.

5. Research statement

This thesis is an assessment of Robert E. Webber's practical worship theology. The thesis claims that as a practical theologian of worship, Webber is concerned with how theological content and liturgical praxis examine and guide Christological proclamation and participation in American evangelical worship.[131] The thesis concludes that Webber's contribution to the field of worship studies is his liturgical recapitulation of evangelical worship, defined through his commitment to Christological proclamation and Christological participation in worship, which he posits can be preserved in any era of the church through the retrieval of historic liturgical practices implemented and communicated through contextual forms. The thesis aims to explore how Christological commitments guide and influence Webber's practical approach to worship. A secondary hope is for the study to open a door to further academic research on Webber.

6. Methodology

This dissertation employs a qualitative research methodology to examine Webber's practical theology of worship. It utilizes qualitative textual analysis combined with reflective inquiry to interpret and analyze both primary and secondary sources related to Webber's contributions to worship. Qualitative textual analysis is an approach that structures and examines substantial data on a given subject. It involves the researcher's engagement with the material, along with systematic reflection, to identify underlying issues and develop a new conceptual framework or theory for the study of emerging topics.[132] This qualitative approach is particularly suited to the current study, as it

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[131] For this thesis, the terms "liturgy," "liturgical," and "liturgical praxis" are used to convey the patterns and practices that are performed in a service of corporate worship.

[132] See Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 13; R.J. Torraco, "Writing integrative literature reviews: Guidelines and examples," *Human Resource Development Review*, 4 (2005), 356-367. For examples of textual research analysis studies conducted on other theologians, see: Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007); Mary McDermott Shidler, *The Theology of Romantic Love: A Study in the Writings of Charles Williams* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock,

facilitates an in-depth exploration of Webber's texts, enabling the identification and synthesis of key themes and concepts across his extensive body of work on worship.

The central objective of this research is to construct a conceptual framework that encapsulates Webber's contributions to worship within the discipline of practical theology. The primary research question guiding this inquiry is: What are the key themes and concepts in Webber's writings related to worship as practical theology? To address this question, data was collected from Webber's relevant texts, including books, articles, and other writings that span the breadth of his career. This dataset forms the foundation of the thesis.

Through analytical textual examination, this study conducts a textual analysis of recurring themes, concepts, and ideas in Webber's practical theology of worship, aiming to trace the evolution of his thought. By situating Webber's writings within their historical, cultural, and theological contexts, the analysis provides insights into the influences that shaped his ideas. Practical theology methods are used to interpret how Webber's theology functions within worship contexts. The primary goal is to synthesize these themes into a coherent framework that captures Webber's contributions to worship and their relevance for contemporary practice.

To ensure thorough examination, this study implements a constant comparison method, juxtaposing Webber's work with supplemental research material. This iterative process not only refines the emerging conceptual framework but also highlights the interconnectedness of Webber's theological perspectives. The analysis leads to an assessment, critique, and synthesis of the literature, enabling the emergence of new theoretical frameworks and perspectives.[133]

7. Research questions and organization of the study

The foundational question of this thesis is: what are the key themes and concepts in Robert E. Webber's writings related to practical worship theology? To navigate this complex question, the thesis uses the integrative textual analysis methodology delineated in the above material. The overarching objective of the study is to fashion a coherent and comprehensive conceptual framework for Webber's practical worship theology. The first chapter of the study provides a literature review that seeks to

2005); Daniel L. Seagraves, *Andrew D. Urshan: A Theological Biography* (Wilmore: Emeth Press, 2017).

[133] Torraco, "Writing integrative literature reviews: Guidelines and examples," 4. Cf. Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods,* 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2001), 5.

pinpoint recurring motifs in Webber's practical worship theology and accentuate the need for a coherent theoretical structure for his work.

Recognizing Webber as a pivotal figure in worship studies, the research then asks several follow-up questions to discern the key themes and concepts of Webber's practical worship theology. These questions are used to analyze, interpret, and critically evaluate Webber's practical-theological method.

First are descriptive questions: What was Webber's understanding of worship? What does Webber articulate about worship? What was Webber's worship context? What was happening in Webber's understanding of worship in this context? The goal of these questions is to categorize features of Webber's practical worship theology and identify contextual dynamics that influenced his understanding of worship. These questions are addressed in the second chapter of the thesis.

The following questions are analytical: What are the foundational commitments of Webber's practical worship theology? What influenced these commitments? How does Webber's practical worship theology reconcile these commitments with his context? The goal of these questions is to distinguish and analyze the historical, theological, and practical commitments embodied in Webber's practical worship theology. These questions are addressed in the third chapter of the thesis.

The next questions are: How does Webber's work in worship reflect the discipline of practical theology? How does his work in worship serve as a practical worship theology? The goal of these questions is to distinguish Webber's practical-theological process, its key concepts, and its contribution to the practice and theology of Christian worship and evaluate its usefulness for implementing changes in liturgical content and practice. These questions are addressed in the fourth chapter of the thesis.

The final set of questions are analytical: In what ways does Webber's practical worship theology contribute a peculiar vision of and approach to worship? In what ways is Webber's work deficient as a practical worship theology? What further research needs to be done on Webber's work in worship? The goal of these questions is to discern the outcomes and effects of Webber's practical worship theology and to offer critical reflection on Webber's practical theological model. These questions are addressed in the fifth chapter of the thesis.

8. Challenges and limitations

Several challenges and limitations are necessary to acknowledge regarding the current study of Robert E. Webber's practical worship theology. Foremost among these is the

fact that, although various scholars and practitioners have engaged with Webber's work to varying extents, prior to this research, no critical scholarship has been devoted to Webber or his worship theology. While it is a privilege to pioneer the academic study of Webber, the thesis is at a disadvantage due to the absence of a scholarly dialogue with other Webber-focused research.

Secondly, the thesis is limited to the Christological commitments that bridge theology to practice in Webber's work in worship. The study does not attempt to examine Webber's pneumatology, sacramental theology, or biblical theology, nor does it evaluate any of Webber's material through systematic theology, analytical theology, or comparative theology even though these topics are worthy of study.

Thirdly, it is important to address the primary and secondary literature utilized in this thesis. Although academic research on Webber is limited, between 1972 and 2007, Webber published over fifty books and hundreds of magazine and journal articles. His writings covered a broad range of topics, including worship, catechesis, culture, education, evangelicalism, evangelism, religious history, spirituality, and philosophy. Given the extensive scope of his work and the fact that several of his books were reissued under new titles, this study does not engage with the entirety of Webber's bibliography. Instead, the research focuses on literature where Webber: 1) articulates principles and practices of Christian worship, both historical and contemporary; 2) assesses evangelicalism and evangelical worship; and 3) provides autobiographical insights regarding his desire for worship reform. Additionally, analysis of secondary material is confined to resources that interact with Webber's contributions to worship studies.

Fourthly, this thesis situates Webber's work within the context of American evangelicalism. Due to space constraints and the study's focus, it does not attempt to examine every historical, theological, and sociological factor that has influenced the development of American evangelicalism over the years. Instead, the study concentrates on key aspects of the American evangelical movement necessary for understanding the context in which Webber's work on worship was conducted. It examines elements of evangelicalism that shed light on Webber's critique of the movement, particularly those factors that shaped twentieth-century American evangelical worship practices, which are crucial for understanding Webber's critique and his construction of a practical theology of worship.

Fifthly, due to the expansive scope of practical theology, the term can mean different things in different contexts and can be applied through a variety of theories. It

is not the purpose of this thesis to examine every theory of practical theology. A survey of six prominent models is given to establish and analyze Webber's work in worship.

Sixthly, sixteen years have passed since Webber's death. It remains challenging to assess the full impact of his contributions to worship. While this thesis acknowledges the influence of Webber's work during his lifetime and in the years following his death, its conclusions are necessarily limited. Moreover, the absence of prior academic research focused on Webber precludes a thorough evaluation of ongoing scholarship concerning his work. Consequently, a secondary aim of this study is to establish Webber as a significant and influential figure in the fields of worship studies and practical theology, thereby encouraging further scholarly exploration of his life and contributions.

1. The Literature Review

1. Introduction

The current literature review examines selected works that delve into the cultural context and practical-theological dimensions of Robert E. Webber's worship theology. The literature is assessed in dialogue with Webber's own writings on worship. The goal of the chapter is to discern, pinpoint, and articulate recurring themes in Webber's practical worship theology as presented in scholars' and practitioners' analyses. The chapter also aims to evaluate methodologies scholars and practitioners use when examining Webber. Finally, the chapter seeks to underscore the need for a well-defined conceptual framework of Webber's practical worship theology.

1.1 Methodology

This thesis employs an integrative textual analysis methodology, synthesizing insights from various sources to develop initial conceptualizations and theoretical models of Robert E. Webber's worship theology. Before delving into the selected literature, it is essential to clarify the discovery and selection process of the scholars and practitioners reviewed in this chapter.

From May 2017 to November 2017, January 2018 to March 2018, and July 2022 to August 2022, extensive searches were conducted at Asbury Theological Seminary using ATLA and EBSCOhost databases. The searches aimed to locate books, journals, and articles referencing Webber's work. Search terms included "Robert Webber," "Robert E. Webber," "Webber and worship," "Webber ancient future worship," "Webber blended worship," "Webber Christology," "Webber contemporary worship," "Webber convergent worship," "Webber evangelical worship," "Webber and participation," and "Webber practical theology." These terms were chosen based on Webber's own terminology and relevant academic disciplines. Despite Webber's practical approach to worship, no results emerged specifically within the discipline of practical theology.

The searches yielded sixty-seven books and 361 articles referencing Robert Webber or citing his works. Cross-referencing "Robert Webber" with terms like "Christology," "contemporary," "evangelical," "liturgy," "theology," "participation," "practical theology," and "worship" produced thirty-nine books and six articles. The following literature review focuses on materials from this cross-referenced list, noting

that none of the identified works examine Webber's contributions to worship from a Christological perspective.

The selected literature is categorized into two sections. The first section reviews literature within the context of American evangelicalism, while the second examines the practical and theological dimensions of Webber's approach to worship. Both sections are instrumental in identifying characteristics and principles of Webber's practical worship theology. A general overview of the literature precedes these two sections.

2. General overview of the literature

For over four decades the name Robert E. Webber has been connected to the word worship due to his influence in worship renewal among American evangelicals. Throughout his life Webber was a prolific writer and sought-after speaker in churches and at Christian conferences. Numerous scholars and practitioners regard his work as important in the field of worship, especially considering how he reframed conversations on worship at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Although Webber's primary audience was American evangelicalism, his work is recognized and appreciated across a variety of Christian traditions. He is documented as a leading voice in worship studies, known for rooting students and leaders of worship in an understanding of historic liturgical practices and principles. Allusions to Webber in publications are numerous; yet it is common for references to Webber to be nothing more than a passing nod. For example, Thomas Howard mentions Webber as a recommended resource in *Evangelical is Not Enough*, as do Emily R. Brink in *Authentic Worship in a Changing Culture*, Thomas G. Long in *Beyond the Worship Wars*, Simon Chan in *Liturgical Theology*, and James K.A. Smith in *You Are What You Love*.[134] Each author sees Webber as an authoritative figure on worship, especially regarding the retrieval of historic liturgical practices in evangelical settings, but no explanation or examination of his work is given.

Several additional authors casually mention Webber's name as an advocate for the return to historical reflection and traditional practices in the church, such as: Rodney Clapp in *A Peculiar People*; Quentin Schultze in *High-tech Worship?;* Reggie Kidd in *With One Voice*; D.H. Williams in *Evangelicals and Tradition*; Alan Hirsch in

[134] See: Howard, *Evangelical is Not Enough*,160; Emily R. Brink, ed., *Worship in a Changing Culture* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1997), 107; Long, *Beyond the Worship Wars*, 119; Chan, *Liturgical Theology*, 190n.105, 197n.78; James K.A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 192.

The Forgotten Ways; Calvin R. Stapert in *A New Song for an Old World*; William Dyrness in *A Primer on Christian Worship*; Timothy George in *Evangelicals and Nicene Faith*; Robbie Castleman in *Story-Shaped Worship*; and Robert A. Myers in *Strategic Portraits*.[135] Similarly, scholars such as Hans Boersma, Simon Chan, Timothy George, Alan Hirsch, Thomas Howard, Robert Myers, D. H. Williams, and John Witvliet reference the evangelical character of Webber's work, applying an "evangelical" label to it without any qualification of what the term means. Neither do they substantiate how Webber's work fits within an evangelical context.[136] Nonetheless, these references are important as they confer upon Webber a historical renewal approach to worship and an evangelical identity even though they offer descriptive rather than analytical treatment of Webber's work.

Despite the quantity of casual references made to Webber, numerous resources stand out in their critical engagement of Webber's work in worship, albeit to varying degrees. Included in this list are: *Pentecostal Orthodoxy* by Emilio Alvarez; *Ever Ancient, Ever New* and *Liturgical Mission* by Winfield Bevins; *The Worship Architect, The Music Architect,* and *Worship Like Jesus* by Constance Cherry; *Worship for the Whole People of God* by Ruth Duck; *What's Love Got to Do with It?* by Sam Hamstra Jr.; *The Worship Pastor* by Zak Hicks; *The Next Worship* by Sandra Van Opstal; *Evangelicals, Worship, and Participation* by Alan Rathe; *Diverse Worship* by Pedrito Maynard-Reid; *Lovin' on Jesus* and *A History of Contemporary Praise and Worship* by Swee Hong Lim and Lester Ruth*; Desiring the Kingdom* and *Awaiting the King* by

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[135] See: Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1996), 14; Quentin Schultze, *High-Tech Worship? Using Presentational Technology Wisely* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004) 80, 90; Kidd, *With One Voice*, 155; D.H. Williams, *Evangelicals and Tradition: The Formative Influence of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 15; Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 66; Calvin R. Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World: Musical Thought in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007) 4; William Dyrness, *A Primer on Christian Worship: Where We've Been, Where We Are, Where We Can Go* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009) 17; Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 156; James K.A. Smith, *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 81; George, *Evangelicals and Nicene Faith*, 183; Robbie Castleman, *Story-Shaped Worship: Following Patterns from the Bible and History* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 163; Zak Hicks, *The Worship Pastor: A Call to Ministry for Worship Leaders and Teams* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 103; Lim and Ruth, *Lovin' on Jesus*, 31; Robert A. Myers, *Strategic Portraits: People and Movements that Shaped Evangelical Worship* (Jacksonville: Webber Institute Books, 2018) 173-174.

[136] Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdman's Publishing Company, 2011), 1, 27, 156; Chan, *Liturgical Theology*, 62, 167; Ruth Duck, *Worship for the Whole People of God* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 154, 260; George, *Evangelicals and Nicene Faith*, 183; Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 66; Howard, *Evangelical is Not Enough*, 160; Myers, *Strategic Portraits*, 173-174; Ruth and Lim, *Lovin' on Jesus*, 131; Williams, *Evangelicals and Tradition*, 15; John D. Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding: Windows into Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 95.

James K.A. Smith; and *In Search of Ancient Roots* by Kenneth J. Stewart.[137] Moreover, six additional resources are worthy of note due to how they provide biographical information on Webber, detailed description of his work in worship, and assessment of his scholarship and influence within American evangelicalism: Elesha Coffman's chapter "The Chicago Call and Responses" in the book *Evangelicals and the Early Church*; Joan Huyser-Honig's article "Robert E. Webber's Legacy: Ancient Future Faith and Worship" on the Calvin Institute for Christian Worship website; George Kalantzis and Andrew Tooley's *Evangelicals and the Early Church*; David Neff's preface to the second edition of Robert Webber's *Common Roots*; Dennis Okholm's chapter "Robert E. Webber" in *The Conviction of Things Not Seen*; and Melanie Ross's *Evangelical Versus Liturgical?*. Each publication offers both observation and critique of Webber. The following review shows, however, that treatment of Webber is limited in scope, revealing why a conceptual framework of Webber's work in worship is needed, especially one that holds together the evangelical and the practical-theological aspects of his worship theology.

3. The evangelical context of Webber's work

It is not difficult to find literature that discusses Webber within the context of evangelical reform, whether related to worship specifically or evangelicalism generally. Authors often apply an evangelical label to Webber or refer to his reformational work within evangelicalism without qualifying what the term means or explaining how his work fits in an evangelical context.[138] The work of these scholars is crucial because, despite their brief references, it upholds Webber's evangelical identity and affirms his role as a key figure in evangelical reform.

A more in-depth exploration of Webber's evangelical context can be found in Kenneth J. Stewart's book *In Search of Ancient Roots*. In the book, Stewart provides a thorough study on the recovery of historic Christian practices in late twentieth century

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[137] It should be noted that one additional book appeared in the database searches—*Essays on the History of Contemporary Praise and Worship*, edited by Lester Ruth—which is not included in the current literature review since the chapter "Robert Webber: Preserving Traditional Worship through Contemporary Styles" that appears in the book was written by this researcher. See: Jonathan A. Powers, "Robert Webber: Preserving Traditional Worship through Contemporary Styles" in *Essays on the History of Contemporary Praise and Worship*, ed. Lester Ruth (Eugene: Pickwick, 2020), 95-115.

[138] Emilio Alvarez, *Pentecostal Orthodoxy: Toward an Ecumenism of the Spirit* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2022), 19-23; Winfield Bevins, *Liturgical Mission* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2022), 19-21; Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, 1, 27, 156; Chan, *Liturgical Theology*, 62, 167; Duck, *Worship for the Whole People of God*, 154, 260; George, *Evangelicals and Nicene Faith*, 183; Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 66; Howard, *Evangelical is Not Enough*, 160; Myers, *Strategic Portraits*, 173-174; Ruth and Lim, *Lovin' on Jesus*, 131; Williams, *Evangelicals and Tradition*, 15; Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding*, 95.

and early twenty-first century evangelicalism, investigating influential figures who sought deeper connection with ancient Christianity. He considers Webber to be one of the premier reformational figures of this movement. Although Stewart does not explore Webber's worship theology at length, he argues that Webber's dissatisfaction with evangelical worship fueled his desire to recover historic Christian practices, particularly those he found in Anglicanism.[139] Stewart highlights three key factors that led Webber to focus on ancient Christianity: his evangelical upbringing, his dissatisfaction with American evangelicalism, and his eventual attraction to the Anglican tradition.[140] He compares Webber to other evangelical leaders, such as Michael Harper and Thomas Howard, who found themselves leaving low church evangelical settings in favor of higher liturgical traditions. Comparing the three figures, Stewart notes that Harper, unlike Webber, turned from Anglicanism to the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Thomas Howard found Anglicanism to be a stopping point on the road to Roman Catholicism. Webber, however, found Anglicanism to be the "very nexus" in which he discovered the ancient church.[141]

Stewart's acknowledgment of Anglicanism's influence on Webber is significant, especially given the comparison he makes between Webber, Harper, and Howard. Although Stewart does not evaluate why each person landed in the tradition they did, he does identify Webber's draw to Anglicanism over and against others who shared his conviction for evangelical renewal but rejected the Anglican tradition. Stewart notes that Webber believed Anglicanism preserved something historic, yet he fails to specify what Webber saw as being preserved. This omission is significant as Stewart does not address the historic theological commitments Webber sought to reclaim through Anglicanism. Furthermore, Stewart does not explain why certain aspects of Anglican theology and liturgical practice appealed to Webber. While Stewart acknowledges Webber's advocacy for a more historically-minded evangelicalism, he does not provide a clear rationale for Webber's work within the context. Consequently, the reader is left with the impression that Webber's desire for reform stemmed merely from general dissatisfaction with evangelicalism. In summary, although Stewart recognizes Webber as a key American evangelical figure who aimed to reform

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[139] Kenneth J. Stewart, *In Search of Ancient Roots: The Christian Past and the Evangelical Identity Crisis* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2017), 72.

[140] Ibid., 73, 91, 254, 265-266.

[141] Ibid., 73.

evangelicalism through the recovery of historic practices, his analysis lacks clarity on the purpose and goals of Webber's reform efforts.

Like Stewart, George Kalantzis and Andrew Tooley point out the reformational quality of Webber's work in their introduction to *Evangelicals and the Early Church*. They write: "In the post-World War II era, at Wheaton College and later Northern Baptist Seminary, professor Robert Webber was one of the first to offer a sustained polemic for why evangelicalism would benefit from a robust exploration of the patristic period."[142] Kalantzis and Tooley recognize Webber as an early advocate for studying church history to address shortcomings in contemporary evangelical faith and spirituality. They highlight that while evangelicalism significantly influenced American society, it also unintentionally absorbed cultural beliefs and customs, a trend that troubled Webber.[143] They also argue that evangelicals "prioritize the spirituality of an individual and her private interpretation of Scripture," which leads to debates on scriptural meaning with evangelical circles.[144] These debates in mind, Kalantzis and Tooley write:

> Robert Webber, Thomas Oden, and others set out in the 1980s to interpret Scripture intentionally with reference to what Christians believed in the past. They were convinced that the intellectual and spiritual climate within American evangelicalism had suffered in part because evangelicals were overlooking or ignoring this ancient tradition. What would happen, they wondered, if evangelicals began interpreting Scripture in ways the church fathers would approve? How might an interpretation of the Bible that valued rather than eschewed early Christian traditions provide a helpful corrective to various excesses and ideological neurosis that had crept into evangelicalism?[145]

Kalantzis and Tooley identify Webber as a key figure in evangelical reform, particularly for his efforts to cultivate a stronger historical awareness within evangelicalism. They argue that Webber's work was foundational in linking the past with evangelical reengagement in politics, academia, and popular culture, emphasizing that his insights remain relevant and should be heeded today.[146] Although Kalantzis and Tooley identify Webber as a reformer of evangelicalism, they give little attention to his contributions to liturgical reform. Apart from his work in biblical hermeneutics, they overlook Webber's practical and theological commitments. They present Webber as an

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[142] George Kalantzis and Andrew Tooley, *Evangelicals and the Early Church* (Eugene: Cascade Books 2012), 6-7

[143] Ibid.

[144] Ibid., 7.

[145] Ibid.

[146] Ibid.

important social reformer but fail to anchor his role in evangelical reform within a clear theological or practical framework.

Elesha Coffman also discusses Webber as a reformer of evangelicalism in her chapter "The Chicago Call and Responses," found in the book *Evangelicals and the Early Church*.[147] Coffman primarily evaluates the Chicago Call rather than delving deeply into Webber's work, though she does make some observations about him. Like other authors, Coffman highlights Webber's advocacy for looking to the past to foster a more mature evangelicalism, identifying this as his aim in organizing the Chicago Call.[148] She does not explore Webber's contributions to worship but instead focuses on his broader role as a reformer within evangelicalism. Despite not addressing his worship theology, Coffman recognizes Webber's efforts to provide richer material for evangelicals and to inspire action in universities and seminaries to develop curricula in both theology and worship.[149]

Coffman makes a significant critique of the Chicago Call in her writing. Considering the impact of the conference and statement, Coffman writes, "I see the Call pointing one way—toward the past, toward tradition, toward contemplation—at a moment when the strongest currents in evangelicalism were flowing the other way—toward an apocalyptic future; toward change in the presentation, though not in the content, of the gospel; toward action, action, and more action."[150] Although the Chicago Call was meant to help evangelicals live into a more mature, historic expression of the Christian faith, Coffman believes evangelicalism skipped the "maturity bit" and moved into social activism and cultural transformation without learning how to nuance its ways of thinking and acting.[151] Coffman similarly notes that, aside from Webber's efforts, evangelical publishers and seminaries have not prioritized church history. She

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[147] The Chicago Call was a conference Webber organized along with a planning committee consisting of Richard Holt, Donald G. Bloesch, Jan P. Dennis, Lane T. Dennis, Gerald D. Erickson, Peter E. Gillquist, Thomas Howard, and Victor Oliver to bring together select evangelical leaders who would draft an appeal to fellow evangelicals stressing the need for a recovery of the theology and practice of historic Christianity and to call them to a catholic and evangelical Christianity. The statement, which would be called "The Chicago Call," was to be loosely modeled after "The Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern" (1973), "The Hartford Declaration" (1975, also known as "The Hartford Appeal"), and "The Boston Affirmations" (1976). See Robert E. Webber, "Behind the Scenes: A Personal Account," in *The Orthodox Evangelicals: Who They Are and What They are Saying*, eds. Robert E. Webber and Donald Bloesch (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1978), 21-28. See also the following chapter of this thesis.

[148] Elesha Coffman, "The Chicago Call and Responses," in *Evangelicals and the Early Church: Recovery, Reform, Renewal*, eds. George Kalantzis and Andrew Tooley (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2012) 108-124. Cf. Stewart, *In Search of Ancient Roots*, 72, 73, 91, 254, 265-266.

[149] Coffman, "The Chicago Call and Responses," 109, 121. Cf. Stewart, *In Search of Ancient Roots*, 254.

[150] Coffman, "The Chicago Call and Responses," 119.

[151] Ibid., 118.

concludes that the Chicago Call fell short of its goal to bring about the desired evangelical reform and suggests that Webber overstated the Call's impact on evangelical change, given the limited number of participants involved.[152]

Coffman's evaluation of the Chicago Call raises questions about the overall success of Webber's efforts within evangelicalism. As Coffman observes, the Call did not significantly impact evangelical public and academic life, nor did it cultivate a deeper appreciation for church history, falling short of Webber's goals. Additionally, the Call has largely been overlooked, except by a few who study Webber or late twentieth-century American evangelical reform. The Call can still be seen as a success, however, in that Webber remained committed to its objectives and achieved the most in pursuing its purpose. Throughout his career Webber consistently urged evangelicals to engage with the church's historic theology and develop a more mature Christian faith. What Coffman and others who study Webber often overlook is the distinction in his approach between the Chicago Call and the rest of his career. The Call was Webber's attempt to initiate evangelical reform through an academic conference and a statement from evangelical thought leaders. Following the Call, Webber shifted his focus to the local church, believing that real change would come not from top-down influence but from grassroots efforts. Webber found greater openness and receptivity to his message of reform in local churches and university classrooms. He believed that renewal would come from the local church and through "younger evangelicals" rather than solely through the influence of thought leaders."[153]

3.1 Webber and evangelical worship

The authors discussed thus far have explored Webber's role in evangelical reform but have paid little or no attention to his contributions to worship. In his preface to the second edition of Webber's *Common Roots*, David Neff addresses the centrality of worship in Webber's work. Neff begins the preface noting Webber's dissatisfaction with American evangelicalism, especially its approach to worship. He notes two reductionist tendencies Webber identifies in evangelical worship: the analytical focus on preaching and the emphasis on the worshiper's subjective experience.[154] Neff writes:

> He had experienced evangelism masquerading as worship – part of the legacy of American revivalism. And he had experienced doctrinal

[152] Ibid., 118-124.

[153] Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 25. Webber's "younger evangelical" concept is explored in the following chapter of this thesis.

[154] David Neff, "Preface," in *Common Roots*, 2nd ed. Robert E. Webber (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 6-7.

> teaching posing as worship – part of the legacy of Reformational evangelicalism. But something was missing from these approaches to worship, just as something was missing from the apologetic arguments that had crowded out the transforming story of God's saving actions.[155]

Webber knew change was needed in evangelical approaches to worship, so Neff claims he set about finding ways to bring "the reformation of worship" to evangelicalism.[156] Neff affirms Webber's work and builds a case for Webber's vision of worship.

Melanie Ross, however, does not agree with what she perceives as Webber's reductionist perspective on evangelical worship. She contends that Webber's evaluation is too negative and constrained, a viewpoint she endeavors to address in *Evangelical Versus Liturgical?: Defying a Dichotomy*. Ross's book aims to reconcile the apparent disparities she identifies between "freer" evangelical worship expressions and more structured liturgical approaches. Her goal is to develop a liturgical theological framework suited to free church traditions. Ross is determined to challenge the existing divide between evangelical and formalized liturgical worship, which she believes Webber worsens by asserting that there are two types of evangelicals: separatist and ecumenical.[157] Citing Webber, Ross says separatist evangelicals are those evangelicals who define themselves over and against higher, formalized liturgical denominations like the Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Orthodox, and mainline denominations. Ecumenical evangelicals are those evangelicals who have aligned with and perhaps entered these traditions.[158]

Ross's critique of Webber's evangelical categorization centers on its propensity to foster a dichotomous perspective, one that delineates liturgical reform in terms of an "us" versus "them" paradigm. Under this framework, it appears that there exist only two viable alternatives: an unwavering embrace of Christian tradition (which entails adherence to practices such as preaching from the lectionary, participating in weekly Eucharistic rituals, and employing fixed liturgies) or a complete rejection of it.[159] Ross rejects Webber's dichotomy as well as his premise that free church traditions should learn how to embrace historic liturgical forms of worship. Instead, she encourages free church traditions to understand how their practices already exhibit a rich theological

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[155] Ibid., 8.

[156] Ibid.

[157] Melanie Ross, *Evangelical Versus Liturgical?: Defying a Dichotomy* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 3. Cf. Robert Webber, "The Impact of the Liturgical Movement on Evangelicalism," *Reformed Liturgy and Music*, 21, no. 2 (1987), 111.

[158] Ross, *Evangelical Versus Liturgical*, 3.

[159] Ibid.

approach to worship. One of her goals in defying Webber is to help those with higher liturgical sensibilities value what the free church tradition has to offer and not just vice versa. She states, "There is pressing need for work that brings together the best of liturgical scholarship with the best of scholarship on American evangelicalism and puts both in conversation with worship practices of contemporary congregations."[160]

In addition to the dichotomy Ross sees Webber creating in evangelical worship, she also considers Webber's definition of "evangelical" to be deficient and too generic, noting that Webber considers an evangelical to be "anyone who believes in the message that the death and resurrection of Jesus is the good news of the forgiveness of sin, the inauguration of a new humanity." [161] Ultimately, Ross concludes that Webber's classification "is broad enough to include almost any Christian."[162] In her opinion a better qualification of "evangelical" is needed.

Despite her critiques, Ross securely places Webber within the context of evangelical scholarship related to the topic of worship. Her work is an acknowledgement that not all evangelicals find Webber's work to be useful. Some find it too rigid and dismissive of their own tradition.[163] For Ross, an approach other than Webber's is needed—one that values the liturgical heritage of a free church movement without embracing formalized practices and sacramentality of higher liturgical traditions. Notably, while Ross does not recognize or evaluate Webber's advocacy for contextualizing worship, her concern remains valid.

Ross's critique of Webber's definition of "evangelical" is noteworthy, too, as she pinpoints Christology as the central characteristic Webber's view. She does not explore Webber's conception of an evangelical beyond this one definition, however, so her assessment is limited.

A final work that examines Webber's work within American evangelical worship is *Pentecostal Orthodoxy* by Emilio Alvarez. In his book, Alvarez identifies Webber as a key figure in the paleo-orthodox movement. Alvarez observes, "Besides [Thomas] Oden, the most prominent contributor to the paleo-orthodox movement has been Robert Webber."[164] While their work in historical retrieval shares similarities,

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[160] Ibid., 5.

[161] Ibid., 128.

[162] Ibid.

[163] For example, see Franklin Arthur Pyles' critique of the liturgical renewal movement in his *Christianity Today* article "What's Right with Evangelical Worship," where he specifically identifies Webber as a key leader in the movement. Franklin Arthur Pyles, "What's Right with Evangelical Worship," *Christianity Today* Vol. 30, No. 3 (February 21, 1986), 14.

[164] Alvarez, *Pentecostal Orthodoxy*, 19.

each approached it differently. Webber focused on integrating ancient practices into contemporary worship, while Oden emphasized returning to the early church's theological foundations in Mainline thought and academic research.[165]

Alvarez identifies four defining features of Webber's work in historical recovery: one, his advocacy for blending old and new forms of worship, an approach that respects the ancient tradition yet seeks to incorporate contemporary worship styles; two, his focus on the four acts of entrance, service of the Word, service of the Eucharist, and the acts of dismissal as the infrastructure of worship; three, his recognition that the four acts of worship are performed in conjunction with the biblical narrative found in both the Old and New Testaments, and that they function as a way of being and worshiping as the people of God; and four, his conviction that worship must do God's story through historic recitation (in sermon, prayer, song, liturgy, and creeds) and dramatic reenactment (in sacraments and other liturgical acts).[166]

Alvarez expresses both admiration and critique of Webber's approach to worship, highlighting significant limitations in Webber's work. While Alvarez acknowledges that Webber's method is commendable for its focus on recovering, blending, and appropriately situating classical Christian worship within postmodern evangelicalism, he argues that Webber's approach to Christian tradition is reductionist. Specifically, Alvarez contends that Webber overlooks important non-Western voices and historical events. He admits Webber's work in worship is fitting within an Anglo-American evangelical context, but he critiques Webber's tendency to place "a resounding consensus for a Christian European universality devoid of ethnic or cultural presence."[167] For Alvarez, Webber's focus on the Christian tradition is too sanitized, ignoring cultural realities of ethnic and non-Western minority groups. For example, Alvarez acknowledges Webber's promotion of a consensual creedal tradition but critiques him for overlooking significant cultural contexts, such as the "bloody history of the sometimes-brutal power and influence exercised by Roman emperors in attempting to settle theological disputes."[168] Ignoring these power dynamics may work within a white evangelical setting, but, according to Alvarez, the ignorance marginalizes the real experience of many global Christians. Alvarez thus concludes that Webber's work may appeal to white evangelicals, but it is problematic for many

[165] Ibid., 22.
[166] Ibid., 22-23.
[167] Ibid., 22.
[168] Ibid., 27.

African-American and Latinx Christians who find solidarity with non-European church expressions.[169] He also questions the ability of Webber's historical recovery to influence evangelical perception on social issues such as immigration reform, gender equality, racial equality, and nationalism.[170] In Alvarez's assessment, Webber's reform efforts are too narrowly focused on white American evangelicals and their worship practices. Supporting this view, research for this thesis found that Alvarez is among only a few non-white scholars, and one of the few Pentecostals, who engage with Webber's work in their research.

Alvarez's evaluation of Webber is important as it highlights both the significant contributions and limitations of Webber's work. While Alvarez does not provide a comprehensive analysis of Webber's approach to worship, he identifies key characteristics, including Webber's focus on historical recovery and his connection to the broader paleo-orthodox movement, alongside figures like Thomas Oden. Alvarez also offers a critical cultural perspective, noting that Webber predominantly represents white American evangelicals. Furthermore, Alvarez observes that while Webber's legacy persists among certain white evangelical groups, particularly within the Anglican Church of North America, his influence has been less pronounced outside these circles.[171] Likewise, while Webber has influenced liturgical changes among evangelicals, Alvarez questions whether Webber has effectively articulated a social vision. Although one could argue that Webber presents a social vision in works such as *The Moral Majority: Right or Wrong?*, *The Church in The World*, *The Secular Saint*, and *Who Gets to Narrate the World?*, Alvarez raises the valid concern of whether these books have significantly impacted evangelical thought and action, particularly in contrast to the influence of Webber's writings on worship.

4. The practical-theological properties of Webber's work

It is imperative to consider the evangelical nature of Webber's work in worship, but it is equally important to examine how scholars explore the practical and theological aspects of his contributions. Such analysis not only reveals scholars' views on Webber's impact on worship but also highlights the distinctive features they identify in his practical worship theology. The reviewed literature reveals three prominent themes that encapsulate the key attributes of Webber's practical-theological work: a

[169] Ibid.
[170] Ibid., 42.
[171] Ibid., 25.

commitment to historical retrieval, a commitment to narrative quality, and a commitment to participatory engagement. The next section of this review is organized around these three categories.

4.1 Historical retrieval

Over the past four decades, most references to Webber in publications focus on his advocacy for grounding contemporary churches in historic principles and practices. Among the thirty-nine books and six articles reviewed, thirty-six sources highlight Webber's insistence on looking to the early church as a model for developing healthy practices in the contemporary church. While these references are numerous, most acknowledge his principle of historical rootedness in passing. A few authors engage critically with his position, though the depth of their engagement varies. In *Diverse Worship*, professor and ethnodoxologist Pedrito U. Maynard-Reid utilizes the revised edition of Webber's book *Worship Old and New* as a resource for developing a history of Christian worship.[172] Maynard-Ried attributes Webber for liturgical insights regarding the development of practices such as the structure of worship, the Eucharistic ceremony, catechetical rites, and post-Reformation congregational participation.[173] Similarly, in *Recalling the Hope of Glory*, Allen Ross applies Webber's writings in *Worship Old and New* to his development of the historic usage of symbolism and space in Christian worship.[174] In her book, *Worship for the Whole People of God*, Ruth Duck relies on Webber for her examination of sacramental theology, particularly making note of Webber's focus on the Eucharist as a central historical act of the church.[175] Likewise, in *Ever Ancient, Ever New* and *Liturgical Mission*, Winfield Bevins uses Webber to build a case for recovering historic liturgical forms as a means of shaping church communities missionally.[176] In each of these volumes, evaluation of Webber's work is not given. Each author utilizes Webber to build his/her own case for contemporary administration of historic worship practices.

Similar to the above authors, Gavin Ortlund's *Theological Retrieval for Evangelicals* highlights Webber as a prominent figure within the historical retrieval movement, contending that Webber played a pivotal role in facilitating evangelicals'

[172] See Maynard-Reid, *Diverse Worship,* 29-40.
[173] Ibid., 31, 33, 36.
[174] Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory*, 252, 414.
[175] Ruth C. Duck, *Worship for the Whole People of God*, 154, 259-260.
[176] Bevins, *Ever Ancient, Ever New*, 19. Cf. Bevins, *Liturgical Mission*, 8.

embrace of historic patterns and practices.[177] Ortlund claims that these evangelicals, inspired by their fascination with the church's past, aspired to enhance the richness of their liturgical practices and deepen their historical consciousness by integrating time-honored worship traditions and artistic expressions. Ortlund attributes the historical retrieval movement led by Webber to the inner restlessness, displacement, and disillusionment prevalent among evangelicals. His examination of how evangelicals selectively incorporate historical forms into their worship practices is haphazard, however, as he allows churches the latitude to appropriate whatever practices they desire, so long as they prove conducive to fostering a historical consciousness.

While Ortlund acknowledges the intrinsic value of historical rootedness in Webber's work, he overlooks its distinct Christological orientation and purpose. Additionally, he fails to adequately address the theological implications of selectively adopting historical practices without a cohesive framework. This omission raises concerns about the potential for superficial or fragmented liturgical expressions that may lack theological depth. Ortlund's approach, though beneficial in encouraging historical awareness, may inadvertently lead to a diluted understanding of the theological heritage and formation Webber sought to recover and embody within contemporary evangelical worship practices.

An author of note for her reliance on Webber's historic recovery principle in worship is Constance Cherry. A former pupil and mentee of Webber, Cherry stands apart from others in the literature due to Webber's direct influence on her scholarship. Four of her books—*The Worship Architect, The Special Service Worship Architect, The Music Architect*, and *Worship Like Jesus*—consider theological foundations of worship and offer practical guides for planning services of Christian worship. Cherry establishes a theological and historical foundation for worship at the beginning of each book, often citing Webber as support. Webber's influence on Cherry's scholarship is obvious considering her plenteous references to him. In total, Cherry cites Webber fifty-two

[177] See Gavin Ortlund, *Theological Retrieval for Evangelicals: Why We Need Our Past to Have a Future* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019), 51-52

times in four books, interacting with thirteen of Webber's publications.[178] Moreover, her first book, *The Worship Architect*, is dedicated to Webber's memory.[179]

Cherry's treatment of Webber's advocacy for historical rootedness in worship is particularly noteworthy. In her book *The Worship Architect*, Cherry specifically examines Webber's historic-theological approach to worship.[180] Cherry observes the evolving terminology Webber uses throughout his career to describe his historically rooted approach to worship, alternately referring to it as "blended" or "convergent."[181] She writes:

> It is likely that Robert Webber was the first to use the term [convergence] widely. Webber often referred to convergence worship as "the coming together of historic and contemporary worship." Yet even Webber used the term in no fewer than three ways: as a style, a model, and a movement. Of these, it is referred to as a style more than anything else. This, with the multiple ways the word is used today, suggests that ambiguity remains and that there is no consensus as to its meaning.[182]

Cherry notes that, according to Webber's definition in *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, a convergent approach to worship involves "the coming together of historic and contemporary worship."[183] She generalizes Webber's work by asserting that he uses the term "convergent" primarily in reference to style rather than method or movement. While Cherry's claim has some validity, particularly regarding Webber's use of the term "convergence" in his writings, she overlooks the fact that Webber eventually shifts his terminology one final time, settling on the term "ancient-future." Additionally, Cherry does not directly engage with Webber's writings or critically assess his theological framework of convergent worship, instead developing her own interpretation. Perhaps Cherry's aim is not to revisit Webber's ancient-future approach but to reclaim the "convergent" term that Webber later abandoned. Nevertheless, by

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[178] See Cherry: *The Worship Architect*, v, ix, 27 n.27, 31, 49 n.15, 50 n.16, 17, 51, 68 n.3, 75 n.20, 120, 126 n.1, 234 n.21, 239, 244 n.1, 245 n.3, 257; *The Special Services Worship Architect*, x, 8, 72, 101-102, 102 n.16, 141, 154 n.11, 283 n.4; *The Music Architect*, x, 23-24, 35, 67, 68, 77, 95, 104, 239, 240, 244; Constance M. Cherry, *Worship Like Jesus: From Spectator to Participant* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2019), x, 34, 66, 125 n.7, 126 n.3, 126 n.7, 127 n.9, 127 n.9, 127 n.10, 127 n.12, 128 n.9, 128 n.10. Cherry also thanks Webber in the acknowledgments of all four books.

[179] The dedication reads, "This book is dedicated in loving memory to Robert E. Webber (1933-2007), mentor and friend." See Cherry, *The Worship Architect*, dedication.

[180] Cherry, *The Worship Architect*, 244.

[181] See: Robert E. Webber, *Blended Worship: Achieving Substance and Relevance in Worship* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 1-2; Robert E. Webber, "Convergence Worship," in *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, vol. 3 (Nashville: StarSong Publishing, 1993), 122.

[182] Cherry, *The Worship Architect*, 244.

[183] Robert Webber, "Convergence Worship," in *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, vol. 3 (Nashville: StarSong, 1993) 122: qtd. in Cherry, *The Worship Architect*, 244.

treating Webber's advocacy for historically rooted worship as primarily a stylistic issue, Cherry presents an incomplete picture of his work.

As support for Cherry's point, Webber does address the importance of "style" in several of his writings, but always through contextual considerations. He never positions historical rootedness as merely one genre within a broader liturgical spectrum. In his penultimate book, *Ancient-Future Worship*, Webber advises readers not to reduce his historically rooted methodology to a matter of style:

> Over the past years people have written or called me and said, "I want to visit an ancient-future church. Where can I go?" I don't usually have an answer because I don't think an ancient-future church or ancient-future worship is the next trend or that "cool" church over there. Ancient-future worship is not a gimmick or a show or the latest adventure. There has been far too much "we need to start the church all over again" innovation since the late sixties. The church and its theology are not to be reinvented every generation. The church may need to be inspired, perhaps contextualized, but never trashed to start again…My call is to help us recover these common roots of faith and worship. For these traditions have been received from the apostles and handed down in the church for centuries. So if you want a definition of ancient-future worship, it is this: *the common tradition of the church's worship in Word, Table, and song, practiced faithfully and communicated clearly in every context of the world*.[184]

Webber's commitment to grounding the content of worship in historic principles and practices is clear. He resists constant innovation and remodeling driven by passing trends, advocating instead for a common tradition of worship that can be appropriately contextualized in practice. While Cherry draws on Webber's principle of historically rooted liturgical design in developing her own methodology for worship practice, her assessment of Webber's work is notably weak and underdeveloped.

While Cherry adopts Webber's methodology without critically engaging it, Sam Hamstra Jr. takes the opposite approach in *What's Love Got to Do with It?*—he critiques Webber's historically rooted liturgical methodology without any intention of applying it. Hamstra is explicit in his desire to distance himself from Webber's approach when constructing a theological framework for worship.

Hamstra states in the opening of his book that his purpose is to develop a theology of worship from the standpoint of love.[185] He claims that despite the multitude of books published on worship in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, none

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[184] Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 168.

[185] Sam *Hamstra* Jr., *What's Love Got to Do with It?: How the Heart of God Shapes Worship* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2016), xii.

begin with the love of God.[186] In order to set forth an alternative theological approach to the study of worship, Hamstra examines assorted theological constructs of worship that precede his own work, including Webber's. Hamstra evaluates Webber's work in worship within a theological framework he designates as the "theologically-oriented regulative principle."[187] Hamstra asserts this principle "follows the conviction that the Bible does not contain an order for worship, a comprehensive directory for worship, or parameters for worship in every time and place."[188] Because Hamstra claims there is no set Scriptural rubric for worship, he specifies that the theologically-oriented regulative principle of worship seeks to offer "historical precedents and theological principles which shall shape the worship of God's people to such an extent that no aspect of worship contradicts the will of God."[189] Hamstra claims two models emerge when the theologically-oriented regulative principle is applied in scholars' work: the patristic-ecumenical model and the biblical-typological model. Hamstra places Webber in the patristic-ecumenical model.[190] Describing the liturgical methodology employed in the patristic-ecumenical model, Hamstra sets forth a two-fold process that relies heavily on Michael A. Farley's article "What is 'Biblical Worship?' Biblical Hermeneutics and Evangelical Theologies of Worship."[191] Hamstra claims the model first looks at and relies almost exclusively on New Testament commands and examples to derive biblical support for worship practice. The model utilizes those New Testament principles to evaluate how contemporary worship practices embody biblical truth even if not explicitly commanded or prohibited in the New Testament. Second, the model draws ideals for liturgical practice from the patristic era, seeking to recover ancient liturgical models from the era of the undivided church.[192] Hamstra concludes the patristic-ecumenical model is deficient, stating it is far too convoluted and lacks a strong distinction between what constitutes worship and what constitutes liturgy.[193] In Hamstra's view, liturgical practice is conflated as worship rather than worship having an ontological reality outside of liturgical action. Hamstra believes the fuzzy distinction between worship and liturgical practice causes adherents to the patristic-ecumenical model—including Webber—to "describe" worship rather than define it. He writes:

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[186] Ibid., xii.
[187] Ibid., 8.
[188] Ibid.
[189] Ibid.
[190] Ibid., 8-9.
[191] Ibid., 8-9.
[192] Ibid., 9.
[193] Ibid.

> …they look at what Christians do when they gather for worship and describe those practices. More specifically, researchers in this camp survey the liturgies of the weekly gatherings of God's people throughout the centuries to discern the constants within the diversity. Wherever you find these constants, then, you may conclude you have found worship.[194]

For Hamstra, the patristic-ecumenical model focuses too heavily on the activity of worship instead of the phenomenon of worship. He thus critiques the patristic-ecumenical model for its failure to recognize how worship starts with the love of God.

Because Hamstra is dismissive of the patristic-ecumenical model, he implicitly critiques Webber's liturgical methodology. Despite his criticisms, Hamstra's categorization of Webber within this model is notable, as he elevates certain aspects of Webber's work in worship. Hamstra includes Webber within a liturgical methodology that is grounded in biblical principles, historically rooted practices, and contemporary application, thereby affirming both the ancient and contemporary elements of Webber's practical-theological approach. In essence, Hamstra acknowledges Webber's method of drawing ideals for contemporary liturgical practice from the ancient church and recognizes the scriptural soundness of Webber's work, an essential component in an evangelical context. Additionally, Hamstra appreciates Webber's ecumenical spirit in worship reform, which seeks to renew worship based on ancient patterns, practices, and principles without favoring any approach. He also recognizes Webber's emphasis on active and participatory engagement in worship praxis.

Hamstra's appraisal also has significant deficiencies that suggest Webber does not fully fit the patristic-ecumenical model he proposes. Although Hamstra categorizes Webber within the model, he does not provide direct evidence or engagement with Webber's writings to justify his placement. He fails to illustrate how Webber exemplifies the patristic-ecumenical model, ultimately forcing Webber's work into a pre-established and narrow framework without engaging Webber on his own terms.

Secondly, Hamstra asserts that Webber's worship theology relies exclusively on the New Testament as its biblical foundation for practice and theory; however, this inference about Webber's methodology is inaccurate, and Hamstra offers no direct statements from Webber's work to support his claim. While Webber does emphasize the New Testament in his writings, he also builds a theological framework for worship rooted in Old Testament doctrine. For instance, in both editions of his book *Worship Old & New*, Webber surveys Old Testament practices and principles—including

[194] Ibid., 13.

covenant, cultic practice, sacrifice, worship space, and choreography—to develop his theological framework.[195] Likewise, in *Planning Blended Worship* Webber examines content and practices from the Old Testament to establish principles for worship design in the contemporary church.[196] Webber's focus is not on practices alone, however. In *Planning Blended Worship*, he looks at Psalm 3 to consider how the Old Testament provides insight to the character of a worshiper:

> A brief interpretation of the psalmist's experience will help us understand what happens in worship. First the psalmist was aware of his *dislocation* in life. His life was in disarray. He was in a state of despair and confusion. Next, as the writer reflected on the memory of God's action in history and realized that God was for him, he became *relocated* in God and finally burst forth into praise. The underlying conviction of Christian worship is that we are all in a state of dislocation. We are dislocated from God, from self, from neighbor, and from nature. But God has entered into our history in Jesus Christ to bring relocation.[197]

While New Testament Christianity undeniably shaped Webber's understanding of worship, faith, and spirituality, he also recognizes the Old Testament as a foundational basis for the practical and theological aspects of worship, allowing it to stand on its own in his framework.

Another deficiency in Hamstra's assessment of Webber is his oversimplified claim that Webber describes rather than defines worship. Granted, Webber often turns to the ancient church in his development of a practical worship theology for the contemporary church, so his writings tend to be highly descriptive in nature, even when he is defining worship. For example, in the section "Defining Worship" in *Planning Blended Worship*, Webber defines worship through a series of actions: "worship is primarily prayer"; "worship is a dramatic expression of God's glory and representation of God's saving deeds in history"; "in worship we ascend into the heavens."[198] Likewise, the book title *Worship is a Verb* implies Webber addresses worship descriptively rather than ontologically. Webber's emphasis on the active elements of worship lean toward description rather than definition. Nonetheless, Webber develops theory and definitive theology elsewhere. For example, in *Ancient-Future Worship* and *The Divine Embrace*, Webber seeks to establish an ontological understanding of

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[195] See Webber, *Worship Old & New*, 23-31, 151-155; Webber, *Worship Old & New*, revised ed., 21-25, 33-39, 137-140

[196] See Robert E. Webber, *Planning Blended Worship: The Creative Mixture of Old & New* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998).

[197] Ibid., 41.

[198] Ibid., 38-39.

worship considering the character of God. He writes in the introduction to *Ancient-Future Worship*:

> Neither worship nor spirituality has a life outside of God's narrative. God brings us into his story, his grace, his redeeming work in all of history. He does that in our worship. He does that in our spirituality. In order for us to be brought into God's story, our worship needs to make a paradigm shift from self to God.[199]

Similarly, in *The Divine Embrace,* Webber defines worship as, "…God's passionate embrace of us; our passionate embrace of God." Despite Hamstra's critique that Webber merely describes rather than defines worship and does not see worship as rooted in the love of God, the textual evidence suggests otherwise. Ironically, in *What's Love Got to Do with It?*, Hamstra himself quotes Webber's *The Divine Embrace* to define worship as a loving dialogue of divine revelation and human response, thereby undermining his own critique.

A final key deficiency in Hamstra's assessment of Webber is his reduction of Webber's scholarship to its practical aspects within the patristic-ecumenical model. While Webber's writing is practical, his study of New Testament and early Christian worship was not merely for creating evaluative tools or applied re-appropriations for contemporary settings. Although Webber may have held an idealized view of the ancient church, it was not the ancient worship practices themselves that captivated him; rather, Webber was interested in how the practices of worship, the theology of the church, and the spirituality of the people functioned as an integrated whole, orienting Christians toward Christological proclamation and participation through the narrative of God's mighty acts of salvation. Webber's goal in looking to the ancient church was to discover ways to participate more meaningfully in the person and work of Jesus Christ. He believed that certain ancient worship practices fostered a deeper participatory engagement with Christ in worship, and he desired for evangelicals to become better worshipers through this engagement. For Webber, worship was the church's primary function, and the story of God's saving acts in and through Jesus Christ was central to that purpose.[200]

Placing Webber within the confines of Hamstra's patristic-ecumenical model is far too reductionist of Webber's work and scholarship. Hamstra's recognition of Webber's reliance on the ancient church for discovering liturgical practices and principles is valid, but his categorization ends up creating too narrow of a rubric.

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[199] Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 24.
[200] Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 168.

Ultimately, Hamstra limits Webber and his work within pre-defined confines that fail to assess Webber on his own terms.

4.2 Narrative quality

Like the publications that emphasize historical retrieval in Webber's work, the review also uncovered varying degrees of engagement with his focus on the narrative quality of worship. While many only briefly acknowledge Webber's contribution, authors like Zac Hicks, David Neff, Alan Rathe, Melanie Ross, and Sandra Van Opstal recognize the narrative quality of Webber's worship theology but do not delve into its practical-theological significance.[201] Although these books were not written to address Webber's commitment to the narrative aspect of worship, they are notable for acknowledging narrative as a central feature of his work.

A few authors offer substantial analysis of Webber's commitment to narrative quality in worship. For instance, Dennis Okholm, in his chapter "Robert E. Webber" from *The Conviction of Things Not Seen*, provides an in-depth examination of Webber's career, particularly within evangelicalism. Okholm explores how Webber's academic background in historical theology shaped his theological convictions, which Okholm argues contrasted sharply with his evangelical upbringing. He traces Webber's transformation from a disillusioned evangelical to a reformer within the movement, highlighting Webber's efforts to address and correct the deficiencies in American evangelicalism. In the concluding pages of his chapter, Okholm addresses the narrative quality of Webber's worship theology, identifying it as central to Webber's liturgical reform.[202] He asserts that Webber used narrative as a means to rectify the shortcomings in evangelical worship, stating, "Webber rightly insists that the key to the content and meaning of worship must be the Christian metanarrative."[203] Okholm emphasizes that narrative was not just a defining characteristic of Webber's work but a foundational element that gave both content and direction to worship practices. He notes Webber's conclusion that "the *order* of worship is to be dictated by the Christian story" and argues that adhering to Webber's principle of narrative quality would help churches transcend the dichotomy between "heartfelt spontaneity" and "dead ritual."[204]

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[201] See Hicks, *The Worship* Pastor, 158-159; Neff "Foreward" in *Common Roots*, 2nd ed., 22-23; Alan Rathe, *Evangelicals, Worship, and Participation*, 110; Melanie Ross, *Evangelical Versus Liturgical?*, 28; Sandra Van Opstal, *The Next Worship: Glorifying God in a Diverse World* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2016), 124-126.

[202] See Dennis Okholm, "Robert E. Webber" in *The Conviction of Things Not Seen:* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2002), 211-213. This book was done as festschrift for Webber.

[203] Ibid.

[204] Ibid., 212.

Okholm's endorsement of Webber's emphasis on narrative quality is clear, as he offers little critique beyond suggesting that if Webber's approach is not correct, another alternative must be found.[205]

Okholm's emphasis upon the centrality of narrative in Webber's worship methodology is significant. He argues that Webber's focus on narrative quality in worship is especially relevant to a postmodern culture.[206] Okholm believes that narrative has the potential to draw the postmodern generation back to the church, particularly one that is "energized by a 'convergence' of the charismatic movement and liturgical renewal."[207] He echoes Webber's views in *Ancient-Future Faith*, supporting the idea that worship should be the proclamation and enactment of God's story, which communicates the gospel and shapes the church to embody the Christian metanarrative.[208]

A concept Okholm mentions but does not develop is Webber's view that the order (or structure) of worship is crucial to its narrative quality, especially in a Christological sense. Webber writes in *Ancient-Future Faith*:

> One of the most immediate consequences of recapturing worship as a telling and acting out of the Christian vision is the impact it makes on the order of worship. The rule of thumb is that the order, rooted in the living, dying, and rising of Christ, which it re-presents, is *the vehicle through which the story of the work of Christ is proclaimed and enacted*.

While Okholm brushes past any discussion on structure, perhaps because it was not within the purview of his chapter, Constance Cherry gives considerable attention to Webber's focus on the narrative quality of the order of worship in her book *The Worship Architect*. Cherry utilizes a fourfold structure of worship – gathering, word, table, and sending – as a "plan for specified succession of events that provides direction and helps to facilitate the action" of worship.[209] There is an internal logic to the structure, Cherry claims, based on the gospel message. Cherry uses Webber's writings to demonstrate the narrative quality of the structure of worship, which she refers to as the plan of salvation. She notes how Webber sees each fold of worship as a proclamation of a particular part of the gospel narrative:

1) The Gathering: God acts first; God seeks us, calls us; God desires to be in fellowship with humanity; God initiates and awakening through the power of the Holy Spirit; God comes to us.

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[205] Ibid., 213.
[206] Ibid.
[207] Ibid.
[208] Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*, 104-106.
[209] See Cherry, *The Worship Architect*, 49.

2) The Word: Because our relationship with God is fractured through the fall, he sends his Son to restore the relationship; Christ, the living Word, is freely given to the world through his life, death, and resurrection; Christ is God's revealed truth.
3) The Table: Such revelation demands a response; we are offered an invitation to repent and believe the gospel; we come to Christ in faith and respond to God's plan of salvation by saying "Yes"; we lay our sins on Jesus, accept his forgiveness, and resolve to take up our cross daily and follow him in true discipleship.
4) The Sending: Becoming followers involves being sent; God intends for his people to be active representatives in his world; the message of Christ is now our message.[210]

Cherry's evaluation of Webber underscores his focus on the overarching Christological narrative in worship and the significance of each movement embodying a part of the narrative. In *The Worship Architect*, Cherry advocates for the careful and intentional design of worship, detailing practices and principles for each of the four folds that contribute to the overarching narrative of worship. Echoing Webber, she concludes in her introductory material:

> Each time you use the fourfold order, you are subtly telling the gospel story – God's plan of salvation. Every Sunday there is an underlying rhythm in motion: God approaches us, God reveals truth, we respond to the invitation to accept the demands of the gospel, and we are sent out into the world with a missional purpose. The fourfold order is the relentless telling and retelling of the story every time we gather in Christ's name.[211]

Webber's impact on Cherry's liturgical theology is clear, particularly in her emphasis on the Christological narrative in worship. Although she does not critique or evaluate his work, Cherry's incorporation of Webber's narrative principle as the foundation of her own worship design methodology highlights her strong endorsement of its validity and its crucial role in worship practice.

Cherry also explores Webber's narrative principle in *The Music Architect*. While *The Worship Architect* examines worship structure and design broadly, *The Music Architect* focuses on the musical aspects of worship. Cherry argues "pastoral musicians must embrace the reality that Christian worship is the proclamation and celebration of the story of God in community."[212] Again, Cherry turns to Webber to reiterate that God's story directs the order and content of worship.[213] Considering how

[210] Ibid.
[211] Ibid.
[212] Cherry, *The Music Architect*, 23.
[213] Ibid., 23-24.

narrative relates to the musical content of worship, Cherry alludes to Webber's books *Ancient-Future Worship* and *The Divine Embrace* to emphasize the importance of theocentric worship, noting Webber's critique of contemporary church culture, which he believed tended to be more "me-centered" than "God-centered" in its content.[214] For Webber, the narrative of worship should shift the focus of worship away from personal stories and toward a Christological narrative. He asserts:

> …worship is not what I do, but *that which is done within me*. That is, worship, which reveals Christ, forms me by making me aware that Jesus is my spirituality and that worship is to form my spiritual life into the pattern of living into the death and resurrection of Jesus…The point of presenting the theology of the ancient church is to show that *worship*…sings, tells, and enacts God's story, not *my* story. The primary focus of worship then and now is not me, but God, who redeems the world…God, through worship, works on me through his story to elicit praise on my lips and obedience in my living. When this happens, worship takes place.[215]

Cherry supports Webber's critique of a "me-centered," anthropocentric approach to worship, labeling it as misguided and narcissistic.[216] She points to Webber's narrative principle, arguing that worship should be grounded in remembrance of God's past work, anticipation of God's future reign, and the actualization of both past and future in the present to transform persons, communities, and the world.[217] Instead of viewing worship as a way to bring God into human stories, Cherry references Webber's claim that worship involves aligning humanity's story with God's narrative.[218] In her conclusion, Cherry emphasizes the role of music in proclaiming God's narrative in worship and helping individuals integrate their story within God's.[219] She asserts that Webber's narrative principle, which centers on God's story in worship, is the only way for the church to speak authentically and with integrity.[220]

4.3 Participatory engagement

Building on Webber's commitment to the narrative quality of worship, several authors highlight his emphasis on participation in worship, particularly participation in the narrative of God. While participation is central to Webber's principle of narrative quality, it is useful to examine literature on participation separately to recognize it as a

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[214] Ibid., 24.
[215] Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 93, 97-98.
[216] Cherry, *The Music Architect*, 24.
[217] Ibid.
[218] Ibid.
[219] Ibid., 24-25.
[220] Ibid., 67.

key concept in his work. Participatory engagement is the second-most emphasized aspect of Webber's worship theology; however, aside from Alan Rathe's *Evangelicals, Worship, and Participation*, there is limited critical engagement with Webber's material on the topic. Most authors tend to describe rather than critically analyze Webber's writings, often quoting him to support their points. Nevertheless, several authors explore Webber's principle of participatory engagement in two primary ways: participation in God's narrative and participation in worship practices.

James K.A. Smith regards Webber's narrative framework as the correct orienting factor for Christian spirituality. In *Desiring the Kingdom* and *Awaiting the King*, Smith contrasts Christian liturgies with cultural ones, emphasizing Webber's insights on the liturgical calendar. Smith concurs with Webber's assertion that Christian lives should be shaped by an alternative narrative to those offered by culture, and he views Webber's work on the liturgical calendar as a key illustration of this principle.[221] For Smith, Webber's emphasis on the liturgical calendar enables participation in the rhythm of Christ's life, offering a counterbalance to the cultural lifecycle.[222] He values Webber's introduction of time as a narrative guide in worship and Christian spirituality, which gives it a Christological quality and invites participation in the story of God's acts of creation, incarnation, and re-creation.[223]

Like Smith, Zak Hicks views Webber as a key figure in demonstrating how worship draws a community of faith into participation in God's story, ultimately shaping them in the life of God. Hicks writes in *The Worship Pastor*:

> Robert Webber further encourages us that when we worship according to God's narrative, we are enacting and embodying the very gospel being proclaimed. As liturgical architects, when we invite people to worship through this story, we aren't merely asking then to observe the gospel structure we've built. We're inviting them to inhabit it.[224]

In contrast to Smith, Hicks accentuates Sunday morning rather than a yearly cycle of worship. Like Smith, Hicks recognizes Webber's practical-theological approach to worship as participation in God's narrative. Hicks draws on Webber to demonstrate how every worship service is participation in the gospel story of Jesus Christ. This participation is not just momentary but ongoing throughout the Christian life.

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[221] Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 156. Cf. Smith, *Awaiting the King*, 81.
[222] Smith, *Awaiting the King*, 81.
[223] Ibid.
[224] Hicks, *The Worship Pastor*, 158-159.

Liturgical scholar Ruth Duck highlights participation in God's story as one of Webber's core practical and theological principles of worship. Duck argues that engaging with God's narrative through worship is what sustains the church amid ongoing cultural change. She references Webber in her analysis of movements that prioritize style to adapt worship for new generations of Christians:

> [Webber] warned, however, that style is not as important as focus on God, with Word and Table at the center, and God's past, present, and future remembered in such a way that people see themselves as "true participants in the very story that tells the truth about the world and all human existence."[225]

In her assessment, Duck underscores Webber's emphasis on contextualization in worship, noting that it never overshadows practices that facilitate participation in God's story, such as the proclamation of the Word and the gathering at the Table. She also highlights Webber's focus on God's activity in worship, which enables human participation. She observes: "[Webber] criticized his own evangelical tradition for making Eucharist a rational exercise in memory of the death of Jesus, rather than an encounter with God, and for focusing on what we do rather than what God does in worship."[226] Duck acknowledges Webber's commitment to divine participation, stressing that human engagement with God is possible only because of God's initiating action. Citing Webber, Duck affirms that active participation in worship must involve God's communication to the congregation through tangible signs, Scripture, and material realities.[227] In doing so, she highlights Webber's theological view that participatory engagement in worship involves both divine and human activity.

Duck's assessment of Webber leads into another key aspect of his work: his focus on practices that foster active participation in the gathered community. Authors like Hans Boersma, Robbie Castleman, Simon Chan, Constance Cherry, Ruth Duck, Swee Hong Lim and Lester Ruth, Perdito Maynard-Reid, Melanie Ross, and John Witvliet reference Webber's commitment to congregational participation in worship practices; however, their citations describe Webber's work rather than analyze it.[228] For instance, Castleman, Duck, and Maynard-Reid highlight Webber's emphasis on active

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[225] Duck, *Worship for the Whole People of God*, 260.
[226] Ibid., 154.
[227] Ibid.
[228] See: Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, 27, 156; Castleman, *Story-Shaped Worship*, 163; Chan, *Liturgical Theology*, 179; Cherry, *The Special Service Worship Architect*, 101, 154; Duck, *Worship for the Whole People of God*, 154, 260; Maynard-Ried, *Diverse Worship*, 31, 33; Ross, *Evangelical Versus Liturgical*?, 28; Lim and Ruth, *Lovin' on* Jesus, 131; Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding*, 255.

participation through the Eucharist, noting it as a central practice of worship.[229] Despite underscoring its importance in Webber's work, these authors do not provide critical evaluation or assessment of his ideas.

Pedrito Maynard-Reid references participation in an intriguing way, focusing on its absence. In his book *Diverse Worship*, Maynard-Reid heavily relies on the revised edition of Webber's *Worship Old & New* for his survey of historical liturgical development. When discussing the medieval era, Maynard-Reid cites Webber to underscore the decline of congregational participation in the Roman Catholic Mass.[230] He notes, "According to Webber, because the people did not understand what was happening, the aura of mystery around the clergy and the Mass was enhanced. Furthermore, he says, 'the church distanced itself from the people…'"[231] Maynard-Reid's citation of *Worship Old & New* is significant, as it establishes Webber as a historian, theologian, and authoritative voice in assessing and critiquing past church practices, particularly regarding participation. By doing so, Maynard-Reid affirms participatory engagement as a central element of Webber's worship methodology. He uses Webber's emphasis on participatory engagement as a framework to evaluate worship practices across different historical periods, acknowledging its importance in both past and present church contexts.

Another group examines the structure of worship to explore Webber's commitment to participatory engagement. Constance Cherry, in *The Worship Architect*, not only addresses the narrative quality of worship but also draws on Webber's teachings on the fourfold order to discuss appropriate congregational practices within each part of the service. She frequently references Webber in her discussion of worship structure, highlighting how specific actions at specific times enhance engagement within the gathered community.[232] Cherry underscores Webber's insistence that "The measure of a worshiping heart is the active disciple," viewing Webber's emphasis on participation in worship as both formational and doxological.[233] According to Webber, active participation in worship should engage the disciple and the entire community in a meeting with God, enabling the disciple to leave worship ready to live out Christ's

[229] See Castleman, *Story-Shaped Worship*, 163; Duck, *Worship for the Whole People of God*, 260; Maynard-Reid, *Diverse Worship*, 31-33.
[230] Maynard-Reid, *Diverse Worship*, 36.
[231] Ibid., 33.
[232] See Cherry, *The Worship Architect*, 51, 109, 120, 239, 244, 257.
[233] Ibid., 31.

commands. Cherry therefore stresses that participation in worship extends beyond the gathered community into the world, embodying obedience to Christ in everyday life.[234]

Another work that accentuates Webber's commitment to participatory engagement is Joan Huyser-Honig's "Robert E. Webber's Legacy: Ancient-future Faith and Worship." Huyser-Honig's article was written shortly after Webber's death as a memorial to his life and work. Throughout her exposition, Huyser-Honig assesses Webber's teachings on worship, incorporating insights from interviews with several of Webber's esteemed colleagues and friends who share their testimonies about his impact on their lives and their understanding of worship.

Huyser-Honig opens the section "Worship as Action" with a statement by Webber: "…worship is not something done to us or for us, but by us."[235] Although she introduces the concept of active, participatory worship with this statement, she does not explore its practical implications. Instead, her focus shifts to ecclesiological concerns, emphasizing that being baptized into Christ's body obliges worshipers to treat all as family and advocating for worship communities to engage in social action. While the section title may be misleading, Huyser-Honig's lack of emphasis on Webber's commitment to participatory engagement in corporate worship inadvertently highlights another aspect of his practical-theological work: the congregation's ongoing participation in worship as they live out their faith in the world.

Webber maintains that the true measure of a worshipful life is the church's activity in the world. Cherry echoes this in affirming Webber's view that the mark of a worshipful heart is reflected in a disciple's active life in the world. In *Ancient-Future Worship* Webber writes, "Not only does worship point to the culmination of all history in the new heavens and new earth, but it also shapes the ethical behavior of God's people to reflect kingdom ethics here on earth."[236] While Huyser-Honig rightly emphasizes the church's social activity, she overlooks Webber's insistence that "The church is first a worshiping community. Evangelism and other functions of ministry flow from the worship of the church."[237] For Webber, while worship does lead to social action, active engagement in corporate worship remains primary.[238]

Huyser-Honig also explores Webber's commitment to participatory engagement in the segment "Follow the Ancient Patterns," emphasizing Webber's insistence that

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[234] Ibid.
[235] Huyser-Honig, "Robert E. Webber's Legacy."
[236] Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 66.
[237] Webber, *Worship is a Verb*, 18.
[238] Ibid., 17.

worship should be corporate, Trinitarian, and liturgical.[239] She highlights Webber's use of ancient patterns to encourage active participation in worship, and includes insights from Darrell Harris, the founding dean of chapel at IWS and a close friend of Webber's. Harris reaffirms Webber's belief that "worship is something that we do together," noting Webber's advocacy for the fourfold structure to foster corporate participation.[240] He adds that Webber's focus on ancient patterns and practices "suggests the worshipers in any church, anywhere, can learn to do simple things together to remind ourselves we worship a God who's Three in One."[241]

Although Huyser-Honig does not theologically explicate Webber's commitment to participatory engagement, her article is noteworthy for insisting that active engagement in worship is corporate and relies on collective practices. Furthermore, while Huyser-Honig does not elaborate on its implications for corporate worship settings, she affirms Webber's view that worship is not something done to or for the congregation but something the congregation actively engages in together.

In *The Next Worship*, Sandra Van Opstal examines Webber's commitment to promoting active participation in worship through intentional structure. She highlights Webber's support for a structured, fourfold order as a means of cultivating communal patterns and practices in corporate worship.[242] She also underscores the importance of hospitality in worship, asserting that genuine hospitality is crucial for enabling individuals to engage in worship. Van Opstal states:

> Webber would often remind people how hosting guests for a meal is a lot like worship. Both meals and worship require a spirit of hospitality and follow a fourfold pattern. Gathering: You warmly welcome people at the door. Word: You engage deep conversation at home and a sermon at church. Table: You share a meal. Sending: You part with hugs at home and a benediction in church.[243]

Van Opstal places Webber's focus on participatory engagement at the heart of her approach, particularly in her use of his ideas to show how intentional liturgical planning encourages active involvement in worship.[244] She draws on Webber's explanation of the fourfold order to argue for the importance of considering cultural and contextual realities when planning worship elements like music, prayer, sermons,

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[239] Huyser-Honig, "Robert E. Webber's Legacy."
[240] Ibid.
[241] Ibid.
[242] Van Opstal, *The Next Worship*, 124.
[243] Ibid., 125.
[244] Ibid.

and readings.[245] Van Opstal asserts that for worship to be genuinely participatory, it must be infused with a spirit of hospitality.[246]

Several authors examine Webber's views on music, focusing on his commitment to participatory engagement in worship. Constance Cherry, in *The Music Architect*, frames Webber's view of music as a participatory act that draws the gathered community into God's story.[247] Cherry cites Webber to demonstrate how singing unites the community in one proclamatory voice, identifying both God's narrative and their place in it.[248] In *Lovin' on Jesus*, Swee Hong Lim and Lester Ruth include Webber in their discussion on the contemporary worship movement of the late twentieth century. They explore how the movement aimed to create space for encounter with God's presence through active participation in musical expression. Lim and Ruth highlight Webber's work in assessing the praise and worship movement of the late twentieth century, claiming it as a "highway mark" for how white mainline and evangelical congregations sought to adopt contemporary styles of worship.[249] They note Webber's identification of contemporary worship's goals as either encounter or evangelism.[250] While Lim and Ruth do not directly engage with Webber's writings, they classify him as a significant voice in contemporary worship studies. They do not take a stance on Webber's views on music but recognize his importance in late twentieth-century discussions on the relationship between music and worship participation.

A final work that highlights Webber's commitment to participatory engagement in worship is Alan Rathe's *Evangelicals, Worship, and Participation*. As the title suggests, this book focuses on participation in evangelical worship. Rathe's work is noteworthy not only for its substantial treatment of Webber's commitment to participatory engagement but also for its critical engagement with Webber. Rathe elevates both Webber and his work in worship as subjects of serious academic study.

Evangelicals, Worship, and Participation is Rathe's study and analysis of prominent publications used in evangelical worship courses.[251] To establish the pool of books for his study, Rathe surveyed professors of worship at evangelical institutions (mainly seminaries) throughout North America, asking for input on the most influential

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[245] Ibid.
[246] Ibid., 125-126.
[247] Cherry, *The Music Architect*, 67-68.
[248] Ibid.
[249] Lim and Ruth, *Lovin' on Jesus*, 131.
[250] Ibid.
[251] Rathe, *Evangelicals, Worship, and Participation*, ix.

publications regarding participation in worship.[252] Professors responded by naming the books they found most beneficial to their scholarship and teaching. Rathe compiled a list and ranked the resources based on the frequency of mentions, assigning one point for each time a specific book was named.

Rathe's study examines the top twenty-five ranked books, revealing that Webber's *Worship Old & New* and *Worship is a Verb* were the two highest-ranked among them.[253] Webber is also the only person besides James White to appear more than once on the top twenty-five list.[254]

The significance of Rathe's work for this thesis cannot be overstated. Rathe's study confirms several claims of the thesis. First, the prominence of Webber's work in Rathe's survey proves that Webber should be considered a serious scholar of worship, especially since he authored the two highest-ranked books. Second, Rathe's survey confirms that Webber's work is respected among worship scholars. When asked to name influential worship theologians, scholars frequently point to Webber. Third, since Rathe's study targeted evangelical institutions, the results demonstrate Webber's strong influence among evangelicals. Since Webber's work is the most utilized in the surveyed evangelical courses of Christian worship, it can be concluded that Webber's voice is renowned by evangelicals in the field of worship studies. Moreover, because Webber's work is the most utilized in the surveyed evangelical courses of Christian worship, it can be claimed that Webber has been an influential figure in evangelical study of worship. Whether in construction or critique, evangelical scholars regard Webber as having significant insights on worship.

Another noteworthy aspect of Rathe's study is the framework he applies to Webber's worship scholarship. To assess the twenty-five books that emerge in his survey, Rathe separates the literature into six distinct emphasis groups. His purpose is for each group to share "a discernable focus, a central axis around which its understanding and theology of worship revolves."[255] Rathe places Webber's two books in what he calls the "Sacramental Recovery" group. Rathe states authors in this category emphasize "the centrality of sacramental symbol to authentic worship-encounter with God" and "embrace the idea of God-oriented mediation in worship" with a desire to bolster the Protestant understanding of "divinely-appointed symbols

[252] Ibid., 34.
[253] Ibid., 34-35.
[254] Ibid., 35.
[255] Ibid., 36.

through which God acts and reveals Godself in worship."[256] Half the pool of authors on Rathe's list fall within his Sacramental Recovery qualification, with Webber leading the way.[257] Rathe points to the Liturgical Movement, which originated within Roman Catholicism and drove the liturgical reforms of Vatican II, as the impetus for Protestant efforts in worship renewal. He writes:

> *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* modeled an accessible and gospel-centered sort of sacramentality, which mainline Protestants were quick to incorporate in their own work of liturgical renewal. And well before 1980, the beginning of the period under consideration in this study, some evangelical scholars (Robert Webber foremost among them) were taking note of the rich ecumenical dialogue; they began to publish works that integrated sacramental understandings into their own theologies of worship.[258]

Rathe places Webber's work in the Sacramental Recovery literature within what he considers to be the "first wave" of sacramental recovery. This wave, occurring in the early to mid-1980s, consists of broad, sacramentally minded introductions to Christian worship. Pointing to Webber's contribution, Rathe writes:

> The pre-eminent representative of this first wave is undoubtedly Robert Webber. His two volumes represented here ranked at the very top of the pool. Webber's excitement in discovering the vitality of liturgical/sacramental worship bristles through *Worship Is a Verb*, along with a deep concern for congregational participation. In *Verb*, Webber unpacks his worship theology in a popular (almost testimonial) vein; a few years beforehand he treated similar territory more academically in *Worship Old and New*.[259]

Additionally, Rathe states, "[*Worship Old and New*] must surely be considered one of Webber's most influential volumes; not only does it rank slightly higher than *Verb* in this project's survey findings; its Amazon sales ranking is consistently between three and four times higher."[260] While not his goal, Rathe's work further establishes Webber as a preeminent scholar of worship. Webber is recognized as a significant figure not only among evangelicals but also in the broader context of late twentieth-century Protestant literature on worship reform.

Rathe makes several noteworthy points in his assessment of participatory engagement in Webber's work. First, Rathe accentuates Webber's view of participation

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[256] Ibid., 106.
[257] Ibid., 105.
[258] Ibid.
[259] Ibid., 107.
[260] Ibid.

as a dialogue between God and God's people.[261] Rathe perceives Webber conducting this dialogue through the various practices of worship. He writes: "Webber…sees thankful response as rightly anchored in the gospel as it is experienced through worship. For Webber, signs and symbols, most especially Word and Table, are God-given media that provide the prime rendezvous for divine self-giving and human response."[262] According to Rathe, Webber views participation in worship as centered in engagement with God through both human and divine action and interaction. He states, "For Webber, this worship dialogue threads through the two movements of Word and sacrament; he sees these two high points as central to authentic, Christ-centered worship, and indispensable for framing genuine congregational participation."[263] To substantiate his point, Rathe points to Webber's work in *Worship Old and New*, which he claims "demonstrates how frequently, throughout history, leaders of worship have failed to achieve a proper balance between Word and sacrament."

Rathe also notes how Webber places human action front and center in *Worship is a Verb*.[264] He states, "Always concerned with fleshing theology into praxis, [Webber] unpacks his participatory vision into numerous recommendations for tangible implementation."[265] Webber explores a wide range of traditional and innovative actions of worship in the book, always tying them to his central vision of worship, which Rathe qualifies as "participation as Spirit-empowered response to God in Christ."[266] As Rathe develops Webber's concept of participatory response in worship, he turns to an assessment of musical aspects of worship.[267] Alluding to Webber, Rathe describes corporate singing as an act that affirms unity in Christ due to its being a communal activity. Moreover, Rathe points to music alongside Word and Table as central components Webber identifies of biblical and historical worship.[268] Rathe is careful to maintain how Webber never sees music as having the same sacramental quality as the Table, even though he asserts that Webber elevates music to an almost sacramental role as it "proclaims the Scriptures in a heavenly language and provides a means through which the mystery of Christ is approachable."[269] While Rathe rightfully locates

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[261] Ibid., 110.
[262] Ibid.
[263] Ibid., 108.
[264] Ibid., 110-111.
[265] Ibid., 111.
[266] Ibid., 112.
[267] Ibid., 113.
[268] Ibid., 115.
[269] Webber, *Worship Old and New*, 195, qtd. in Rathe, *Evangelicals, Worship, and Participation*, 115-116.

Webber's focus on music within the arts, he also distinguishes Webber's insistence that utilizing the arts in worship is for the purposes of engaging the senses and anchoring worship in the heart. Commenting on Webber's attention to the inward dimensions of worship, Rathe writes:

> For Webber, the externalized celebration about which he is so insistent must always be rooted in an internalized heart-response to a very present God. In order to be authentic, worshipful singing or confessing or praying must involve spiritual expression – a genuine, communicative response to "the living and active presence of a loving and merciful God."[270]

Rathe identifies how Webber's commitment to participatory engagement in worship involves the mind, body, and heart. The separation of the body from the heart in American evangelical worship concerned Webber; thus, he desired to emphasize the importance of human activity in worship.[271] For Webber, bodily actions and practices of worship carry meaning insofar as they direct the mind and heart to respond to God's love and mercy.[272]

In addition to human participation in worship, Rathe also gives attention to Webber's focus on divine activity in worship. Rathe recognizes Webber's view of participatory engagement includes active participation of both humans and the Triune God in worship. Such focus on divine activity in worship is a pivotal feature of Sacramental Recovery literature, according to Rathe. Authors like Webber seek to "counterbalance the typically evangelical emphasis on human action, alone," he writes.[273] Rathe provides an example through the sacrament of baptism, claiming Webber's primary focus is on how the act needs an "ancient understanding" characterized by God's initiation of a relationship with the person rather than the typical evangelical perspective of baptism as a sign of the person's subjective expression of faith.[274]

Rathe sees the sacraments as a central feature of Webber's worship theology, especially concerning divine action. He claims, "they serve [for Webber] as a channel through which God acts."[275] Certainly, the sacraments are prominent in Webber's theological construct of worship. Rathe points out that Webber concentrates particularly on the sacrament of the Eucharist, referencing the "Lord's Supper" (or an

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[270] Rathe, *Evangelicals, Worship, and Participation*, 111.
[271] See Webber, *Common Roots*, 93-11, 222-224. Cf. *The Majestic Tapestry*, 111.
[272] See Webber, *The Majestic Tapestry*, 111.
[273] Ibid., 115
[274] Ibid., 119.
[275] Ibid., 117.

equivalent term) over 300 times in the 220 pages of *Worship is a Verb*.[276] Since Webber's focus in the book is on active participation in the regular corporate gathering of worship, Rathe observes, it should be no surprise that the regular, repeated act of coming to the Table is so strongly emphasized. Additionally, Rathe claims that Webber's sacramental view focuses on the Table because Webber's sacramental theology is in essence a summary of John Calvin's perspective of the Table, whereby the primary reality of the supper is participation in Christ.[277] Rathe concludes of Webber's view, "The sacrament of the Supper, tangibly participative itself, not only proclaims participation in Christ, but effects that very spiritual reality."[278] According to Rathe, Webber's sacramental theology articulates and makes visible that which is otherwise not known or seen, and by the means of tangible signs the congregation is made a participant in the body of Christ.[279] Human participation is possible in worship because of God's divine active engagement through the sacraments, through which God brings the congregation into communion with Himself.[280]

The final component of Rathe's assessment of participation centers on human participation in the life of God. Rathe argues that although Webber does not explicitly define worship as participation in the life of God, this idea is implicit throughout his writings.[281] Rathe points to Webber's explanation of the Table in *Worship is a Verb*, which is framed as "an action of God whereby he enters into union with the believer by faith."[282] Additionally, while Rathe does not focus on how Webber views worship as fostering participation in the life of God through congregational liturgical activity, he acknowledges Webber's emphasis on worship as heavenly participation. Rathe notes Webber's proposal in *Worship is a Verb* that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, humans join the entire creation—including angels, archangels, apostles, martyrs, and the communion of saints—in offering unceasing praise and worship to God.[283] Rathe sees Webber's liturgical approach as a way to direct humans to participate in heavenly worship, which culminates in sending them forth into positive social action and continued participation in the life of God in the world.[284]

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[276] Ibid., 119.
[277] Ibid., 120.
[278] Ibid.
[279] Ibid.
[280] Ibid.
[281] Ibid., 123.
[282] Robert Webber, *Worship is a Verb*, 78, qtd. in Rathe, *Evangelicals, Worship, and Participation*, 123.
[283] Rathe, *Evangelicals, Worship, and Participation*, 123-124.
[284] Ibid., 124.

Rathe does not claim to be an expert on Webber, especially since Webber is only one of numerous figures he examines in his research. His book lacks a comprehensive exploration of Webber and does not fully cover Webber's approach to worship beyond the two books on his list. The lack of nuanced analysis, insufficient engagement with critiques of Webber, and failure to give attention to whether Webber's model fosters diversity and inclusivity in worship participation also limits his study. Nonetheless, Rathe's work is significant for Webber scholarship. Rathe establishes Webber and his worship theology as valid subjects of study, highlighting Webber's prominence and influence as a worship theologian. His assessment of Webber's participatory principle affirms it as a key component of Webber's theology and establishes Webber as a primary voice on participation in evangelical worship studies. Additionally, Rathe's categorization of Webber under Sacramental Recovery reflects both the general and specific ways Webber views participation in worship. For Webber, participation is generally a dialogical encounter between the human and the divine, occurring through specific actions of worship, particularly music, sacrament, and social action. Finally, Rathe's work illustrates how Webber understands the participatory element of worship to be Christ-centered. Worship practices help the congregation focus on the saving work of Christ, and through worship, especially the Eucharist, the congregation participates in Christ.

As noted, a deficiency in Rathe's study is the breadth of the Webber literature he reviews. Rathe's study analyzes publications on liturgical participation prominent in evangelical courses of Christian worship, thus not providing a comprehensive evaluation of Webber's worship theology. Rathe's assessment is limited to the books in his survey, namely *Worship Old and New* and *Worship is a Verb*. While Rathe's evaluations of these two books are insightful, his conclusions on Webber's principle of participatory engagement in worship must be considered in light of Webber's larger corpus, especially since these books were published early in Webber's career. To Rathe's credit, Webber's principles remained consistent, although he articulated different points in various ways in later writings. For instance, while Rathe claims Webber lacks an explicit focus on worship as participation in the life of God based on the two books, Webber spends three chapters in *The Divine Embrace* developing this idea.[285] Therefore, while Rathe's work is a notable study on Webber and two of his

[285] Webber, *The Divine Embrace*, 169-239.

most prominent publications in evangelical academia, it is not a holistic assessment of Webber's practical worship theology.

5. Conclusion

This review has evaluated literature engaging Webber's practical approach to worship, focusing on the evangelical aspects and practical-theological elements of his work. Notable criticisms, particularly from scholars like Ross and Alvarez, underscore the limitations of Webber's contributions, especially in terms of their accessibility to certain cultural groups. These critiques are crucial for a balanced evaluation of Webber's impact on American evangelicalism.

In addition to the critiques offered, the literature yields conclusions that relate to the overarching goal of this thesis. It confirms Webber's status as an influential voice in worship studies, with references to his work appearing across a broad range of publications over several decades; however, no comprehensive analysis of his work exists, highlighting the need for a holistic examination of his worship theology.

Secondly, the literature recognizes Webber as a key figure in evangelical reform; thus, any study of his worship theology must consider the evangelical context in which it developed. His work did not emerge in isolation but was rooted in the specific needs and audience of American evangelicalism. Ignoring his context risks misunderstanding the essence and intent of his work. Despite this, the literature does not adequately explain Webber's evangelical concept or his reformist agenda, particularly his commitment to retrieving ancient practices for contemporary worship. Critics like Ross argue that this focus on antiquated rituals diminishes the significance of Webber's theological contributions, underscoring the need for a more comprehensive evaluation of his evangelical framework.

Webber's integration of theology into practice is another key theme in the literature. His worship theology aimed to revive historic practices through contemporary forms, fostering active participation centered on Christ and God's salvation narrative. Scholars like Rathe note that Webber viewed theology and practice as interrelated, which links Webber's work to practical theology. The literature lacks a thorough assessment of Webber's practical theology, however, particularly in terms of the theological foundations and specific practices he advocated. Such an assessment is crucial for understanding his contributions.

The literature also identifies four defining characteristics of Webber's work: the recovery of historic Christian practices (historic-rootedness); an emphasis on God's

narrative in the worship of the church (narrative quality); the active participation of the congregation in worship (participatory engagement); and the recalibration of the evangelical experiential dynamic of worship as participation in the saving work of Jesus Christ (evangelical character). While these principles are acknowledged, they are often treated in isolation rather than as an integrated whole. This fragmented approach highlights the need for scholarly inquiry that examines these principles collectively, as they form the core of Webber's practical theology of worship.

Finally, although the retrieval of tradition is central to Webber's work, the literature fails to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding his worship theology. Hamstra's attempt to define Webber's methodology is insufficient, leading to potential misinterpretations of his work. There is a need for research that explores the connections between Webber's evangelical concept, his theological and Christological commitments, and his practical worship theology. Such research is essential for understanding and implementing Webber's work.

In conclusion, while the literature acknowledges Webber's influence in worship studies, it reveals significant gaps in understanding his work. Scholars often fragment his practical-theological concepts, necessitating further research that takes a multifaceted approach to his evangelical context and his reasons for retrieving ancient practices. The following chapters will address these gaps and offer a holistic examination of Webber's practical worship theology.

2. Worship Biography and Context

1. Introduction

The current chapter aims to answer: What was Webber's understanding of worship? What does Webber articulate about worship? What was Webber's worship context? What was happening in Webber's understanding of worship in this context? The goal is to categorize emerging features of Webber's practical worship theology and identify contextual dynamics that influenced his understanding of worship. The chapter begins with the first of Osmer's four tasks of practical theology, descriptive observation, which serves as the foundation for the subsequent tasks of interpretation, normative evaluation, and strategic action.[286] The descriptive task involves providing a thorough, accurate account of observed phenomena, focusing on real-world events, behaviors, and contexts with limited interpretation and judgment. The method requires situating events within their cultural, historical, and social context to enrich description quality with the goal of capturing the essence of the situation faithfully. This chapter applies these practices to Webber's practical worship theology, seeking to ground it in the context and framework in which he presented it.

2. Early experiences (1933-1972)

Robert Eugene Webber was born in 1933 in Mishawaka, Indiana to Charles "Chester" and Harriet Basto Webber.[287] Prior to Webber's birth, Chester and Harriet traveled as missionaries to the Belgian Congo with Africa Inland Mission, where they met and were later married. While working to evangelize the indigenous people of the Belgian Congo, Chester and Harriet had three children – Eleanor, Robert, and Kenneth.[288]

From his childhood, Webber was immersed in a context where Christology was central to ministry and faith, namely through evangelism and spiritual conversion experiences. Growing up with missionary parents, Webber spent the first seven years of his life working in the remote areas of the Belgian Congo where the mission was to "evangelize the natives."[289] He reflects in *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail*: "My father…took safaris into the jungle to reach the pygmies who had never seen a white person, let alone heard about Christ. Sometimes I would go with him."[290] The purpose

[286] See Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 5-33.

[287] "Webber, Chester," n.d., Collection 081, Records of Africa Inland Mission (1888-2006), Archives of Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois.

[288] Webber, *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail*, 12.

[289] Ibid.

[290] Ibid.

of Webber's trips with his father was to share the story of Jesus Christ with those who had never heard it, hoping the Holy Spirit would bring such people to a salvation experience. Even if no one accepted the message, Webber was faced with the responsibility of sharing the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

Missionary life exposed Webber to an evangelistic impulse that extended to gathered worship. He describes some of his earliest memories of worship:

> My earliest impressions of morning worship revolved around the idea of bringing in the harvest. Members of the congregation, I believed, were expected to bring their unbelieving friends and neighbors to church to expose them to the gospel and put them in a supportive situation that would encourage a personal acceptance of Christ. My experience of worship was an evangelistic model.[291]

The evangelistic emphasis Webber experienced on the mission field permeated the first two and a half decades of his life. He reflects in biographical material in *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail*, "I was told that witnessing and bringing people to Christ were the only reasons for my being and for the existence of the church."[292] Worship particularly emphasized sinners' need for conversion, he reflects. The purpose of worship was "to come to Christ, to rededicate one's life, or to heed the call to the mission service."[293] Everything in worship pointed to this climatic moment of the individual making a decision for Christ.

In 1940, after a decade of service in the Belgian Congo, Chester and Harriet Webber returned to the United States and resettled in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. On returning to the United States, Chester got involved in the fundamentalist-modernist controversy taking place within the American Baptist Church and ended up leaving the American Baptist Convention to join the Conservative Baptists. On February 17, 1945, Chester became the pastor of the Montgomeryville Baptist Church, located 25 miles west of Philadelphia, where he served until his resignation on October 1, 1950.[294] Webber was 11 years old when his father began as the pastor of the Montgomeryville Baptist Church and one month shy of his 17th birthday when his father resigned. The Webbers lived in the parsonage fifty yards east of the church during the six-and-a-half years Chester served as the pastor. Being in such constant proximity to the church formed in Webber a dedication to ministry and to the people of the local church.[295] His

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[291] Ibid., 33-34.
[292] Ibid.
[293] Ibid., 34.
[294] Webber, *Signs of Wonder*, 116-118.
[295] According to Rev. James Camlin, former pastor of Montgomeryville Baptist Church, many congregants in the church still tell stories about the Webber family and "Bob's" active commitment

writings reflect fondness for his childhood experiences in the church and how the people surrounded him as a community of faith to help him grow in knowledge and love of Christ.[296]

Webber's father baptized him in the Montgomeryville Baptist Church at the age of thirteen, which for Webber reemphasized the importance of a personal faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ.[297] Webber's accounts of worship in Montgomeryville, much like his experiences in Africa, describe services focused on winning souls through preaching, culminating in the altar call. It wasn't until his teenage years that Webber attended a worship service without an altar call, an experience that left him puzzled.[298] At that service, Webber realized how his early experiences had ingrained in him a bias toward an evangelistic approach to worship.

While Webber would later critique evangelistic approaches to worship, his early years laid a Christological foundation centered on the saving work of Jesus Christ. Growing up in an environment that emphasized commitment to Christ, Webber's faith was rooted in the belief that the person and work of Jesus were central to every aspect of Christian life and worship.

After high school, Webber pursued education with the goal of vocational pastoral ministry, attending faith-based institutions from various traditions, each with a distinct approach to Christianity. He earned a bachelor's degree from Bob Jones University in 1956, a divinity degree from Reformed Episcopal Seminary in 1959, and a Master of Theology degree from Covenant Theological Seminary in 1960. At Covenant, Webber developed a strong interest in historical theology, which led him to earn a Doctor of Theology degree from Concordia Seminary in 1968.

Following his graduation from Concordia, Webber began pastoring a church near Chicago, Illinois and launched his academic career as a professor of theology at Wheaton College in 1968, where he taught until 1999. After his tenure at Wheaton, he continued teaching at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary from 1999 until his death in 2007. Webber's commitment to theological education also led to the founding of the

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within the life of the church. While Chester served at the church, a car hit Bob's brother Kenneth on the road just outside of the parsonage and left him with severe brain damage. The people from Montgomeryville say that the event was very hard on Webber, and that following the incident Webber saw it as his duty to be Kenneth's caretaker, constantly trying to find ways for Kenneth to be included in the church's activities. Rev. James Camlin, conversation with author, Wilmore, Kentucky, August 12, 2018.

[296] Webber writes of his childhood in Montgomeryville, "I went to Christian schools and palled around with Christian friends from my youth group. The boundaries of home, church, and school were very tight." See Webber, *The Divine Embrace*, 150. Cf. Webber, *Signs of Wonder*, 116-118.

[297] See Webber, *Signs of Wonder*, 116-117.

[298] See Webber, *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail*, 34.

Institute for Worship Studies (IWS) in Orange Park, Florida, in 1999, reflecting his enduring passion for nurturing the theological and liturgical understanding of future scholars and ministers.[299]

As Webber moved beyond his childhood context and engaged with diverse Christian traditions during his college and seminary years, he encountered perspectives that challenged his previously held beliefs. This exposure sparked a profound intellectual and spiritual transformation. During this time, Webber grew increasingly discontent with the rigid and exclusive interpretations of Christianity that had shaped his earlier years. He felt that these approaches stifled intellectual curiosity and perpetuated a static faith rooted in memorization and institutionalized thinking.[300] Additionally, an experience Webber had at a church service in 1957 led him to question the evangelistic model of worship he had always known. He writes in *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail:*

> A visiting evangelist who had 'preached his heart out' brought us to the final point of the meeting, the invitation. We sang all the verses of the age-old hymn 'Just as I Am,' but no one stepped forward. After another ten-minute plea, accompanied by threats and tears and all the psychological enticements in the book, we sang the whole hymn again. But there was no response. With a tone of absolute exasperation in his voice, the evangelist announced that he was going to count to ten. After ten, if no one responded, he would wash his hands of this church and let our blood be on our heads. He counted to ten, slowly. Then, with the air of an omniscient and all-powerful judge, he announced that he knew God was working with someone in that congregation to be saved. But, he went on to say, 'It's too late, the Holy Spirit is gone, the invitation is finished, the door is closed.' I watched this man of God as he stomped from the pulpit, his face flushed with anger.[301]

The service proved to be a revelation for Webber. The actions of the evangelist and the discomfort Webber experienced acted as catalysts that ignited a process of questioning the very reason and purpose of worship.[302] Webber discerned something amiss in the service, leading him to recognize the need for correction. He also felt that others might share his unease. He reflects in *Signs of Wonder*, "After a certain period of time – it's longer for some than for others – people tire of the antics and long for something more substantial."[303] The service sparked Webber's pursuit of a form of worship that

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[299] The Institute for Worship Studies was renamed The Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies in January 2007. See "Robert E. Webber, Founder," accessed January 6, 2018, https://iws.edu/who/robert-e-webber/.

[300] Webber, *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail*, 14.

[301] Ibid., 34-35.

[302] Ibid., 35.

[303] Webber, *Signs of Wonder*, 22.

transcended manipulation or coercion, embodying authenticity and sincerity. He sought a worship experience that was genuine and free from any trace of artifice.[304]

The next phase in Webber's pursuit of authentic worship involved moving away from the familiar evangelistic model he had known and embracing what he describes in *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail* as an "educational approach" to worship.[305] Webber describes this educational approach as a paradigm where the purpose of worship is the sermon.[306] Instead of worship being a congregational gathering of participatory ritual activity, the educational model worship serves as a forum wherein the congregation gathers in earnest anticipation of the sermon. He writes:

> The sermon was the food that nourished the people, and transformed them. The sermon was, you might say, the main dish of the meal. It was what everyone came for, so it better be good. Whether it was by intent or by design my seminary education left me with this particular notion of worship. As a student I was told to spend at least half my week preparing for the sermon. It was to be an exegetical sermon, a challenge to the mind and heart.[307]

Central to Webber's description of the educational model, in contrast to the evangelistic model, is the role of preaching. In the evangelistic model, preaching aims to convert or convict souls; however, in the educational approach, the sermon is intended not only to win or convict but to edify and bring about transformative change within the congregation. This shift toward an educational approach marked a fundamental change in Webber's perspective, emphasizing the formative value of worship through preaching.

Webber's initial embrace of the educational approach to worship was short-lived, as he soon became disillusioned with its limitations, recognizing that it failed to capture the authentic expression of worship he sought. He realized that this sermon-centric model placed excessive pressure on pastors to deliver intellectually rigorous and original sermons. Any perceived lack in these areas often led congregants to seek superior preaching elsewhere. Webber's shift from the evangelistic model to the educational approach marked a transition from a faith focused on proselytization to one centered on intellectualization. Reflecting on this period during his college and seminary years, Webber describes it as a time when he was "being swept away into evangelical rationalism, into a proof-texting Christianity, into a Christianity based on

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[304] Ibid., 22-23.
[305] Webber, *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail*, 35.
[306] Ibid.
[307] Ibid.

scientific inquiry. Christianity was no longer a power to be experienced but a system to be defended."[308] Webber saw his faith as being reduced to a set of propositional truths, and the more certain he became of his ability to argue and defend his faith, the less real God was for him. He reflects, "I scarcely acknowledged what was happening in my soul. I was drying up spiritually. The reservoir of God's presence in my life was running low. But forget that. It really didn't matter. I had the answers. And, after all, I had been taught that the answers were what made the difference."[309] Similarly, Webber records in *The Divine Embrace*:

> Falling into what has traditionally been known as the 'God in the box' syndrome, I became increasingly dead to Scriptures and found my study led to lifeless propositions that I could easily defend... What was missing was the very heart of the Bible – the embrace of God expressed in the images that connected the two testaments and envisioned God restoring the world. I had exchanged the divine embrace for a list of propositions. The story had become lost to me. The faith became merely and intellectual construct.[310]

For Webber, God had become an intellectualized figure within a rationalized system, reducing worship to a mere cognitive exercise. Despite his dissatisfaction with the educational approach, he found no better alternatives. The options available to him seemed confined to either a rationalistic approach, a return to the evangelistic model, or choosing between two other prominent approaches in American evangelicalism. The first was the entertainment approach, which aimed to draw large crowds by making worship entertaining and appealing. The second was the self-help approach, where the focus of worship was on helping individuals feel more positive about themselves.[311] The lack of an authentic experience of worship increasingly frustrated Webber. He eventually concluded that American evangelicalism lacked a model that truly captured the deep meaning and purpose of worship.[312] Although he could not articulate what constituted proper worship, he felt his experiences had been inadequate. These frustrations spurred him to continue his exploration for a more substantive theological approach to worship.[313]

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[308] Ibid., 24.

[309] Ibid., 25.

[310] Webber, *The Divine Embrace*, 128.

[311] See Webber, *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail*, 36.

[312] Ibid., 36-37. Cf. Webber: *Signs of Wonder* 23-25; *The Divine Embrace*, 128-130.

[313] Webber reflects in *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail*: "My longing for a more satisfying worship grew as each route I took in worship led me to a dead end street. But after giving up the evangelistic approach to worship and after the unfulfilling experience of educational worship, I didn't know what to do next. I was running out of reasons for being at church. I remember posing the question one day to a group of my friends in an open session on the subject. After dismissing evangelistic, educational, and social reasons for being at church, the only argument we couldn't dismiss was the

Amid his crisis over worship, Webber participated in what he refers to as "a life-changing experience" that ultimately altered his understanding of worship.[314] The experience occurred during an Easter Vigil service in 1972 at St. Michael's Catholic Church in Wheaton, Illinois. Here, Webber encountered a newfound Christological focus and a transformative approach to worship, one that would profoundly mold his comprehension of active participation and initiate his work in worship renewal. Webber writes:

> I had never heard of the Great Easter Vigil, an ancient service that begins on Saturday night and ends with the rising of the sun on Easter Sunday morning... But in 1972 someone mentioned it to me and urged me to attend. I was tired of singing, "Up from the Grave He Arose" and pretending I was excited, so I decided to try something new. I called St. Matthew's Catholic Church in Wheaton and found out the time of its Easter Vigil service. I went out of curiosity more than anything else. And I had absolutely no idea what I was getting into.[315]

The Easter Vigil service offered Webber a worship experience unlike any he had encountered. He emphasizes how the structure of the service engaged the congregation in both the remembrance and celebration of Christ's story. Webber recounts entering the darkened worship space, proceeding into the sanctuary with candles, and being immersed in the stories of salvation through Scripture readings. After several hours of proclaiming God's narrative, he notes the inclusion of new members through baptism, culminating in the celebration of the Eucharist, which he describes as "the great thanksgiving of the church."[316]

That Easter evening in 1972 marked a pivotal moment for Webber. It was his first true participation in a liturgical expression of worship. Raised as a fundamentalist Baptist, Webber harbored biases against high liturgical and sacramental traditions, particularly Roman Catholicism, and was wary of formalized worship practices.[317] His quest for an authentic expression of worship, however, led him to set aside these prejudices and become open to exploring traditions beyond his Baptist upbringing. The

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injunction of Hebrews: "Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some" (10:24-25). But what for, we asked? No one in the group really knew, although we all had some vague and pious notions about the need to offer worship to God. But even this, as I think about it now, much later, was something I was supposed to do. I had replaced the idea of somebody doing something for me – evangelizing me, educating me, entertaining me – with a new focus centering around my feeble efforts to praise God and do something for him. I was thoroughly confused and, frankly, fed up with the confusion." See Webber, *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail*, 36.

[314] Ibid., 37.

[315] Ibid.

[316] Ibid., 37-38.

[317] See Webber, *Signs of Wonder*, 7.

Easter Vigil service ignited a spark that would later fuel Webber's worship theology. He recognized that something profound occurred during that service—something that needed to be more prevalent in evangelical worship. Specifically, the service demonstrated how historic practices could draw worshipers into a Christological narrative centered on participation in the victorious resurrection of Jesus Christ. Webber reflects:

> I began to feel the resurrection. It was more than evidence that demanded a verdict. It was more than an intellectual proposition proving the empty tomb. I couldn't put my finger on it completely, but I sense that there was something different, something deeper about this experience of worship than anything else I had been through. I didn't really understand it at the time, but I was experiencing the resurrection. It was no longer a hard cold fact, but a warm reality. I experienced being in the tomb and walking out of that darkness into the marvelous light, the light that conquers evil, the light that is Jesus Christ.[318]

David Neff observes in the preface to *Common Roots* how Webber's first experience of the Easter Vigil service was visceral and emotionally overwhelming.[319] Webber was hungry for worship to provide an encounter with the living God, a craving the Easter Vigil satiated. More than an emotional experience of worship, however, the Easter Vigil provided a narrative and participatory framework for worship, which aroused within Webber a curiosity that propelled him into deeper study of worship.

As he began to study more on worship, Webber focused his research on worship theology and praxis in the first five centuries of the church. As a historical theologian, he sought to understand the historical and theological foundations of Christian worship and its evolution from its inception. He believed that studying early Christian worship, liturgy, and sacraments would inform how contemporary Christian worship should be conducted.[320] He saw these elements as essential for fostering a profound and authentic worship experience rooted in Christian tradition.[321] He believed that returning to liturgical elements like the Eucharist, creeds, and the church calendar could enrich modern congregations' spiritual lives and connect them to ancient worship modes of worship.[322]

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[318] See Webber, *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail*, 38.

[319] Neff, "Preface," 9.

[320] See Webber, *Common Roots*, 99-111. Cf. Webber: *Signs of Wonder*, 29-42; *The Majestic Tapestry*, 9-19; *The Divine Embrace*, 101-121.

[321] See Webber, *Common Roots*, 99-111. Cf. Webber: *Worship is a Verb*, 17-26; *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail*, 21-56; *Signs of Wonder*, 72-130; *The Majestic Tapestry*, 100-101.

[322] See Webber, *Common Roots*, 104-108. Cf. Webber: *Worship is a Verb*, 98-102; *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail*, 43-56; *Signs of Wonder*, 34-39; *The Majestic Tapestry*, 77-79, 84-93; *Ancient-*

Webber also found the early church's sacramental theology, particularly its understanding of Christ's presence in the Eucharist, demonstrated how formalized liturgical acts could be encounters with the living Christ. Webber embraced the centrality of the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist, as the heart of Christian worship. For Webber, the Eucharist was not merely a memorial but a mysterious and transformative encounter with the living Christ. He believed that in the sacrament of the Eucharist, Christ was truly present, and this presence was made tangible through the liturgical actions, prayers, and communal participation of the faithful.[323] He valued the importance of the "real presence" of Christ in the Eucharist, a concept that transcends mere symbolism and points to a deeper, mystical participation in the life of Christ. His understanding of the Eucharist as a means of grace, where the worshiper is drawn into the divine mystery, was central to his theology. In a Reformed rather than Roman Catholic sense, he saw the sacraments as a means of bridging the gap between the temporal and the eternal, allowing worshipers to participate in the heavenly reality while still on earth.[324]

In addition to the Eucharist, Webber valued the broader sacramental nature of worship, where all of life could be seen as sacramental—a means of encountering God. This extended to the use of symbolism, art, and architecture in worship, which he saw as essential components that communicated theological truths and enhanced the worship experience.[325] For Webber, these elements were not mere decorations but integral to creating an environment where the mystery of God could be encountered. He believed that through these sensory and symbolic acts, worship moved beyond intellectual assent to engage the whole person—body, mind, and spirit—allowing for a deeper experience of God's transcendence.[326]

Webber drew on what he perceived as the Christological focus of the ancient church's liturgy to shape his practical theology, advocating for evangelicalism to reclaim its roots in ancient Christian tradition while addressing contemporary challenges and opportunities. He coined the term "ancient-future faith" to describe his vision of integrating ancient Christian practices, traditions, and perspectives into the

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Future Worship, 133-148; *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 180-182, 192, 200.

[323] Webber, *Worship is a Verb,* 36-38.

[324] Ibid., 42-25. Cf., Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 648–652; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 4.17.1–4.17.43.

[325] Webber, *Worship is a Verb*, 71-74.

[326] Ibid., 82-85.

modern church. Webber aimed to re-anchor evangelicalism within a "divine narrative," viewing worship as the key.[327] He believed that rediscovering the early church's rich heritage would deepen faith and renew spirituality among evangelicals.

3. The Chicago Call (1976-1977)

One of Webber's initial attempts to ignite evangelical renewal took the form of an academic conference he organized in 1976, which produced a document known as the Chicago Call. Webber assembled numerous evangelical leaders for the conference with the purpose of addressing essential aspects of evangelical reform. In 1976, Webber held the position of Associate Professor of Theology at Wheaton College. During the fall and winter of that same year, Webber established a planning committee consisting of Richard Holt, Donald G. Bloesch, Jan P. Dennis, Lane T. Dennis, Gerald D. Erickson, Peter E. Gillquist, Thomas Howard and Victor Oliver. The primary objective of the committee was to form a National Conference of Evangelicals for Historic Christianity (NCEHC) and to discern major weaknesses in evangelical Christianity. Webber writes, "We brainstormed over such areas as church, ministry, and sacraments; Scripture, tradition, authority, and hermeneutics; worship, preaching, and music; theology; evangelism, education, and cross-cultural communication; ecumenism; social issues; spirituality; and seminary education."[328] The group discerned two overarching weaknesses in American evangelical faith: an inadequate view of the incarnation and a deficient view of church history. In Webber's opinion, evangelicals separated and elevated spiritual experience in a way that diminished the true humanity and physical nature of Jesus, which he critiqued as a hallmark of Gnostic thinking.[329] Additionally, the negligence of church history he believed was due to an amnesia that plagued American evangelicalism. Both mindsets failed to meet God in the responsibility of life, in the process of history, and in the issues of the day.[330] Instead, evangelicals privatized and individualized Christ's work, constraining Christian spirituality to experiences of personal salvation.[331] The consequence was evangelical obfuscation of Christ's recapitulating work, which includes his saving work in the entirety of creation. Webber argued that evangelicals therefore needed to reorient worship, evangelism,

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[327] Robert E. Webber, interview by Trevin Wax, April 28, 2007, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/in-honor-of-robert-webber-an-interview/.

[328] Webber, *The Orthodox Evangelicals*, 24.

[329] Ibid.

[330] See Webber, *Common Roots*, 233. Cf., Webber, *The Orthodox Evangelicals*, 24-25.

[331] Webber, *The Divine Embrace*, 79.

education, social action, and theology toward the cosmic story of God's redemptive work culminating in the Christ-event. He reflects in *The Majestic Tapestry*:

> I have come to see through the study of early Christian tradition that my view of the work of Christ was severely limited. It wasn't that I didn't believe the right truth. I simply didn't understand how far-reaching and all-inclusive the work of Christ really was... What I have discovered among these treasures is a tapestry of historical events, all of which are related to the main event of human history – the living, dying, and rising again of Jesus Christ... For me these are the most important events of human history. They link heaven and earth, God and man, immaterial and material, eternity and time... The Fathers of the early church put the pieces this story into a grand tapestry. For them the elements of the story are all interrelated. One thread does not exist without the other. The key thread, the one that reaches out to tie all others together, the one that runs through the center of it all, is the work of Christ.[332]

The apostolic witness in writings from the ancient church exemplified for Webber the centrality of Christological narrative in the Christian faith; an emphasis he believed contemporary evangelicalism needed to retrieve. Webber thus convened the NCEHC to call for a shift in evangelical theology, one that would center on a historic approach to Christological participation. In his view, this shift was necessary because evangelicalism had prioritized the cultivation of a personal experience with Christ at the expense of active participation in the person and work of Jesus Christ.[333] He reflects in *The Divine Embrace*:

> In the ancient church, [spiritual] experience was the act of baptism into union with Jesus in the pattern of his death and resurrection. The focus was not on an emotionally charged decision I made for Jesus but on the lifelong commitment to live in the pattern of dying to sin and rising to the new life of the Spirit…The confidence in spirituality is not *my experience* but *my baptism into Christ*, with the focus on Christ embracing me in his death and resurrection.[334]

For Webber, connecting Christian spiritual experience to baptism was crucial for reorienting evangelical understanding of the incarnation. He emphasized baptism as a lifelong union and commitment to Jesus, living in conformity with the pattern of dying to sin and rising to new life in the Spirit rather than approaching baptism as an isolated personal decision. Evangelical confidence and spirituality, therefore, needed to be rooted in the understanding of being baptized into Christ, with the primary emphasis on Christ embracing believers in his life, death, and resurrection rather than individuals

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[332] Webber, *The Majestic Tapestry*, 24-25.
[333] Webber, *The Divine Embrace*, 89.
[334] Ibid., 74.

accepting Jesus in their lives. Consequently, the task of the NCEHC was to redirect this inherit evangelical spiritual piety.

Despite the work of the planning committee, the concerns addressed at the NCEHC were, at their core, Webber's. His advocacy for an ancient perspective on Christian spirituality marked the inception of a transformative journey that propelled him from relative obscurity to a prominent critic of and advocate for reform within twentieth century American evangelicalism. Prior to 1976, Webber was an unknown figure. While he held an associate professor position at the respected evangelical institution of Wheaton College and had written and contributed to a handful of publications, his influence had not extended beyond the confines of Wheaton.[335] The NCEHC marked a watershed moment in Webber's career. His call for the recovery of historic Christianity was emblematic of his future pursuits as a professor, author, and spokesperson within the evangelical tradition. The Chicago Call, together with the subsequent publication *The Orthodox Evangelicals*, were Webber's initial steps into evangelical reform. They would not be his last. Webber dedicated his life to scrutinizing the deficiencies he believed were rooted in evangelicalism's divergence from the full, biblical, and Christological narrative of the church's historic faith.[336]

Accepting Webber's concerns, the NCEHC ultimately decided on a plan: they would bring together select evangelical leaders to draft an appeal to fellow evangelicals. The statement, which would be called the Chicago Call, was to be modeled on similar calls to evangelical reform: the Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern (1973); the Hartford Declaration (1975, also known as the Hartford Appeal); and the Boston Affirmations (1976).[337] What Webber believed would distinguish the Chicago Call was its focus on the theology and practice of historic Christianity and its desire for an ecumenical evangelical identity.

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[335] Webber's publications prior to 1977 include: *Rappings*, (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1971); *Reshaping Evangelical Higher Education* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), with Larry Richards and Marvin Keene Mayers; *How to Choose a Christian College* (Carol Stream, IL: Creation House, 1973); and "Living in the World," *Post American 3* (June/July 1974): 26-28.

[336] See Webber, *Who Gets to Narrate the World?*, 73-88. Cf. Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 67-86. As later material will show, Webber remained steadfast in his mission to scrutinize and address what he perceived as deficiencies embedded within evangelicalism, especially in its practices of and approaches to worship, which he believed stemmed from evangelicalism's departure from the full biblical and Christological narrative grounded in the historic faith of the church. He thus dedicated his teaching and writing to the reclamation of a more holistic understanding of the Christian faith, seeking to rekindle within evangelicalism an appreciation for the profound implications of Christ's person and work within the context of the historic Christian traditions of worship.

[337] "Robert Webber's Notes from Evangelicals for Historic Christianity," December 4, 1976, RG-03-002, Box 92, Folder 5, College Archives, Wheaton Archives and Special Collections, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL.

The next objective of the NCEHC was to identify needed correctives that, if followed, would help evangelicalism reclaim a richer historic-minded faith. The committee decided upon eight areas: A Call to Historical Roots and Continuity; A Call to Biblical Fidelity; A Call to Creedal Identity; A Call to Holistic Salvation; A Call to Sacramental Integrity; A Call to Spirituality; A Call to Church Order; A Call to Church Unity.[338] The committee placed the Call to Historical Roots and Continuity as the first priority, stating nothing else would change among evangelicals until they learned to value the past.[339]

The NCEHC convened the first three days of May 1977, at the Cenacle Retreat Center in Warrenville, Illinois, a monastic retreat center near Wheaton College. Approximately forty-five evangelical leaders from various locations, occupations, and denominations attended the NCEHC.[340] Webber served as the chairman. During the NCEHC, those who attended were broken into eight working groups to deliberate on each of the eight areas the committee had named. The conference resulted in a full draft of a document entitled The Chicago Call: An Appeal to Evangelicals. The eight areas of the Call outlined its agenda. A final section on "evangelical accomplishment" was added but was vague and did not outline any specific action steps for achievement or means for evaluating goals, a stark oversight for a renewal initiative. Regardless, the NCEHC considered the Call a success if even the smallest steps toward evangelical reform were made.

According to his writing in *The Orthodox Evangelicals*, Webber's personal desire for the Call was that it garner evangelical attention in two areas. First, Webber anticipated a restoration of historical awareness among evangelicals, which would result in a more inclusive spirit, evangelical accord, and the breakdown of divisive and judgmental temperaments.[341] Such an attitude also would produce greater charity and desire for unity, leading to a more ecumenical movement. Webber writes, "By

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[338] Webber, *The Orthodox Evangelicals*, 28-30.

[339] Ibid., 27. It is notable that the committee wanted the conference to be catholic, reformed, and evangelical. It was agreed upon that the NCEHC should reflect all three traditions. Webber writes on the process of selecting attendees for the NCEHC: "Our *modus operandi* was to make a list of all evangelical schools and institutions and draw representative conferees from them. We purposefully invited people from the various traditions, such as Lutheran, Reformed, Anabaptist, and free church as well as Roman Catholic and Orthodox...We wanted to see whether or not theologians and church leaders from these traditions could actually agree sufficiently enough to produce a call that was essentially catholic in spirit." Despite the desire for catholicity, notably missing in the list is any Wesleyan representation even though the Wesleys were influential figures in the American evangelical movement. See Webber, *The Orthodox Evangelicals*, 30.

[340] Ibid., 34.

[341] Ibid., 35-36.

understanding the historical occasion that stands behind every denomination including our own, we will become, hopefully, more concerned for unity and oneness as the goal of the church. I don't mean a mere organizational unity, but one in spirit and in anticipation of the ultimate unity of the body of Christ."[342] Secondly, Webber hoped to re-center evangelical attention on the sacraments. Webber observed the evangelical rejection of sacramental practice, particularly the Eucharist, in favor of preaching and the altar call as an area where evangelicalism had strayed in its worship. He claimed evangelicals had isolated the sacraments to mainline Christianity out of a desire to live deeper into evangelical ideals of Gospel-centered worship, but they ended up distancing themselves from the full participatory expression of Christ and his Gospel in worship.[343] He states:

> If we deny, both in doctrine and then in action, what the church is and what God can do and does in the church and by the sacraments, then we have cut ourselves off from the channels through which God continues to work in the world. By recovering the *content* of Christ, we will open ourselves to new ways to grow as well as discover new ways to serve.[344]

As a result, Webber sought to turn evangelical ideas back on themselves, exhibiting the evangelical nature of the sacraments and the deficiency of a sermon-centered and cognitive-based approach to worship and spirituality.[345] He emphasized that this shift would not only enrich the spiritual life of individual believers but also invigorate the corporate worship experience. Webber argued that a return to sacramental worship would cultivate a deeper sense of the sacred and the mystery of God's presence among His people.[346]

A year following the NCEHC, a book-length expansion of the Chicago Call was published entitled *The Orthodox Evangelicals: Who They Are and What They Are Saying*. Webber and Donald Bloesch served as co-editors of the book, with various contributors from the NCEHC writing each chapter. In the first chapter of the book, Webber states his hope for the Chicago Call is "to provide [evangelicals] with a new vision of what it means to belong to Christ and His church."[347] He also outlines in the introduction to the book the main outcomes he desires to see from the work of the NCHEC: a restored sense of historical awareness among evangelical Christians; an

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[342] Ibid., 36.
[343] Ibid.
[344] Ibid., 36.
[345] Ibid.
[346] Ibid.
[347] Webber, *The Orthodox Evangelicals*, 38.

evangelical reclamation of Christian theological and ecclesiological content; and a developed sense of unification and community among evangelicals.[348]

By and large, the NCEHC was a failure. After the NCEHC and the publication of *The Orthodox Evangelicals*, Robert Webber's vision for evangelical renewal, articulated through the Chicago Call, struggled to gain traction within the broader evangelical community. Despite the lack of momentum, Webber did not abandon his quest for reform. Instead, he recalibrated his focus, shifting from academic discourse to the practical needs of the local church. This transition marked a significant change in his approach, as he began to prioritize equipping congregations with the tools to incorporate historic Christian practices into their worship.[349] Webber believed that true renewal would emerge not from scholarly debates but from grassroots movements within the church, where worship could be reshaped to reflect the Christ-centered, sacramental theology he championed.

A couple decades after the Chicago Call, as Webber was advocating his vision for worship, a movement with somewhat parallel goals to the Call—Evangelicals and Catholics Together (ECT)—began to take shape.[350] ECT, unlike the Chicago Call, garnered considerable attention and involvement from evangelical and Catholic leaders. While Webber's work aimed at internal evangelical reform through historical and liturgical renewal, ECT sought to bridge theological divides between evangelicals and Catholics, fostering dialogue and cooperation on social and moral issues.[351] The success of ECT in creating ongoing conversations and joint initiatives stands in stark contrast to the Chicago Call's limited impact.

Webber did not participate in ECT, nor does he mention it in any of his writings, even though it pursued some of the same objectives he valued, such as fostering dialogue within and beyond evangelical circles. The absence of references to ECT may indicate Webber's deliberate shift in focus from large-scale ecumenical dialogues to the local church level, where he believed lasting change could take root. Notably, however, while ECT succeeded in part due to its broader, more collaborative approach, the Chicago Call's narrower focus on internal evangelical reform may have

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[348] Ibid., vii.

[349] See Twila Paris and Robert Webber, *In This Sanctuary: An Invitation to Worship the Savior* (Nashville: Star Song, 1993), 9.

[350] For more on Evangelicals and Catholics Together, see: Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus, eds., *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Toward a Common Mission* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1995); and Timothy George and Thomas G. Guarino, eds., *Evangelicals and Catholics Together at Twenty: Vital Statements on Contested Topics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2015).

[351] See *Evangelicals and Catholics Together*, xv-xxxii.

contributed to its relative obscurity. Nevertheless, Webber's decision to concentrate on the local church underscores his belief that renewal would be most effective when driven by those directly engaged in worship and ministry rather than through top-down academic or ecumenical initiatives.

4. Later views (1978-2007)

Following the publication of *The Orthodox Evangelicals*, Webber's personal writings focused on evangelical identity as it related to theology and social responsibility. Webber continued to push for renewal in evangelicalism, expanding evangelical thought beyond the cultural, philosophical, and political ideologies he believed held it captive. For example, in his book, *The Secular Saint*, Webber addresses the complexity of Christian life amid secular culture, believing that evangelical response often goes to one of three extremes: separation from culture, identification with culture, or opposition to culture. Webber advocates in *The Secular Saint* that all three stances are necessary. In his book *God Still Speaks*, Webber constructs a biblical and theological view of communication from the context of creation, Scripture, and church. His purpose in *God Still Speaks* is to move beyond rational discourse common and consider communication through symbolic and imaginative ways. Webber's book *The Moral Majority* investigates the cultural revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s, examining the response of the church on both the political left and the political right. Moreover, in *The Moral Majority*, Webber calls both the political left and political right into question, offering a "third way" that takes exception to the theological ideology and methodology of both. Webber calls this stance "the prophetic center." In *Secular Humanism*, Webber addresses problems of social secularization that plague both American society and American evangelicalism. He instead advocates for an "authentic Christian humanism" that seeks to move beyond a privatized faith and bridge the divide between religious faith and life in the world.[352]

Of particular significance is Webber's book *Common Roots: A Call to Evangelical Maturity*. The book serves as Webber's personal take on the content of *The Orthodox Evangelicals*, and was published alongside *The Orthodox Evangelicals* in 1978, one year following the Chicago Call. In the preface, Webber states his two-fold purpose for the book:

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[352] See Webber: *The Secular Saint: A Case for Evangelical Social Responsibility* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979); *God Still Speaks: A Biblical View of Christian Communication* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1980); *The Moral Majority: Right or Wrong?* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1981); *Secular Humanism: Threat and Challenge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

> The primary concern is, as the title suggests, to search for the roots of evangelical Christianity. The secondary concern, and one which naturally arises out of the first, is to look at those beliefs and practices of contemporary evangelicalism which are out of harmony with historic Christianity, thus the subtitle A Call to Evangelical Maturity.[353]

In *Common Roots*, Webber pinpoints historical negligence as the central problem in twentieth century American evangelicalism. He writes, "The major issue facing evangelical Christianity, the one from which all other problems flow, is a kind of evangelical amnesia. Evangelicals have forgotten the past."[354] Webber's considered this disposition to be dangerous claiming it ignores God's work in the history of the church and uncritically adopts modern categories of thought to interpret the faith.

Webber admits in *Common Roots* that the ahistorical character rampant among evangelicals was not a twentieth century phenomenon. He cites a statement written one hundred-years prior by the German Reformed historian and theologian Philip Schaff (1819-1893) in *The Principle of Protestantism, as Related to the Present State of the Church*: "...the significance of the church has been forgotten in favor of personal piety; the sacraments, in favor of faith; sanctification, in favor of justification; and tradition in its right sense, in favor of the Holy Scriptures."[355] Webber's use of Schaff stands as an observation on the state of the church, but it also can be seen as a critique of and an admonition to the church. While personal piety, personal faith, the justifying work of Christ, and the Scriptures are good, necessary, and valuable in the Christian life, Schaff critiques the church for falling short when it emphasizes these features to the detriment of others. Schaff's use of the word "forgotten" thus admonishes the Protestant church to remember and reclaim something that has been lost.

Webber's citation of Schaff in *Common Roots* is noteworthy, particularly as Webber finds solidarity with Schaff's work. Although Schaff was Swiss-born and German-educated, he spent most of his adult life living and teaching in the United States. Schaff is most known for his stint teaching at Marshall College in Mercersberg, Pennsylvania and his work with John Williamson Nevin (1803-1886) as part of the Mercersburg Movement. In 1846, Schaff published *What is Church History? A Vindication of the Idea of Historical Development*. The book proposed Schaff's idea of a "historical school," which stressed new methods for uniting the past and the present

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[353] Webber, *Common Roots*, 8.
[354] Ibid., 15.
[355] Philip Schaff, *The Principle of Protestantism, as Related to the Present State of the Church* (Boston, United Church Press, 1964), 118, qtd. in *Common Roots*, 14.

rather than imposing present-day values on past events.[356] Moreover, another of Schaff's works, *The Principle of Protestantism*, was one of the central manifestos of the Mercersburg movement, and was based on two fundamental convictions he proposed to the church:

> (1) the person of Christ is the ultimate fact of Christianity, which makes Christology and the Incarnation the essential starting point of Christian theology; (2) the historical development of the Church reveals by its richness and diversity how the Christian faith fulfills and culminates every human or historical tendency, blessings which are lost when and if the Church becomes static and unresponsive to its history. [357]

The agenda proposed by Schaff in *The Principle of Protestantism* is the same Webber sets forth in his work in worship. Webber believed the "key thread" that holds all of history, worship, and theology together is the work of Christ.[358] Moreover, rather than imposing modern or post-modern values on the church's historical forms and setting forth a new paradigm for a changing evangelical age, like Schaff, Webber connects themes within evangelicalism that unite the past and present.[359] Webber's goal is to reclaim what he believed the modern evangelical movement lost. To overcome the modernist captivity of the evangelical mind, evangelical return to historic Christianity was needed. Such connection to history was crucial for evangelical vivacity.

Webber's historical approach to evangelical reform is unique, especially compared to other normative approaches, because Webber anchors subjective spirituality in the historic revelatory experience of Christ as witnessed to in the writings of early Christians. He is quick to welcome the death of the modern era, including its triumvirate of individualism, rationalism, and factualism, the three very things he believes cuts evangelicalism off from its historic substance rooted in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ.[360] In contrast to Webber's historical approach were restorationists on one side and evangelical liberals on the other. Restorationists followed Thomas and Alexander Campbell, who advocated a fundamentalist approach to Christian faith, especially on the issue of biblical inerrancy. The restorationists held to the maxim "Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent."[361] On the other side, the evangelical liberals

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[356] See Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 618.

[357] Ibid.

[358] See Webber, *The Majestic Tapestry*, 24-25.

[359] Webber, *Common Roots*, 20-21.

[360] Ibid., 20.

[361] See Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 447; 822-823.

included figures like Carl Henry, Jim Wallis, and Ron Sider who did not reject or seriously question historic Christian orthodoxy, but argued that the majority of evangelical establishment is overly concerned with orthodoxy at the expense of orthopraxy.[362] In contrast, Webber turned to historic Christianity, which he trusted provided a cognitive center for both critique and construction of American evangelicalism. Webber's desire was to bring together the "evangelical spirit" with the historic substance of the faith rooted in a robust Christology, which he believed would not lose any evangelical distinctives, but rather animate them.[363] He did not want to change evangelicalism in a radical way but sought to protect its true, Christological nature and transformational spirit. He writes in *Common Roots*:

> The evangelical spirit is the inward, passionate, and zealous conviction that faith in Jesus Christ, who died and was raised from the dead, produces life-changing effects in man and his culture. Evangelicals believe that this is the central message of Christianity, that it is the good news which gives meaning to life, that it has the power to heal the broken relationship that exists between man and God, man and his neighbor, man and nature, and man's separation from himself. This is grasped, not merely as an objective fact, but also as a person reality, changing persons from the inside, filling the believer with a sense of overwhelming joy, providing peace within the heart, offering new moral purposefulness and a sense of fulfillment of life.[364]

Faith in Jesus Christ, restoration of both human and divine relationship, and change in the believer are the innate qualities of the evangelical spirit, according to Webber's description. According to Webber's analysis, the evangelical spirit is always at the forefront of renewal and reform in the history of the church.[365] "Because the 'evangelical spirit' is at the heart of Christian faith," Webber writes, "there can be no move toward 'historic substance' without it... Without the 'evangelical spirit' historic substance is lifeless and dead."[366]

Although he does not state it, Webber infers the opposite is also true – without historic substance, the evangelical spirit is dead. There is reciprocal relationship between the two in Webber's methodology: historic substance gives grounding to the evangelical spirit while the evangelical spirit breathes life into the historic faith. Webber sees both the evangelical spirit and the historic faith embodying an inward,

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[362] See Roger Olson, *The Westminster Handbook to Evangelical Theology*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 94.

[363] Webber, *Common Roots*, 17.

[364] See Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 17.

[365] Webber, *Common Roots*, 17.

[366] Ibid., 19-20.

passionate, and zealous conviction that faith in Jesus Christ is wholly transformative of human life and culture. Thus, for Webber, evangelicalism is at its most dynamic when the evangelical spirit and the historic faith are in relationship with one another because they both point to the person and work of Christ.

Webber was concerned that American evangelicalism had adopted modern thought categories that conflicted with historic faith and theology interpretations. He saw modern Christianity as excessively intellectual and rational, reducing theology to mere propositional truths. Webber identified a strain of evangelical rationalism similar to Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Kant's perspective subjected all aspects of the faith to "reason, logic, and explanation, void of mystery and wonder."[367] To counter a Kantian approach to faith, Webber aimed to revive evangelicalism by restoring scriptural and theological authority as understood by the early church. Instead of creating a new paradigm for a changing evangelical era, he sought to deepen the connection between the faith's historical foundations and its contemporary expressions. Webber's vision was to preserve the timeless treasures of Christian tradition amid modern challenges. He writes:

> ...we will concentrate mainly on the substance of the early church, particularly the fathers of the second century. These fathers of the church are direct descendants of the apostles themselves and claim to hold the faith as it was held by the apostles. We will also refer to some of the fathers of the third, fourth, and fifth centuries whose thought gave shape to the creeds of the early church. These confessions have stood as testimonies to the heart of biblical Christianity and, although accepted by evangelical Christians, have not always been understood.
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> In particular, we will probe the self-understanding of the early Christians of the nature of the church, worship, theology, mission, and spirituality. Hopefully their biblical understanding of the Christian faith will provide an agenda for evangelicals which will help us overcome our modernity and recapture the historic substance of the Christian faith.[368]

Like Schaff, Webber sets forth an agenda for the church founded on the idea of reclaiming the historical substance of the faith.[369] To overcome the modernist captivity of the evangelical mind, what is needed, Webber posits in *Common Roots*, is an evangelical return to historic Christianity, specifically to the first five centuries of the church. Throughout the remainder of *Common Roots*, therefore, Webber sets forth an

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[367] Neff, "Preface," 7.

[368] Webber, *Common Roots*, 20-21.

[369] Schaff draws out implications of how the historical development of the church "fulfills and culminates every human or historical tendency." See Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 618.

agenda for evangelicalism by challenging five specific areas: the church, worship, theology, mission, and spirituality.

Since Webber places such strong emphasis on the "historic faith" of the church, it is important to clarify what Webber means by historic faith. In one sense, Webber means the entirety of the church's history. He is not trying to be a Protestant apologetic or doctrinal purist; instead, Webber believes in a church consciousness that is not segmented by historical restrictions. In the opening chapter of *Common Roots*, Webber faults evangelical scholars who trace church history/tradition no further back than the Protestant Reformation. He writes, "This strange silence toward the ancient and medieval church could lead one to believe that the history of God's *real* people began in the sixteenth century."[370] Therefore, in Webber's opinion, a true historical faith must consider the teachings and traditions of those centuries prior to the sixteenth century. Webber concentrates on the teachings and traditions of the first five centuries of the church. Even when mentioning sixteenth-century Reformers, Webber states, "We should remember that the Reformers, Luther and Calvin, did not wish to break from the early church, but to reform the church of their day to make it truly evangelical and historic. Both agreed that the church of the first five hundred years had succeeded in maintaining the essential substance of New Testament Christianity."[371] Webber's statement here is notable, especially as it reveals the difference between what he says is the historic faith of the church and how he approaches this historic faith.

Webber's approach to the historic faith is notably selective. He emphasizes the writings and traditions from the first five centuries as the foundational basis for his understanding of historic Christianity, and while he allows other eras to be part of the narrative of the church, he does not treat them with the same level of authority and often compares them unfavorably to what he perceives as the pure faith embodied in the early church.[372] This selective emphasis can be seen as a reductionist approach, as it overlooks the rich diversity and development of Christian thought and practice that occurred in later centuries. Moreover, in his work on worship, Webber engages only a select few documents from the first five centuries of the church. His selective engagement was perhaps a strategic choice to introduce evangelicals to the early church, limiting his focus to a few key documents for the purpose of making the early

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[370] Webber, *Common Roots*, 15.

[371] Ibid., 21-22.

[372] See Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 67-86. Cf. Webber: *Worship Old and New*, 59-84; *The Divine Embrace*, 31-121.

church's teachings more accessible and less overwhelming to his audience. Regardless, his approach does not offer a full or comprehensive view of the early church. Webber's limited engagement misses the broader context and the full spectrum of early Christian thought and practice. Furthermore, Webber's historic treatment does not extend to the global expressions of Christianity outside the Western tradition, which further narrows his perspective. His isolation of the early centuries and Western tradition idealizes one era of the church over others and ends up reading the church's history through a limited lens. The approach misses the broader understanding of the church's historic faith that includes diverse cultural and historical contexts. Consequently, Webber's portrayal of historic Christianity can be seen as incomplete, as it does not fully represent the rich and varied history of the church across different regions and eras.

Despite critiques of Webber's historical methodology, his broader ecclesiastical vision is evident in his focus on the modern church's worship practices. Besides his analysis of the church's ahistorical tendencies, Webber also expressed apprehension about worship's diminished priority in late twentieth-century evangelicalism. He notes that while the church emphasized evangelism, teaching, fellowship, missions, and Christian service, these vital activities often neglect their orienting center—worship.[373] Such neglect results in passive approaches to worship where people seek worship to amuse or appease rather than celebrate God's love, character, and actions. Endeavors like evangelism, discipleship, fellowship, and education, which should extend from worship, instead co-opt it; thus, Webber urges that reform is needed, and it must start with worship.[374] Such reform can only occur if a church is willing to examine its theology of worship and change its worship practices.[375]

Another problem Webber identifies in evangelical approaches to worship is the lack of theological substance in worship. Although he views this as a distinct concern, he also sees it as a natural consequence of worship that is subjective and human-centered, focusing more on personal experience and gratification than on theological substance. He observes, "A [human]-centered approach to worship often occurs as a result of the failure to understand *why* content is necessary in worship, *what* the content should include, and *how* the content should be put together."[376] Webber emphasized content as the foremost component of worship, affecting all other aspects of the

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[373] See Robert E. Webber, *Renew Your Worship: A Study in the Blending of Traditional and Contemporary Worship* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997), back cover.

[374] Ibid., 126.

[375] Ibid., 4.

[376] Webber, *Common Roots*, 78.

communal gathering. For Webber, worship is to be a faithful rehearsal of who God is and what God has done in the person and work of Jesus Christ, giving expression to the relationship between God and his people. When churches seek primarily to educate or to foster human stimulation in worship, they end up missing the point of worship and fail to glorify God in his entirety.[377] At best, Webber reflects, churches address individual aspects of God's character and actions in the content of their worship, leaving congregations with a limited view of God. At worst, the content is fixed upon the benefits of the creatures rather than the wonder, mystery, and majesty of the Creator, which establishes within the congregation a culture of consumerism and self-absorption. Webber critiqued American evangelicalism at the turn of the twentieth century for having worship that often is passive, consumeristic, and narcissistic. In his assessment, attention was placed more on the worshiper than on God. Webber's mission, therefore, was to redirect the content and the practices of evangelical worship toward a dynamic, God-oriented, and communal proclamation and participatory expression of Jesus Christ's saving work.

Two prominent behaviors in worship revealed to Webber the pervasive human-oriented attitude in evangelicalism: one, the overemphasis on reaching the mind of the worshiper; and two, the overemphasis on triggering an emotional response in the worshiper.[378] Webber believed these behaviors reduced worship to its intellectual and emotional components and nurtured an attitude in worshipers that worship is meant for them rather than a participatory act that they themselves do.[379] He thus critiqued evangelical practices and rituals of worship for failing to foster awareness of Christ's real and abiding presence in worship, brought through the Holy Spirit and all to the glory of the Father. He claimed evangelicals instead relied on human effort to manufacture an encounter with God through mental and/or emotional stimulation all for the gratification of those who were present in worship.[380] Webber argued these behaviors place emphasis on what an individual finds meaningful, stimulating, or compelling in worship.[381] Thus, Webber saw evangelicals as if they were treating worship as a merchandise produced for a consumer. The music, the testimonies, and the sermon were designed to provide information or to facilitate an emotional reaction within the congregation. Moreover, Webber saw the wars over the style of worship that

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[377] Ibid.
[378] Webber, *The Majestic Tapestry*, 72.
[379] Webber, *Planning Blended Worship*, 22-23.
[380] Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 84.
[381] Webber, *Worship is a Verb*, 31.

emerged in the late twentieth century as proof that many evangelical churches were more concerned with good marketing than the historic, biblical purpose of worship, i.e., its Christological content.[382] Noting these problems, Webber concluded that when worship is geared toward the congregation, worship is reduced to human indulgence rather than exaltation of the Triune God.

4.1 The negative influence of modernity

Webber considered the negative influence of modernity to be a key factor in the loss of theological content in evangelical worship, especially with its subjective hermeneutic.[383] Throughout his work, Webber is hyper-critical of modernity, blaming both philosophical and theological movements that occurred in the modern era as the antecedents of evangelical reductionism, which ultimately affected evangelical worship practices. For example, in *The Divine Embrace* and *Ancient-Future Worship*, Webber connects educational-focused worship to the spread of Cartesian epistemology, a thought system developed by philosopher and scientist René Descartes (1596-1650) in the seventeenth century.[384] Webber identifies Descartes as representing a major break with the past, stating: "According to [Descartes'] method of arriving at truth, human reason was autonomous and could come to truth without the help of revelation."[385] Webber positions Descartes as the catalyst who paved the way for modern thinkers to seek advancement of knowledge through rationality and the scientific method. Webber notes that the church did not escape the Cartesian philosophical shift and that the church reacted to it in two ways: First, many felt under attack by the rationalistic approach of modernity; secondly, others sought to utilize reason to a greater degree in relation to the faith.[386]

In response to modern philosophy, Webber notes how traditionalist conservative theologians utilized evidential apologetics, i.e. a proof-oriented defense of Christianity as an attempt to rationalize the faith.[387] In *The Younger Evangelicals*, Webber notes that fundamentalism was an anti-intellectual movement, at least in concern to higher criticism, evolutionism, and rational criticism.[388] He also states that

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[382] Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 85.

[383] Ibid., 81-83.

[384] Webber, *The Divine Embrace*, 63. Cf. Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 78-80.

[385] Webber, *The Divine Embrace*, 63.

[386] Ibid., 64.

[387] See Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 78-83. Cf. Webber, *The Divine Embrace*, 64-65; R.C Sproul, John Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defense of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 13-23; and Thomas Oden, *After Modernity…What?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 67-68.

[388] Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 27.

fundamentalism remained rooted to the Baconian system of intellectual thought known as Common Sense Realism. This system of thought was derived from Descartes' emphasis on knowledge gained through the empirical method and insisted that facts could be known intellectually through observation and reason that was propositional. Common Sense Rationalism was applied to Scripture to determine truth. Webber writes, "The inerrant Bible was the source for data fed into the evidential process of knowing truth."[389]

Although the goal of the traditionalist fundamentalists was to fight against aspects of modernity corrosive to the historic Christian faith, Webber criticizes these conservatives for buying into modernity's emphasis on reason and objective truth. Their hope was to build structures of certainty for faith-based claims; these structures were founded upon critical defenses of biblical texts, the doctrine of inerrancy, discoveries in archaeology, and other analytical proof of what they claimed to be biblical Christianity. What resulted from their efforts was a rational and propositional approach to Christian faith. They turned worship into a lecture hall where Christians could gather, focus on, and affirm these truths. Webber observes:

> But whereas Scripture was once over reason and science, the tables were now turned, and reason and science became the judge of Scripture. Hence, modern theologians, following the accepted way of thinking, brought reason and. science to the aid of the Bible. The conservatives sought to harmonize reason and science. . .Worship, which in the past was the telling of and enacting of God's story of the world from beginning to end, was reshaped into a time of teaching the Bible. . .The doctrines of revelation, Trinity, creation, incarnation, atoning death, bodily resurrection, and second coming became *facts to be believed*. They were not shed of their supernatural character by the conservatives, but the mystery was gone and the relational character lost.[390]

For Webber, the rationalistic impulse of modernity caused an important shift in worship. Since the sermon was a key feature of the worship service, preaching was seen as a useful tool for accentuating propositional truth.[391] Other traditional liturgical acts of worship became suspect since many conservatives decided traditional liturgical practices should be accepted solely based on biblical sanction or on their subjective and pragmatic impact. Consequentially, the preservation of doctrine through educational sermons was emphasized in worship rather than the practice of historic liturgical forms.

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[389] Ibid.
[390] Webber, *The. Divine Embrace*, 65.
[391] Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 29.

Evangelical conservatives took two approaches for discerning what constituted biblical worship. The first was to permit only worship practices explicitly affirmed in Scripture. All other practices were seen as human inventions and thus prohibited. As a result, many churches eschewed artwork, the recitation of the creeds, prayers of confession, and even musical instruments in the worship service.[392] The second was to allow any practice of worship not explicitly prohibited in Scripture, so long as it was agreeable to the peace and unity of the church. Webber considers the second approach to be a key contributing factor to the rise of evangelical diversity.[393] As evangelicals were freed from fundamentalist control, he claims, there was a rise in evangelical pluralism. Some found the break from fundamentalism to be an opportunity for recovery of the ancient tradition within evangelicalism, while others moved toward a pragmatic form of evangelicalism.[394] The recovery approach was much more accepting of traditional liturgical practices while the pragmatic movement challenged the old way of doing evangelism and worship. Ultimately, the pragmatists shifted toward what Webber calls an ahistorical and antitheological seeker-tradition.[395] Church-growth principles and popular cultural innovations fueled the movement. This pragmatic mindset, according to Webber, eventually became the most influential of all late twentieth century evangelical movements.[396] With it came a focus on human attraction and a deviation from Christological proclamation and participation.

Whereas evangelicalism's first two responses to modernity favored the intellect over the emotions, a third response ran counter to Enlightenment rationalism. This response stressed the importance of experiential religion and emphasized the necessity of a personal experience of God's salvation by asserting that true worship takes place in the heart. In his books *Worship Old and New*, *Ancient-Future Worship*, and *The Divine Embrace*, Webber claims the experiential response was a significant influence on the mindset of twentieth century evangelical worship.[397] The governing attitude undergirding experiential religion was that Christian faith is not dependent upon acceptance of propositional truth but is based on an individual commitment of one's whole being to God.[398] Webber likens experiential faith to the philosophical movement

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[392] Noll, *History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*, 33-34.
[393] Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 33.
[394] Ibid., 35-36.
[395] Ibid., 36.
[396] Ibid.
[397] See Webber: *Ancient-Future Worship*, 83-84; *Worship Old and New*, revised ed., 127-133; *The Divine Embrace*, 69-75.
[398] James White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 146.

of Romanticism, a movement that opposed analytical methods of knowing truth and called for a more intuitive, inner experience of knowing through the senses, the passions, and the will.[399] Romantics insisted that truth was known in the heart through experience; thus, true worship ensued through the immediate and spontaneous movement of God, who was manifest in powerful, emotional responses. Oftentimes, this meant Romantics dismissed formalized liturgical forms of worship, viewing them as unnecessary since they limited the spontaneous activity of God. Preaching was done to "revive" the hearts of those who needed to be awakened to a saving faith.[400] Services often climaxed in a call to conversion or deeper repentance. Above all, pastors wanted worshipers to know that contrary to the claims of modernity, God was not dead nor distant but could be known in a personal way.

Despite evangelicalism's varied responses to modernity—be it rationalism, fundamentalism, or Romanticism—Webber observes two common characteristics present in each, namely a subjective approach to the faith and the glorification of the individual. He reflects in *Ancient-Future Faith*, "One evangelical group located the meaning of worship in the shaping of the Christian mind; the other evangelical stream pointed to the meaning of worship in the experience of the heart."[401] Likewise, he notes in *The Divine Embrace*:

> These modern approaches to spirituality created the twentieth century tension of a spirituality rising within the self. Whether the intellectual self or the experiential self, the problems resulting from these new spiritualities, which have become divorced from the full story of God, now plagued the evangelical spirituality developed in the twentieth century.[402]

Modernity perpetuated a culture of subjective, autonomous authority through its concentration on individual reason and knowledge. The dual focus on rationalism and experience within the church during the modern era likewise placed the individual at the center of the Christian faith and established a worship piety directed by human education and/or personal intimacy with God. The heightened attention to human edification in both fundamentalism and Romanticism was not done to position the human individual above God, but rather out of a human desire for a personal, authentic experience of God. The church refused to allow modernity to destroy God; thus, it felt

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[399] Webber, *The Divine Embrace*, 69.

[400] James White, *Protestant Worship: Traditions in Transition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 191-193.

[401] Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*, 99. Cf. Webber, *The Divine Embrace*, 94-99.

[402] Webber, *The Divine Embrace*, 77.

an urgency for people to understand objective matters of the Christian faith and to know God in a personal way. This passion within the church for a vigorous inward, heart-felt religion paved the way for the American evangelical revival tradition that would extend throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries.

4.2 The negative influence of revivalism

Webber posits in *The Divine Embrace* that Romanticism had a direct impact on American evangelical worship specifically through the revival tradition.[403] He points to Continental Pietism as a significant influence on the American evangelical revival tradition.[404] Originating in seventeenth-century Germany as a reaction against an intellectual Lutheranism, Pietism accentuated personal transformation through spiritual rebirth, personal renewal, individual devotion—often through reflection on sermons and the singing of hymns—and intimate piety.[405] Webber notes that Pietism emphasized a regenerative spirituality seen in a "new birth" that results in an inner transformation.[406] Likewise, Pietism contributed to religious practice by promoting commitment to evangelism, social action on behalf of the poor, a biblical foundation for theology and ethics, and experience as the basis of religion.[407]

Many Pietists believed and often asserted that their movement was a second phase of the Reformation. In contrast to the dry intellectualism that they alleged developed in the generations following the Protestant Reformation, Pietists claimed true religion was based in a heartfelt faith. The copious doctrinal divisions between Protestant movements were proof to the Pietists that Protestant Christianity focused too much on rational concerns. Pietist leaders therefore placed less emphasis on doctrinal divisions and instead emphasized religious experience and the affections. Theological conflict should be engaged only when useful for changing people's hearts, the Pietists claimed.[408] Moreover, worship, especially the sermon, should serve primarily to edify the congregation.

The two traditions of Puritanism and Pietism were brought together in American Protestantism in the 1730s and 1740s through a series of revivals known as the First Great Awakening. Seeds had already been planted for the Great Awakening

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[403] Ibid., 69.
[404] Ibid., 69-70.
[405] Ibid., 69.
[406] Ibid., 70.
[407] Douglas Sweeney, *The American Evangelical Story: A History of the Movement*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 34-35.
[408] Webber, *The Divine Embrace*, 70.

through the Puritan experiment in the colonies and its newfound focus on repentance. However, it was through the influence of Pietism that the desire for religious renewal and personal assurance of salvation was instigated amidst the uproar of revival. Consequentially, a growing emphasis in American religion was placed on the inner life of the believer.[409]

Webber also links the evangelical revival movement in America to the ministry of John Wesley (1703-1791) in eighteenth-century England. Wesley's focus on the inner experience of God and affective faith accentuated the new birth as a life-changing emotional experience, Webber claims.[410] This affective approach to the faith catapulted Wesley's ministry throughout England as Wesley traveled and spoke on God's free offer of salvation, the inner witness of the Holy Spirit, and growth in holiness. As an Anglican priest ordained in the Church of England, Wesley also emphasized the sacramental life of the church; yet, according to Webber, it was his revivalism that had the greatest influence on American evangelicalism.[411]

Webber is keen to point out the Christo-centric nature of the early evangelical revivals, as well as their kerygmatic approach to proclaiming the gospel so that Christ may dwell in the hearts of all who hear the message of Christ's love and saving work.[412] He offers more critique of revivalism than compliment, however. Though the revivals had a unifying effect on American culture, the First Great Awakening also incited a division between the evangelical revivalists and traditional Protestants in America. Like their Puritan and Pietist predecessors who influenced the American evangelical revival culture, the revivalists of the First Great Awakening brought to the American colonies a detachment from religious rituals, ceremonies, sacramentality, and hierarchy. The evangelical movement made the experience of Christianity subjective to the average person by fostering deep introspection, emotional conviction, and a commitment to a new standard of morality. It brought a message to American Protestantism that emphasized personal experience and the need for salvation by faith in Jesus Christ. As a result, the evangelical revivalism manifest in the First Great Awakening bred a worship culture that was full of zeal for the conversion of sinners but had little interest in the liturgical traditions of the church.

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[409] See Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship,* 81-83.

[410] Webber, *The Divine Embrace*, 71.

[411] Ibid., 70-73, 88. Cf. Webber: *Common Roots,* 98-99; *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail*, 168; *Ancient-Future Faith*, 99; *Ancient-Future Worship*, 82.

[412] Webber, *The Divine Embrace*, 70-71.

Webber notes that the revivals also caused a shift away from historic Christian spirituality in view of human relationship to God. Union with God was not based in Christ's incarnation but in personal experience.[413] The primacy of Jesus' faithful role as the one who unites all with God was exchanged for the primacy of human faith and personal choice. Webber viewed this as a shift away from the grounded subjectivity seen in ancient Christianity and toward personal subjectivity.[414] He writes:

> In the ancient church, experience was the act of baptism into union with Jesus Christ in the pattern of his death and resurrection. The focus was not on an emotionally charged decision I made for Jesus but on the lifelong commitment to live in the pattern of dying to sin and rising to the new life of the Spirit. . . Baptism into Christ was a lavish experience of union with God's experience for us and in us. The confidence in spirituality is not *my experience*, but *my baptism into Christ*. . . In modern pietism and revivalism the focus of experience is certainly rooted in God incarnate, dead, and buried; but the focus is on *my* experience of his death and resurrection. . . The common emphasis here is a confidence in the self. "*I* chose Jesus. *I* now have a better life."[415]

Webber argues that personal experience serves as the foundation of certitude and assurance for evangelicals, leading to a privatized approach to worship. While this emphasis on experience fueled evangelistic efforts, it also shifted the focus of worship toward pragmatism, a trend that became more pronounced during the American evangelical revivals of the nineteenth century.

The intense spiritual fervor of eighteenth-century revivalism laid a foundation for the evangelical revival tradition that would later unfold as the singular most prominent religious movement in America. A second series of revivals known as the Second Great Awakening surfaced during the first four decades of the nineteenth century. These revivals often have been attributed to originating at camp meetings in Kentucky and Tennessee in the 1790s and early 1800s, which later swept across New England and the American frontier. Other outpourings of revival were simultaneously arising across the content, however, such as those connected with Methodist Quarterly Meetings in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States and the Baptist evangelism mobilization in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia.[416] Extraordinary numbers

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[413] Ibid., 76.
[414] Ibid., 74.
[415] Ibid.
[416] See Lester Ruth, "Reconsidering the Emergence of the Second Great Awakening and Camp Meetings among Early Methodists," *Worship* 75, no. 4 (July 2001): 334-355; and Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*, 165-168; 170-179.

of people converted to Christianity at these revivals due to the enthusiastic preaching and congregational participation that occurred.

Webber observes that the revivals of the Second Great Awakening transformed the religious landscape of America by introducing a new worship practice known as the altar call.[417] The altar call was a public invitation given directly after the sermon that encouraged unrepentant sinners to come forward to a chancel rail, mercy seat, or anxious bench to make a personal commitment to God.[418] The purpose of the altar call was to summon the unconverted to an experience of salvation. For those already converted, it was used to implore believers toward growth in sanctification. While the altar call originated in revival meetings, it quickly found its way into the regular worshiping life of the church. Some Protestant denominations rejected the practice, claiming it was manipulative and depended on a contrived emotional experience. Nevertheless, the altar call became a common feature of worship in the fastest growing American Protestant movements of the nineteenth century, such as the evangelical Methodists and Baptists.[419] The inclusion of this new practice by American Protestant evangelicals marked a major alteration in the order and conduct of worship. It pivoted worship into an appeal to the unconverted, increasingly blurring the distinction between worship and evangelism. Preaching maintained a central role in the service, but it was used as a means of stimulating the affections due to its usefulness in attracting large numbers of converts to the Christian faith. Thus, as evangelicalism grew in prominence in America throughout the 1800s, a distinct "revivalist" form of worship became prevalent in the church.[420] This revivalist approach to worship typifies the experience Webber had in worship for most of his early years.[421]

Important to note in relation to Webber's critique is the sanctioning of liturgical pragmatism in American revivalism. At the heart of liturgical pragmatism is a result-oriented approach to worship. Charles Finney (1792-1875) was the promulgator of this liturgical outlook. Finney believed human sin could only be countered by "religious excitements," so he argued worship must be done in a way to arouse spiritual fervor within the gathered people.[422] In contrast to contemporaries who prescribed liturgical

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[417] Webber, *Common Roots*, 125.

[418] Noll, *History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 176; and White, *Protestant Worship*, 176.

[419] Webber, *Common Roots*, 125. Cf. White, *Protestant Worship*, 177.

[420] Webber, *Worship Old and New*, revised ed., 128. Cf. White, *Protestant Worship*, 177.

[421] See Webber, *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail*, 22-35. Cf. Webber, *Signs of Wonder*, 4-22, 116-117; and Webber, *Worship is a Verb*, 21-22.

[422] Charles Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (New Tappan: Revell, n.d.), 1-2.

practices based on biblical commands, Finney argued God established no set worship rubric or liturgical measures in the Scriptures. Instead, pastors are to "use the faculties [God] has given" to discern what means of worship are appropriate for each age and to weed out practices that are no longer effective.[423] Finney developed several "new measures" he believed were conducive to revival, such as mass advertising, prolonged services, and the inclusion of the "anxious bench," which was a pew placed at the front of the congregation where sinners sat for prayer during the meeting. The essential test of meaningful worship for Finney was its pragmatic value, as James White observes.[424] Does a practice of worship work to move the people? If so, it should be kept. If not, it should be rejected.

In Webber's assessment, revivalism incited two prominent features that permeated American evangelical worship practice at the end of the twentieth century. First, preaching held the primary position in the service.[425] Whether done for pragmatic evangelistic purposes or traditionalist educational purposes, preaching was central to evangelical worship piety. Second, evangelicalism held strong to its innovative spirit.[426] Evangelicals were apt to adopt "new measures" as a way of engaging people in worship.[427] Be it new musical styles, technological advancements, or marketing techniques, evangelicals were not shy about innovation. Finney's pragmatic views generated an attitude in American evangelicalism that religious traditions should be disregarded if they do not prove to be as effective as newer methods in producing converts to the faith. Worship was done to achieve results qualifiable through the emotional reaction of the people and quantifiable by the number of attendees and/or converts in the service. Consequentially, by the twentieth century the substance of evangelical worship was unbridled evangelism dependent upon gripping preaching and personal experience of God's saving work. Webber was not a fan of this pragmatic approach to worship, stating it generated a preoccupation with a journey into self and a focus on personal spiritual experience.[428] He saw the pragmatic approach to worship as reductionistic and in opposition to a more ancient spirituality rooted in the narrative of God and built upon historical actions and declarations of the church.[429] The heightened focus on the change of outward forms to bring renewal to worship relied too heavily on

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[423] Ibid., 251.
[424] White, *Protestant Worship*, 177.
[425] Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 83-84.
[426] Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 43-45.
[427] Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion,* 251.
[428] Webber, *The Divine Embrace*, 117.
[429] Ibid., 120-121.

innovation and cultural appeal. In *Ancient-Future Worship*, Webber critiques American evangelicals for kowtowing to emerging cultural trends.[430] They had made the purpose of worship, he claims, to "get people in the door," a goal he believed epitomized pragmatism in worship.[431] Instead of innovation and cultural trends, Webber was convinced that Christian tradition instead had the power to renew faith. He writes:

> The Christian tradition is sorely needed in the Christian church because many people like myself have come to the end of our patience with so-called innovative gimmicks that have no connection with the past. We are exhausted by every new trick in the book, so now we are digging into the past to resurrect old treasures that still have meaning and can offer direction."[432]

Webber saw within the Christian tradition an opportunity to shift evangelical worship away from its preoccupation with human-centric pragmatism and toward a participatory celebration of God.

While Robert Webber offers a compelling critique of American evangelical revival worship culture, his analysis often overlooks the strengths and benefits within the movement. By focusing primarily on the negative aspects, he tends to ignore the genuine spiritual renewal, community engagement, and profound encounters with Christ that revivals can inspire. This one-sided critique risks alienating those who have experienced the positive impacts of revivalism, thereby limiting the inclusivity and relevance of his message.

Notably absent from Webber's treatment of evangelical worship is a thorough exploration of Pentecostal and charismatic traditions. Although he acknowledges these streams in a few of his works, Webber does not offer the same level of critique or corrective that he directs towards white, American revivalist worship traditions. This omission may stem from his personal inexperience with Pentecostal and charismatic practices, leading to a lack of the same frustrations he expresses toward other evangelical traditions. It's also possible that Webber did not consider Pentecostals and charismatics to be part of his primary audience.

When Webber does engage with Pentecostalism and charismatic movements, his treatment is often cursory, conflating charismatic worship with the broader praise and worship tradition. For example, in his book *Signs of Wonder*, Webber groups Pentecostal and charismatic worship under the larger evangelical umbrella, alongside

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[430] Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 84-85.
[431] Ibid., 85.
[432] Webber, *The Majestic Tapestry*, 15.

Pietists, revivalists, the holiness movement, and the Black Church. He argues that these traditions share a focus on experiential and emotional worship, reacting to the rationalist pressures of the Enlightenment. Webber writes:

> For the most part, these worshipers have ignored the Enlightenment world view and the questions it poses for modern Christians. They aren't interested in getting involved with logical debates, with "evidence that demands a verdict," or with the development of a science that opposes evolution. Instead, they want a Christianity that touches the heart, moves the will, and results in holy living. They want commitment and passion. They want to feel the presence of Christ and experience the power of the Holy Spirit.[433]

Overall, Webber's integration of Pentecostal and charismatic approaches into his broader assessment of evangelicalism is weak. His advocacy for a return to historic, liturgical forms of worship does not adequately consider the underlying values of these movements, nor does he engage with them on their own terms. Instead, he tends to lump Pentecostal and charismatic worship into the experiential, revivalist model that he finds deficient in other forms of evangelicalism. As a result, Webber fails to provide a comprehensive assessment or corrective for these significant streams within evangelicalism. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Webber does not engage with figures like William J. Seymour or the Azusa Street Revivals as part of his historical treatment of evangelicalism. This omission underscores a broader gap in his analysis, as he overlooks critical moments and leaders in the history of Pentecostalism that have profoundly shaped the landscape of evangelical worship.

4.3 A new evangelical movement

Reflecting on major characteristics of American evangelical worship that emerged by the turn of the twenty-first century, in his book *The Younger Evangelicals* Webber identifies three categories of evangelicals: the "traditional" evangelicals, the "pragmatic" evangelicals, and the "younger" evangelicals. Alan Rathe provides a pithy summary of these three categories:

> *Traditional Evangelicals* maintain typically neo-evangelical values and carry forward long-standing, sermon-centered worship traditions; *Pragmatic Evangelicals* embrace "church growth" and "seeker-sensitive" ministry approaches, attempting to be hospitable to the "unchurched" by eliminating cultural obstacles; *Younger Evangelicals* engage with postmodernity, explore alternative ministry models, and often re-appropriate ancient traditions as a way into the future.[434]

[433] Ibid.

[434] Rathe, *Evangelicals, Worship, and Participation*, 13.

Although he attempts to be sympathetic and charitable to the traditionalists and pragmatists in *The Younger Evangelicals*, Webber's disdain is clear as he critiques the for their acceptance of modern ways of thinking and their fashioning of a consumerist worship culture.[435] Differing from the traditionalists and pragmatists, Webber locates his own affinities and work in worship renewal among the younger evangelicals. Webber categorizes this group as evangelicals emerging at the onset of the twenty-first century who are willing to engage with postmodernity, explore alternative ministry models, look for meaning through a cosmic Christian metanarrative, and seek to re-appropriate ancient traditions of the church.[436] He upholds the younger evangelicals as visionaries and those who will influence new movements in the church because of their commitment to "release the historic substance of faith from its twentieth century enculturation in the Enlightenment and recontextualize it with the new cultural condition of the twenty-first century."[437] Notably, Webber's use of the term "younger" is not exclusively a reference to a particular age bracket; rather, he uses the term to signify the neoteric perspective of evangelicals who recognize they are in the midst of a cultural transition and thus have a particular philosophical outlook on the world and a reformational agenda for the future of evangelicalism. He states in *The Younger Evangelicals*: "I see this new group as a fresh start, a new beginning for an evangelicalism of a different kind."[438] Although Webber claims these younger evangelicals do not emerge until the final quarter of the twentieth century, he claims they have an intrinsic link to their evangelical predecessors and that they have been shaped by the twentieth century American evangelical context. Unlike their predecessors, however, the younger evangelicals are dissatisfied with former evangelical approaches to church and worship and instead desire to engage with contemporary and contextual forms of worship while simultaneously re-appropriating ancient traditions of the church.[439] Webber sees three trends in the worship of the younger evangelicals: one, they neglect entertainment worship; two, they long for an experience of God's presence; and three, they seek a restoration of historic liturgical elements in worship, especially the Eucharist.[440]

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[435] Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 23-42.
[436] Ibid., 43-54. Cf. Rathe, *Evangelicals, Worship, and Participation*, 13.
[437] Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 17.
[438] Ibid., 25.
[439] Ibid., 43-54; Rathe, *Evangelicals, Worship, and Participation*, 13.
[440] Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 188.

Webber's concept of the "younger evangelical" is more an idealistic projection of his own evangelical commitments than a defined or empirically supported movement. Although he alludes to groups that embody these principles, he does not provide any data to substantiate the existence of a distinct younger evangelical movement, nor does he identify specific figures who exemplify this model. Webber also assumes that this vague group of younger evangelicals shares his Christological commitments in worship and theology. While he notes trends such as the re-appropriation of ancient traditions and the restoration of the Eucharist in younger evangelical worship practices, he fails to explore the underlying reasons for these commitments.

Nevertheless, *The Younger Evangelicals* illustrates Webber's vision for an evangelicalism that synthesizes the new and the old, offering a fresh approach to various aspects of church life, from education and evangelism to worship and the arts. For Webber, worship renewal was central to broader church reform, and he developed his practical theology of worship with the belief that this idealized emerging group of evangelicals would lead the first new evangelical movement of the twenty-first century.

5. Webber's vision for worship renewal

Throughout his career as an educator, speaker, and author, Webber addressed a variety of subjects regarding recovery of the ancient Christian tradition as a means of renewal in present-day evangelical churches. Topics ranged from ecclesiology and theology to discipleship and mission, but his most notable contributions concerned the practice of worship. Webber considered worship to be the central activity of the church and thus the key to church renewal. "[Worship] stands as the center of the church's life and mission," he writes in his book *Signs of Wonder*; "It is the summit toward which the entire life of the church moves and the source from which all of its ministries flow…In brief, the single most important thing the church can do is worship."[441] The impact of the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) is evident on Webber's thought. His statement in *Signs of Wonder* appropriates the two-fold importance of worship found in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, (Latin for "The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy"), one of the council's key documents.[442] *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, promulgated on December 4, 1963, was the first document passed by Vatican II. Its drafting involved extensive

[441] Webber, *Signs of Wonder*, 16.

[442] Pope Paul, VI, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*: *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy Solemnly Promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI on December 4, 1963* (CreateSpace, 2016), 7-15.

consultation and debate among bishops, theologians, and liturgical experts to address concerns about the liturgy's accessibility and relevance. After many unsuccessful attempts in the first half of the twentieth century to make liturgical alterations, the 1963 constitution ended up being one of the most revolutionary developments in twentieth century Christian worship, causing the Roman Catholic Church to go through a liturgical reform that altered practices in place since the sixteenth century. The primary purpose of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* was to reform the liturgy to encourage active participation by the faithful. This involved simplifying rites and emphasizing communal worship.[443] The Roman Catholic Church also hoped to foster greater unity among Christians and facilitate dialogue with other Christian denominations. One of the most notable liturgical changes was the permission for the use of vernacular languages in the Mass and other sacraments, replacing Latin, which had been the universal liturgical language in Roman Catholicism. The document emphasized the active participation of the laity in the liturgy, encouraging responses, singing, and other forms of engagement.[444] The liturgical rites were simplified to eliminate unnecessary duplications and to make the essential elements more prominent. Greater emphasis was placed on the Liturgy of the Word, with an expanded selection of scriptural readings and more significant participation by lay readers.

For Webber, the *Sacrosanctum Concilium* proposed a model where "worship is primarily an action from above and secondarily a response below."[445] He reflected, "When the church worships, God becomes present to give to the church the salvation that comes from Jesus Christ. As the church responds in faith, the church is built into the holy temple of the Lord."[446] Webber believed worship is the primary context where the presence of God is mediated to his people and the true fellowship of Christ's body is realized. Therefore, he professed it is also the activity where those who participate find meaning, healing, encouragement, and motivation for Christian living. When worship cultivates a conscious awareness of God and participation in the person and work of Christ, the natural benefit is nourishment for spiritual life and growth.[447]

Webber was not alone in his view of worship as the key to church renewal. Similar evangelical figures include Donald Bloesch, Thomas Oden, Francis Schaeffer, and Thomas Howard, as well as leaders in the emergent church movement such as John

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[443] Ibid.
[444] Ibid.
[445] See Webber, *Worship Old and New*, revised ed., 124.
[446] Ibid.
[447] Webber, *Worship is a Verb*, 18.

Burke, Mark Driscoll, Dan Kimball, Sally Morgenthaler, Doug Pagitt, and Karen Ward.[448] Several factors set Webber apart. The first was his prolific work as a writer. During the scope of his career, Webber published over fifty books and contributed regular articles for popular magazines like *Reformed Worship* and *Worship Leader*. The second was the accessibility of Webber's published works for a breadth of readers. He wrote his books with both lay people and clergy in mind.[449] The third was his extensive travels to lead workshops at conferences and local churches. People were drawn to his gracious demeanor, charismatic personality, and profound thought.[450] Fourthly, Webber created worship programs at several schools and eventually created his own school, IWS. Fifth, although he was educated in historical theology, Webber dedicated his attention to the subject of worship as a historical theologian, as a practical theologian, and as an evangelical, integrating theological principles with ecclesial practices that reflect what he considers to be the biblical and historical spirit of evangelicalism. Finally, Webber's work is distinct from his contemporaries in that he built an "ancient-future" practical worship theology specifically for the purpose of helping evangelicals recapture Christological content in worship. Webber believed that worship is rooted in the person and victorious work of Jesus Christ. He thus promoted ancient practices of worship to evangelicals not because they were historic but rather because he believed they preserved Christological content, embodied a Christological narrative, and fostered Christological participation in worship.

Amidst his sharp critique of evangelical worship, Webber found a clear vision for worship in writings from the early church. He believed that the foundational years of Christianity held significant answers to the challenges facing contemporary evangelical practices. Although Webber acknowledged critiques could be made of the early church era, he posited that the epoch of the first few centuries of the church is a paramount historical period concerning the church's deliberate formulation of rituals

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[448] See: Donald G. Bloesch, *The Church: Sacraments, Worship, Ministry, and Mission* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2002), 116-145; Thomas Oden, *Turning Around the Mainline: How Renewal Movements are Changing the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 183-191; Francis Schaeffer, *True Spirituality: How to Live Your Life for Jesus Moment by Moment* (Wheaton: Tyndale Elevate, 2001), 95-111; Thomas, *Evangelical is Not Enough*, 41-62; Sally Morgenthaler, *Worship Evangelism: Inviting Unbelievers into the Presence of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 17-31. For perspectives from John Burke, Mark Driscoll, Dan Kimball, Doug Pagitt, and Karen Ward see Robert Webber, ed., *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches: Five Perspectives* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).

[449] See Webber: *Worship is a Verb: Celebrating God's Mighty Deeds of Salvation*, 2nd ed. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1992), ix-xii; *Planning Blended Worship*, 190-205; *Renew Your Worship*, ix-xi.

[450] Ibid.

that have come to define its worship across the centuries.[451] His research of the early church's worship revealed three dominant features:

> 1) The *content* of Christian worship was Jesus Christ in his fulfillment of the Old Testament, his birth, his life, his death, his resurrection, his ascension, and his return.
> 2) The *structure* of Christian worship was Word and sacrament, including prayers, hymns, doxologies, benedictions, and responses.
> 3) The *context* in which worship took place was the Christian church, called by God to worship, where each member played his or her part and where God spoke and the worshiper responded. This worship was highlighted by sign-acts (baptism and Eucharist).[452]

Webber employed the categories of content, structure, and context to understand early Christian worship and to create a taxonomy for evaluating worship. He saw his taxonomy as a valuable tool for examining worship across different times and places. Using "style" and "context" interchangeably, Webber viewed style as a contextual issue influenced by cultural factors, rather than a marketable one. He believed that worship style should vary according to cultural changes to enhance congregational participation and engagement. Each congregation must discern a style that suits its members and reflects the community's character and personality.

5.1 The theological content of worship

Webber's examination of the content, structure, and context of worship in the ancient church led to him to conclude that the theological substance of worship is the proclamation of and participation in the Christ-event. This is offered through the pattern of Word and Table and experienced in the congregated church. For Webber, the dual liturgical action in the ancient church's worship showcased a purity of focus and motive.[453] Instead of trying to achieve something through worship, such as evangelism, education, or appeal, the ancient church was concerned with what worship represented: the person and work of Jesus Christ.[454] "This kind of worship is not goal driven, but Christ-driven." he writes, "And when Christ is the center of worship, all of the goals for worship are achieved: Christ-centered worship educates, evangelizes, heals, develops spirituality—and is most enjoyable."[455]

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[451] See Webber, *Common Roots*, 77-90. Cf. Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 67-86, 149-149-165, 167-178.

[452] Webber, *Worship Old and New*, 62. Cf. Webber, *Worship Old and New*, revised ed., 151; Webber, *Planning Blended Worship*, 21.

[453] Webber, *Worship Old and New*, 62.

[454] Webber, *Signs of Wonder*, 33.

[455] Ibid., 33.

Webber maintained that Christological participation should influence worship practice in the contemporary church. First and foremost, worship should be grounded in the character and actions of God made known through Jesus Christ. The church's worship is to God, for God, and because of God. God is to be worshiped simply for the fact that he is God and therefore worthy of praise and adoration. Likewise, God is to be worshiped for his great and mighty acts of redemption in Jesus Christ, and because of his steadfast, covenantal love.[456]

Webber also identified a striking narrative quality in the worship of the ancient church. In worship, he argued, the church comes together to celebrate God and to remember God's mighty acts of salvation through Jesus Christ. In its celebration, worship proclaims and reenacts the story of God. Moreover, through the words and actions of worship the church participates in retelling and dramatizing the Gospel. "The church is all about the continuation of God's narrative in this world," Webber writes in *Ancient-Future Worship*.[457] "Worship gathers to sing, tell, and enact God's story of the world from its beginning to its end."[458] Webber saw an explicit and indispensable narrative quality in the worship of the ancient church; thus, he argued this narrative quality was the central feature, or the content, that should define worship in any era. As the people of God gather to both remember God's mighty acts of salvation and anticipate God's ultimate restoration of the cosmos in their worship, the entire spectrum of the Christian faith is celebrated. When the content is altered, the story becomes fragmented, and worship is corrupted. Webber thus states that God's narrative of love and salvation shown forth in the person and work of Jesus Christ should be the foundation of the unchanging theological substance of worship. He reflects:

> Worship is all about how God, with his own two hands—the incarnate Word and the Holy Spirit—has rescued the world. The biblical God is an active God—he creates, becomes active in the world to rescue his creation from sin and death, and restores the world to paradise and beyond in the new heavens and new earth. The centerpiece of his saving action is the incarnation, death, and resurrection, where sin and death have been defeated and where the deliverance of creatures and creation, which will be consummated at the end of history, will begin. In the meantime, worship is the witness to this vision. In worship we *remember* God's redemptive work in history . . . We also *anticipate* the future. Worship connects the past with the future, for it is here in worship where God recasts his original vision.[459]

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[456] Webber, *Common Roots*, 84-85.
[457] Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 39.
[458] Ibid., 40.
[459] Ibid., 66.

Remembrance and anticipation are key features of Webber's narrative concept of worship. Through a convergence of past and future, the church in the present discovers its place in the narrative of God's covenantal love and redemption of the world. Worship tells a polemical narrative that claims the world, its history, and its future belong to God. Webber affirms that when worship remembers the past it praises God by proclaiming God's work in history, especially in and through Jesus Christ, whereby he has already begun to restore the world.[460] Likewise, when worship anticipates the future, it witnesses to the victory of Christ over all powers and principalities and proclaims his rule over creation as Lord of the universe.[461] The proclamations and actions done in worship are thus the means by which a congregation is able to participate in God's story. Again, Webber emphasizes the story of God's creation and redemption as the critical content of any service of worship:

> The story is *remembered* through Scripture reading and preaching; the story is *anticipated* through the Table. The story is also the very substance of our singing, praying, and testimonies. It shapes our environment, determines how the arts are employed, and informs everything else we do. And, though God is the subject of worship, acting among the people, it is the *people* of God who remember God's story, not as an audience, but as true participants in the very story that tells the truth about the world and all of human existence. The two sides of this substance in worship are the content, which is God's story, and the energy with which God's story is remembered and anticipated by the people.[462]

Webber's emphasis on the participatory nature of worship is notable, especially as it orients the experiential dynamic of worship away from personal emotions and stimuli and toward the experience of the person and work of Jesus Christ. As a self-proclaimed evangelical, Webber remains steadfast in valuing experience as a crucial component of worship and perceives it as one of evangelicalism's core strengths.[463] Nonetheless, he aspires to anchor this evangelical experience in more objective foundations. Drawing inspiration from the practices of the ancient church, Webber contends that immersing oneself in God's narrative—primarily through proclamation and deed, and especially in the Word and sacrament—facilitates a tangible encounter with the Christ-event for the worshiper in contemporary settings.[464] He writes:

> Although worship dramatizes an event which happened long ago, it brings that event into the present by the power of the Holy Spirit. In

[460] Ibid., 61.
[461] Ibid., 61.
[462] Ibid., 107.
[463] Webber, *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail*, 168-171.
[464] Webber, *Worship is a Verb*, 31.

> each worship experience, I am present in the actual event. Each worship experience contains the fullness of the birth, life, teachings, ministry, death, resurrection, and promised return of Christ. The rites evoke the historical event and bring it into the present.[465]

For Webber, congregational participation adds a crucial and appropriate experiential dynamic to worship. Rightful congregational participation pushes against the evangelical narcissistic subjective experience and leads to a more communal form of worship, in Webber's opinion. In *Ancient-Future Worship*, he asserts, "The focus seems to be on self-generated worship. God is made the object of *my* affection, and worship is measured by how strongly I am able to feel this gratitude and express it to God."[466] What Webber desired instead was for worship to focus on God's mighty work of redemption, bringing the whole church into an experience of God's saving grace as it participated together in the proclamation and reenactment of God's story. When worship focuses on celebrating God's mighty acts, Webber reasoned, the gathered congregation becomes so in tune with God and with God's reconciliation through Christ that Christ's death and resurrection become a lived experience within the worshiper.[467] "In Christian worship," he writes, "we are not merely asked to believe in Jesus Christ, but to live, die, and be resurrected again with him . . . When our life story is brought up into the story of Christ's life, death, and resurrection, it then gains meaning and purpose."[468] Webber upheld that personal experience in worship should be rooted in the worshiper's participation in the story of God. He did not dismiss the value of personal experience in worship but saw experience as a valued byproduct rather than the goal of worship. Likewise, Webber saw the experiential nature of worship as more than emotional or intellectual stimulation. Instead, he insisted that from beginning to end worship must be rooted in the formidable experience of the person and work of Jesus Christ as the congregation dwells together in the presence of God. God is active in worship drawing his people into the person and work of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit speaking through the Scriptures and acting through the sacraments. Human acts of corporate worship such as singing, prayer, verbal expression, and personal commitment, among others, are thus responses that arise from the hearts of worshipers due to God's merciful and loving presence. As Webber concludes in *Worship is a Verb*: "Since God is speaking and acting in worship, response to God who speaks and acts is

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[465] Ibid., 120.
[466] Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship,* 84.
[467] Webber, *Worship is a Verb*, 31.
[468] Ibid.

of great importance. In my response, I am once again saying yes to God. As with that initial response when I first heard the Word of God's love and grace, I again respond to him [in worship] in faith and love."[469]

5.2 The liturgical structure of worship

The second component of Webber's worship taxonomy, and another notable component of his theological framework, is the liturgical structure of worship. Although Webber held structure in secondary importance to the content of worship, he nevertheless endorsed structure as a significant area of concern. The structure of worship needs careful attention, Webber argued, since structure gives form to worship's theological substance.[470] Webber believed worship is the primary way the church experiences God's saving work in history, which is why he advocated worship should be oriented around the proclamation and reenactment of God's saving work from creation to final consummation. The reason for Webber's concentration on structure, therefore, was to identify a model that organized patterns and practices of worship intentionally through proclamation and action so the congregation could more fully participate in worship. In his view, the structure of worship outlined a drama in which each person in the congregation was invited to play a part.[471] Participation in the drama is cultivated as structure brings together the many acts of worship into a coherent whole providing direction, facilitating action, and ordering the meeting between God and his people. When each act of worship is treated with intention and care, the structure guides the experience of the worshiping congregation and orients it in God's cosmic narrative.

Webber believed participation in worship was best fostered and guided through a fourfold structure centered in Word and Table. The model of Word and Table was the basic form he saw exemplified in the ancient church's regular worship gathering; however, he also acknowledged that over time the church added to it acts of gathering and sending, establishing a narrative framework that directed congregated worship from beginning to end. While he admitted there was no direct biblical teaching on the structure of worship, i.e. a specific rubric handed down by Jesus or his disciples, Webber noted certain New Testament passages along with early descriptions of worship strongly pointed to Word and Table as the standard practice of the church

[469] Ibid., 125.
[470] Ibid., 61-65.
[471] Webber, *Worship Old and New*, revised ed., 263.

since the church's inception. For example, Webber notes: "The description in Acts 2:42 of the earliest Christian worship recounts how early Christians gathered around the apostles' teaching and the breaking of bread in the context of prayer and fellowship. This passage provides evidence that from its inception, Christian worship had two primary focuses: Word and Table."[472] When adding acts of gathering and sending, adherence to a fourfold model was the stance of the church for the majority of its history, Webber maintained, and thus should continue to be the standard practice of the contemporary church, not simply because of its historic precedent, but chiefly because of the way gathering, Word, Table, and sending represent God's story and facilitate remembrance and anticipation. He observes, "Churches aware of their historical roots celebrate the life-changing Christ-event in four movements: worshipers enter God's presence, hear God speak, celebrate God's work of restoration at the Table, and are sent forth into the world to love and serve the Lord."[473]

Notable in Webber's description above of the fourfold structure is his attention to the posture of the congregation in various stages of the worship service. Because he maintained worship is a dialogue between God and the congregation, Webber acknowledged in the structure both human activity as well as the activity of God. For example, Webber stated that in the gathering God calls his church to worship, assembling the congregation in his presence. The congregation then responds with singing and prayer, preparing their hearts to hear God's Word proclaimed. In the Word God speaks to the congregation in the reading of Scripture and through the sermon. The congregation then responds at the Table with thanksgiving, receiving God's grace and committing to Christ-like transformation. Finally, in the sending God sends the congregation out to continue Christ's ministry in the world. The congregation responds through service and holy living.[474] The fourfold structure thus invites the congregation into a dual liturgical action where God first initiates and then God's people respond.

Webber believed the fourfold structure was a useful resource for any worshiping community, regardless of tradition or background. In *Signs of Wonder*, he observed how many renewing churches aware of their historic roots are reclaiming the ancient form, bringing the content of worship in line with the order of worship.[475] Within the fourfold order, Webber insisted the two acts of Word and Table were among

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[472] See Webber, *Planning Blended Worship*, 20.

[473] Webber, *Signs of Wonder*, 41.

[474] For a further exploration of each the four folds of worship, see Webber, *Worship Old and New*, revised ed., 153-194 and Webber, *Planning Blended Worship*, 50-189.

[475] Webber, *Signs of Wonder*, 41.

the most significant actions of renewing worshiping communities since they are the focal points of proclamation of the Gospel in worship.[476] Preaching the Word proclaims God's story and remembers his mighty deeds of salvation, Webber said, and the Eucharist dramatizes God's story and its anticipated future, ushering the congregation into God's kingdom.[477] As both preaching and the Eucharist celebrate and proclaim Christ, Christ is given to the gathered congregation through them.[478] In the practice of Word and Table, the church hears a declaration of God's almighty grace and then receives from God the grace it needs to go forth as the imitation of Christ to the world. The congregation not only hears God's story in the preaching, but through the Table it also sees God's story as God is disclosed through revelation and incarnation.[479]

Webber describes the Eucharist both theologically and liturgically with a focus on its spiritual and communal significance. Theologically, Webber emphasizes the Eucharist as a sacrament where the real presence of Christ is encountered.[480] It is more than a mere symbol; it is a means through which believers experience the grace and presence of Christ and find healing, restoration, and comfort. He explains that the Eucharist allows believers to participate in the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection, re-presenting the Paschal Mystery and making Christ's sacrifice present and effective in the lives of the faithful today.[481] The Eucharist signifies and actualizes the unity of the Church, binding believers together in the body of Christ and fostering spiritual communion with Christ and one another. Additionally, Webber highlights the Eucharist as a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, an anticipation of the ultimate fulfillment of God's kingdom, looking forward to the return of Christ and the consummation of all things in Him.[482]

Liturgically, Webber outlines the structure of the Eucharistic celebration, as the preparation of the gifts, the Eucharistic prayer, the consecration, and the distribution of Communion.[483] He describes the liturgical actions and symbols used in the Eucharist, such as the bread and wine, the altar, and the communal aspects of the celebration, noting that these elements are not just functional but carry deep symbolic meaning that connects the faithful to the spiritual realities they represent. Webber emphasizes the

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[476] Webber, *Worship Old and New*, revised ed., 98.
[477] Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 177.
[478] Webber, *Worship is a Verb*, 19.
[479] Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 106.
[480] Ibid., 141.
[481] Ibid., 146-147.
[482] Ibid., 141.
[483] Webber, *Planning Blended Worship*, 132-135.

importance of active participation by the congregation in the liturgical celebration, including singing, responding, praying, and receiving Communion, which are all seen as vital to experiencing the fullness of the Eucharistic mystery.[484] The Eucharist is thus portrayed as a transformative act of worship, where through the rituals and prayers, believers are invited into a deeper relationship with Christ, experiencing spiritual renewal and empowerment for Christian living.

In sum, Webber suggests that, through Word and Table, the service is ordered so the gathered congregation can experience the story of God's saving work.[485] The two acts foster a vision of the whole story of God, including creation, fall, incarnation, death, resurrection, ascension, church, the kingdom, and the promise of the new heavens and new earth accomplished through Jesus Christ.[486] The covenantal relationship of God and his people is expressed through the whole of worship, therefore, displaying the character of the God who first loved so that his people may respond in love.

5.3 The varied style of worship

The final category in Webber's worship taxonomy is the context of worship, which he sometimes refers to as "style." Indeed, style was important to Webber, which is why he included it in his worship taxonomy. Because evangelical and mainline churches were so engrossed in debates over style at the end of the twentieth century, Webber could not and did not ignore its significance. His goal, however, was to keep style in its rightful place, namely as a contextual concern tertiary to the content and structure of worship. Moreover, Webber sought to suppress arguments over style in the church by shifting the conversation away from preferential matters and toward cultural concerns.

Webber viewed the context of worship as the atmosphere in which the content and structure of worship are implemented.[487] Because worship is rooted in participatory proclamation and reenactment of the story of God, Webber advocated the contextualization of worship should be open and flexible based on cultural dynamics within the local congregation such as ethnicity, generation, background, and preference in order to ensure the Gospel was communicated clearly in any worship setting and to safeguard participatory engagement in worship.[488] He insisted the content and structure

[484] Ibid., 135-138.
[485] Webber, *Worship Old and New*, revised ed., 150.
[486] Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 141.
[487] Webber, *Worship Old and New*, revised ed., 151.
[488] Ibid., 263.

of worship should not be altered; however, Webber believed context is subject to considerable variety since it is relative to the ever-shifting patterns of culture, differing according to time and place.[489] For the historic faith to be accessible to the contemporary church, contextualization is necessary.

5.4 A blended approach to worship

In the above examination of Webber's theological framework of worship, four principles were identified as central to his work: one, the return to historic Christianity rooted in the earliest expressions of the church (historic-rootedness); two, the recovery of God's narrative in the worship of the church (narrative quality); three, the active participation of the congregation in worship (participatory engagement); and four, the recalibration of the experiential dynamic of evangelical worship in the person and work of Christ (evangelical experience). These principles undergird Webber's understanding of the theological substance of worship, which he articulates as the proclamation and re-enactment of the Christ-event experienced in the congregated church through gathering, Word, Table, and sending. When contextualized in contemporaneous ways in a local congregation, Webber supposed the historic theological substance of worship held potential for considerable church renewal. He thus reasoned renewal was not to be found in new styles and forms but rather through the reclamation of historic theological substance in worship done in contemporary ways.[490]

By the end of the twentieth century, changes in worship had impacted nearly every branch of the church. A growing desire in many churches for revitalization of the Christian faith, as well as a mounting dissatisfaction among laity with practices of worship brought about an unprecedented revolution in the church giving rise to a myriad of renewal movements. While many churches followed a singular trend, Webber instead sought a way to mediate between the various movements.[491] First, he advocated for spiritual growth through contemporary dialogue with biblical and early church traditions amid rapid changes.[492] He emphasized that worship must stay rooted in essential theological principles to foster dynamic Christian spirituality and to prevent the contemporary church from falling into the pitfalls he observed in his evangelical

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[489] Webber, *Planning Blended Worship*, 21.

[490] Ibid., 17, 28.

[491] See Paul E. Engle and Paul A. Basden, eds., *Exploring the Worship Spectrum* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004). The book includes conversations between figures such as Joe Horness, Sally Morgenthaler, and Robert Webber on various approaches to worship at the turn of the turn of the twenty-first century.

[492] Webber, *Signs of Wonder*, 10.

upbringing. Secondly, he insisted worship communities should learn from traditions other than their own, namely because he saw something missing in both traditional and contemporary approaches to renewal. The traditional church was missing the sense of a real and vital experience with God. The contemporary movement was missing substance. Webber therefore believed a blended approach that brought together the content of liturgy and the experience of the contemporary movement would foster a dynamic and genuine experience with God.[493] Such cross-fertilization held potential to stimulate worship in new directions and engage the congregation in fresh expressions of historic practices.[494]

Webber found two movements to be particularly significant in his modeling of a blended approach to worship renewal: the Liturgical Renewal movement and the Pentecostal-based Praise and Worship movement.[495] The Liturgical Renewal movement began as a nineteenth-century effort to reform worship. Particularly, in the Church of England a faction known as the Tractarians arose in Oxford that desired to incorporate High-Church principles in Anglican worship. Their goal was to bring liturgical renewal to the Anglican Church, binding it more closely to Roman Catholic practices through a resurgence of interest in the essence, spirit, and shape of ancient Christian worship as practiced and understood by the church of the first four centuries. This approach was also reflected in Vatican II, where the Roman Catholic Church sought to renew its worship practices by returning to early Christian traditions and emphasizing active participation and engagement from the congregation.

Ultimately, the impact of these two nineteenth century Liturgical Renewal movements spread to Protestant mainline churches. Over the next thirty years every traditional mainline denomination imitated the reforms particularly of Vatican II and produced their own new worship books, collections of liturgical resources, and hymnbooks. For example, the Lutheran Church produced a new combined hymn and service book called *The Lutheran Book of Worship* in 1978, the Episcopal Church produced a new *Book of Common Prayer* in 1979, the United Methodist Church produced the *United Methodist Book of Worship* in 1992, and the Presbyterians

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[493] Robert E. Webber, "Blended Worship," in Basden, *Exploring the Worship Spectrum*, 178-179.

[494] Webber, *Signs of Wonder*, 145.

[495] See Webber, *Worship Old and New*, revised ed., 121-134; Webber, *Signs of Wonder*, 43-56; Webber, *Twenty Centuries of Christian Worship*, 105-141. Notably, the second volume of Webber's *Complete Library of Christian Worship* provides an extensive examination of renewal movements that took place in the twentieth century. The scope of content in the volume has gone unmatched in any worship resource to date.

produced a book of liturgical resources called *The Book of Services* in 1993.[496] The Liturgical Renewal movement was not a denomination-specific or monolithic movement. While certain denominational distinctives were maintained in each tradition's produced liturgical resources, Webber noticed an emerging consensus on the ancient pattern of the fourfold structure of worship among the mainline churches as they sought to bring reform based on the spirit and practice of worship in the early centuries. Additionally, the Eucharist became more prominent in the weekly service, as did the significance of the liturgical calendar throughout the whole of the year.[497] The reform taking place through the Liturgical Renewal movement was based in historic precedent and practice. Its impact on evangelicalism was minimal, however, partly due to the ingrained prejudice against Roman Catholic forms of worship amongst evangelicals. Bridging the gap between the Liturgical Renewal movement and evangelicalism, Webber based his reform on fundamental notions of the Liturgical Renewal movement, which he offered to evangelicals in a simple, popular, and compelling way. Webber highlighted elements such as the prominence of the Eucharist in worship, the emphasis on participation, and the liturgical rhythm of the church year to show evangelical churches how dialoging with other traditions held potential for more mature expressions of Christian faith and spirituality.[498]

The second of the two movements significant to Webber's blended model was the Pentecostal-based Praise and Worship movement. The Praise and Worship movement originated in the Latter Rain revival of the late 1940s but began to gain wider prominence in Pentecostal circles in the late 1970s and early 1980s.[499] By the last decade of the twentieth century the movement spread and was picked up by a number of non-Pentecostal churches exploring a more contemporary style of worship.[500] Considering the movement's origins in Pentecostalism, Webber noted the Praise and Worship movement developed from several trends in the sixties and early seventies among churchgoers who "felt a concern for the immediacy of the Spirit, a desire for intimacy, and a persuasion that music and informality must connect with people of a post-Christian culture."[501] In Webber's examination, a major feature of the Praise and

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[496] Webber, *Planning Blended Worship*, 15.

[497] Webber, *Worship Old and New*, revised ed., 126.

[498] Webber, *Signs of Wonder*, 6-9.

[499] Lim and Ruth, *Lovin' on Jesus*, 14. While Lim and Ruth's research details the origins of the Praise and Worship movement in the 1940s, Webber himself does not seem to have become aware of the movement until its explosion in the 1980s. See Webber, *Worship Old and New*, revised ed., 128-132.

[500] Lim and Ruth, *Lovin' on Jesus*, 14.

[501] Webber, *Worship Old and New*, revised ed., 128.

Worship movement was the intentional distinguishing of praise from worship. The movement identified praise as a ministry offered to God for God's mighty deeds in history, while worship was simply adoring and extoling God for who he is.[502] The pattern of the Praise and Worship movement was thus the gradual shift from praise to worship, seeking greater degrees of intimacy with God usually through the singing of contemporary choruses. Typology from the Old Testament tabernacle or temple was often employed to convey the experiential movement from the "outer courts" to the "inner courts" and ultimately to the "holy of holies."[503]

Webber believed the Praise and Worship tradition offered to the church an emphasis on the participatory and experiential dynamic of worship, which was particularly evident in the musical component of the movement. Additionally, Webber valued the movement's openness to the spontaneous work of the Spirit through the freedom of physical acts such as the raising of hands, dancing, the laying on of hands for prayer, and the restoration of healing in the context of worship.[504] He recognized these aspects of Pentecostal worship were not simply stylistic preferences but had roots in practices of the early church. Vestiges of the actions appear in liturgical books of worship throughout history, he noted. Thus, much of what the Pentecostal-based Praise and Worship movement contributed to worship renewal had historic precedent, reintroducing practices forgotten in later manifestations of the church.[505]

In his longing to see all churches experience the fullness of Christian worship and spirituality, Webber blended essential and distinctive elements of the Liturgical Renewal and Praise and Worship movements together. While each of the movements reflected a particular tradition of worship, Webber believed God desired to use a "borrowing" between the traditions to bring about renewal in the church.[506] He identified several features that characterized a blended model of worship, which he advocated as the proper pathway to renewal: first, there was restored commitment to the sacraments, especially the Eucharist; second, there was continued commitment to the personal experience of Jesus Christ's work through the proclamation of the Word and ministry of the Holy Spirit; third, there was increased commitment to the church's historic structure and form, namely the fourfold pattern of worship; fourth, there was interest in integrating bodily action in worship; fifth, there was exposure to styles and

[502] Ibid., 129.
[503] Ibid., 130-131.
[504] Webber, *Signs of Wonder*, 54.
[505] Ibid., 54.
[506] Ibid., 55.

practices from various traditions while ecclesial distinctives were maintained; and sixth, there was an emphasis on God's healing power. For Webber, a blended approach to worship did not mean the abandonment of a particular tradition but rather a convergence of streams. He saw the work of God as inclusive, not exclusive, producing from each tradition gifts God had already authenticated.[507] Important matters such as sacrament, liturgy, healing, and the work of ministry remain intact as the church stays grounded in its historic content and moves forward with fresh expression, allowing the Spirit's power to be released in every facet of the church's life.

Undoubtedly, the significance of Webber's work as a worship theologian at the turn of the twenty-first century was his insistence that biblically and theologically sound worship represents the story of the Triune God while standing in continuity with the historic church and remaining pertinent to the contemporary culture. It was an insistence he pressed upon countless workshop participants, readers, and students. His method of blended worship moved beyond trivial arguments over traditional and contemporary preferences and encouraged thoughtful theological, historical, and cultural reflection on worship. It also set the pervasive issue of style in its proper place—as a matter of fostering participatory engagement. Any movement toward convergence would take a great amount of time and intentional conversation, he acknowledged. Nevertheless, Webber persistently advocated his blended model for the remainder of his life with confidence and grace as American evangelicalism faced an uncertain future at the turn of the twenty-first century.

6. Conclusion

The emphasis Webber places on both experience and tradition in his practical worship theology is significant. Evangelicalism, with its soteriological focus and emphasis on personal relationship with Christ, appeals to Webber; yet, Webber's critique suggests that a robust spiritual experience must be tethered to sound theological doctrine to prevent inadvertent drifts into heterodoxy. His plea for a return to historical liturgical practices, therefore, stems from his belief in the transformative power of traditions that have sustained Christian communities for centuries. In highlighting the lack of any traditional structures in contemporary evangelicalism, Webber not only underscores the significance of historical Christian traditions but also underscores the danger of neglecting them. He observes an increasing focus in evangelical worship on human

[507] See Sly and Boosahda, "The Convergence Movement," in Webber, *Twenty Centuries of Christian Worship*, 134-135.

experience and preference, factors that overshadow what he believes should be the primary focus: the person and work of Jesus Christ. Considering these concerns, Webber sought to present a practical approach to worship that ensures worshipers are rooted in theological doctrine while actively engaged in a transformative relationship with Christ, safeguarding the faith against fleeting cultural trends. In essence, Webber's practical worship theology emerged as an invitation for evangelicals to rediscover the richness of the Christian heritage while nurturing a vibrant, personal, and communal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Given Webber's approach to evangelical reform, several critiques arise, particularly concerning evangelical fundamentalist, Biblicist, and inerrantist perspectives. One primary concern is the perceived tension between Webber's emphasis on early Christian tradition and the doctrine of biblical authority. By elevating early church practices, Webber risks undermining the Bible's position as the ultimate source of Christian belief and practice. Additionally, his call to shift evangelical worship away from a focus on personal experiences of salvation may provoke unease among those who see individual conversion experiences as central to evangelical identity.

Webber's skepticism toward individualism, rationalism, and subjective experience—qualities he associates with modernism—may also be controversial. For some evangelicals, these traits are viewed as essential in defending the faith against secularism and other modern challenges. They therefore might perceive Webber's critique as a potential weakening of the very tools needed to uphold and protect the faith in a modern context. This could lead to questions about whether Webber's approach dilutes or compromises the distinctives of evangelicalism rather than reinforcing them.

Moreover, Webber's criticism that evangelicals have reduced worship to intellectual and emotional components might be met with resistance, especially since many evangelicals, including those in the Pentecostal tradition, see these elements as crucial for a profound encounter with God. Intellectual engagement in worship is often valued for deepening understanding of Christian doctrine and theology, fostering greater contemplation of God. Similarly, emotional responses in worship are seen not as self-indulgent but as genuine expressions of faith and devotion, providing a means to seek God's presence and guidance. Critics might argue that Webber's approach undervalues these aspects, which they consider vital for nurturing a holistic and meaningful worship experience.

The tensions between historical emphasis and biblical authority, the reorientation of worship away from personal experiences, and skepticism toward certain aspects of modernity all contribute to a complex landscape where Webber's proposals for evangelical renewal may not readily find acceptance. Nevertheless, the critiques also highlight the diversity of thought within evangelicalism and the ongoing dialogues on how to maintain and express the Christian faith in an ever-evolving world. It is within these discussions that the vitality of Webber's work is most evident, serving as a catalyst for reflection and conversation. While his ideas may not be universally embraced, they contribute to the ongoing evolution of evangelicalism, prompting a reevaluation of established norms and fostering a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between tradition, scripture, personal experience, and contemporary challenges in the pursuit of vibrant and authentic Christian worship.

3. Webber's Practical-Theological Commitments

1. Introduction

The current chapter attempts to answer the following questions: What are the foundational commitments of Webber's practical worship theology? What influenced these commitments? How does Webber's practical worship theology reconcile these commitments within his context? The goal of this chapter is to distinguish and analyze the historical, theological, and practical commitments embodied in Webber's practical worship theology. The chapter relates to principles outlined in Osmer's normative task. According to Osmer, when considering practical theology, the normative task involves interrogating theological concepts and practices by asking the critical question, "What ought to be going on?" [508] The normative task holds paramount importance as it seeks to evaluate and guide contemporary practice while considering established theological truths and traditions. Understanding the normative task not only aids in identifying deviations from those established truths and traditions, but also illuminates the pathway for rectifying misalignments within the implementation of theological practice. In a similar manner, this chapter seeks to identify normative commitments in Webber's practical worship theology.

2. Webber's evangelical concept

Navigating the intricacies of Webber's practical worship theology involves exploring its foundational constructs and commitments. A key aspect is the interplay between Webber's evangelical commitments and his interpretation of the evangelical landscape. This relationship highlights how Webber carefully integrated and applied theological norms within his evangelical context. Additionally, it provides insight into how Webber's practical theology, rooted in an evangelical perspective, aims to reform and recalibrate that very tradition, which explains his focus on the American evangelical tradition in his work.

Because he is familiar with and committed to evangelicalism, Webber preserves an inherent evangelical character in his work in worship. If for no other reason, Webber's practical worship theology maintains an evangelical identity because it is within the context of the American evangelical tradition that his worship theology emerged. Webber was a committed evangelical who spoke to an American evangelical

[508] See Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 14.

audience, a point he makes clear in the opening lines of his book, *Common Roots: A Call to Evangelical Maturity*: "This book is about evangelical Christianity. It is written to evangelicals by an evangelical who speaks from inside the movement."[509] Because he is an insider to the American evangelical movement, Webber labored as an agent of evangelical reform, especially in the field of worship. Although Webber does not claim to write specifically to an evangelical audience in all his works, the evangelical identity he maintains throughout his career is undeniable. Many of Webber's early publications address evangelicalism, such as his organization of and leadership in the Chicago call in 1977 and his books *Reshaping Evangelical Higher Education* (1972, with Marvin K. Myers and Lawrence Richards), *The Orthodox Evangelicals: Who They Are and What They Are Saying* (1978, with Donald Bloesch), *Common Roots: A Call to Evangelical Maturity* (1978), *The Moral Majority: Right or Wrong?* (1981), and *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail: Why Evangelicals are Attracted to the Liturgical Church* (1985). Late in his career, Webber published *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World* (2002), a book that explicitly addresses the changing nature of evangelicalism in the twenty-first century. One of Webber's final acts before he died in 2007 was the creation of an ecumenical evangelical manifesto entitled "The Call to an Ancient-Evangelical Future," in which he urges evangelicals "to strengthen their witness through a recovery of the faith articulated by the consensus of the ancient Church and its guardians in the traditions of Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, the Protestant Reformation and the Evangelical awakenings."[510] Based on his lifelong commitment to being involved in evangelical dialogue, it is clear Webber considered himself, his work, and his audience to be evangelical; however, Webber's writings on evangelicalism demonstrate a particular conception of what it means to be an evangelical, especially as he understands the historic sense of the term. It is important, therefore, to examine and interpret Webber's own understanding of the evangelical label and to see how his evangelical concept influences the Christological commitments he seeks to preserve in worship.

Navigating the intricate landscape of evangelicalism is a daunting task, as the multifaceted nature of the movement defies easy categorization. Since no definitive ecclesiological or structural clarity exists among evangelicals, categorization and conceptualization of evangelicalism is problematic and often tends to be approached

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[509] Webber, *Common Roots*, 13.

[510] "The Call to an Ancient-Evangelical Future," *Christianity Today*, last modified September 1, 2006, https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2008/august/robert-webbers-ancient-future-legacy.html.

one of two ways—either through an external rubric, i.e. examining identity and adherence through specific criteria of beliefs and/or religious practices (i.e., David Bebbington's quadrilateral, Gallup's three-fold questionnaire, The Barna Group's nine-fold commitments of evangelicals, or George Marsden's statement that an evangelical is "anyone who likes Billy Graham"), or by self-definition, (i.e., asking someone whether or not one considers one's self to be an evangelical and then asking the same person to explain what the term means).[511] The first approach is challenging since lack of ecclesiology and structure prohibits consensus on what the rightful criteria of an evangelical is or should be. The second approach is problematic because it is too subjective, leading to as many different definitions and qualifications as the number of people questioned. There are times when self-definition can be helpful, however, such as when studying a particular evangelical expression, figure, or interpretation. Self-definition offers insight to the specific characteristics and qualifications the expression or figure finds valuable and distinctive.

Two of Webber's works, *Common Roots* (1978) and *The Younger Evangelicals* (2002), provide insight to Webber's own interpretation of the evangelical term, especially how he situates evangelical identity in an ancient historic conception rather than a modern one. In these two books, Webber offers a taxonomy that categorizes the evangelical term biblically, theologically, historically, and sociologically.[512] A thorough assessment of Webber's evangelical taxonomy reveals two features he believes represent a historic yet enduring evangelical identity—its Christocentric commitment and *kerygmatic* persistence. Webber's taxonomy reveals what he believes to be characteristic of the evangelical identity and gives insight to why he situates evangelical activity in Christological proclamation and praxis, especially in the practical worship theology he develops as a corrective for American evangelicalism.

2.1 Biblical meaning

The first category in Webber's evangelical taxonomy is the term's biblical meaning. In this category, Webber seeks to understand the significance rather than the usage of "evangelical" in the Bible. He does not cite any scriptural passages as he examines the

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[511] See: David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), 2-3; Frank Newport, "Who Are the Evangelicals?," *Gallup News*, June 24, 2005, accessed February 8, 2018, http://news.gallup.com/poll/17041/who-evangelicals.aspx; "Survey Explores Who Qualifies as an Evangelical," *Barna*, Research Releases in Culture and Media, January 18, 2007, accessed February 8, 2018, https://www.barna.com/research/survey-explores-who-qualifies-as-an-evangelical/; George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 6.

[512] See Webber, *Common Roots* and *The Younger Evangelicals*.

term but instead defines evangelical more generally, making note of the word's Greek roots. He writes in *Common Roots*: "The word 'evangelical' comes from the Greek word *euangélion*. A glance at any Greek lexicon shows that the word in its various forms is translated as good tidings, good news, or gospel."[513] Webber's statement is a succinct description of evangelical, and it traces the word back to its simplest and most axiomatic definition. Although he does not address its etymology, Webber is right to note that the Greek word *euangélion* can be translated into English as good tidings, good news, or gospel since the word is a combination of the Greek words *eu*, which means "good," and *ángelos*, which means "messenger." Put together, *euangélion* means "one bringing good news," or simply, "good news."[514]

An important feature that emerges in Webber's work related to the etymological roots of *euangélion*/evangelical, is how *kerygma* is essential to the term. The word *kerygma* comes from the ancient Greek word meaning "proclamation." In the New Testament, the word is used to reference apostolic proclamation of Jesus Christ and may refer either to the content proclaimed or the act of proclaiming. Thus, *kerygma* is essential to the concept of *euangélion* because "good news" is something to be brought by someone and proclaimed. The socio-historic usage of *euangélion* emphasizes this *kerygmatic* character. In the Greek, *euangélion* is used to denote a weighty and authoritative message, usually in reference to an official royal declaration or political victory.[515] In the Roman context of the New Testament writers, however, *euangélion* has more religious significance. *Euangélion* is used to refer to persons who announce the presence (or coming) of the Roman emperor or to those who travel the empire to proclaim the emperor's accession to the throne.[516] Such pronouncements are important in the context of the Roman empire because veneration of the emperor is part and parcel to the emperor cult of Rome. The emperor is revered as a divine being, as well as the head, the spirit, and the protector of the empire. The announcement of his presence and the proclamation of his accession are "good news"; thus, the messengers of the emperor serve as *euangélion* to the people, bringing the *kerygma* of his good

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[513] Ibid., 25.

[514] Walter Bauer and Fredrick William Danker, "Euangélion," in *A Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 4th ed. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1957), 68.

[515] *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, s.v. "Euangélion," accessed September 3, 2022, https://www.britannica.com/topic/biblical-literature/New-Testament-literature#ref598074. Cf. Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich, and Geoffrey W. Bromiley, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament: Abridged in One Volume* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 10-11.

[516] *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, s.v. "Euangélion."

news of his reign.[517] The early Christians saw themselves in a similar light. As *euangélion*, they were tasked with the *kerygma* of Christ's work and reign, not only with their words but also with their lives.

While Webber does not mention the Roman nor the early Christian usage of *euangélion* in his evangelical definition, he does emphasize a *kerygmatic* quality of the ancient church, thus rooting the evangelical term in an historic evangelical identity. Webber states in *Common Roots*:

> The content of this gospel is contained particularly in the *kerygma* of the early church, which... includes first the insistence that the age of fulfillment is shown by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah: that in virtue of His resurrection He is exalted as Lord; that the Holy Spirit's presence in the church is a token of God's favor toward his people; that Christ will come again as Judge and Savior; and that, on condition of repentance, forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit are offered, with an assurance of salvation.[518]

Webber's accent on *kerygma* is significant. For Webber, commitment to the proclamation of the good news of Christ's rule and reign is, in the most elemental sense, the character of an evangelical.[519] Such *kerygmatic* proclamation relies on doctrinal commitments about Jesus and his work, namely the centrality of the Christ-event in the work of forgiveness and salvation. Elsewhere he posits, "In the broadest biblical sense [evangelical] refers to anyone who believes in the message that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the good news of the forgiveness of sin..."[520] The message of Jesus is not one that changes or can be changed, but rather, as he describes: "This is the gospel which was preached by Paul, Mark, Barnabus, Peter, and Stephen, and was responded to with enthusiasm in Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth, Rome, and many other places throughout the Roman Empire."[521] Evangelical *kerygma*, therefore, must comply to the basic tenets of the Gospel message as proclaimed by the apostles and passed down through the church.

A noteworthy characteristic in Webber's biblical interpretation of the evangelical term is how he underscores the importance of human response to the message of the gospel. Associating evangelicalism with an enthusiastic response to the preaching of the gospel, (i.e., *kerygma*), Webber recognizes there is and always has been an experiential aspect of evangelicalism. He appears to view a confessional

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[517] Ibid.
[518] Webber, *Common Roots*, 25.
[519] Ibid., 26.
[520] Ibid., 33.
[521] Ibid., 25.

approach, where one must confess orally to a church establishment rather than believe experientially, as uncharacteristic of evangelical faith. Yet, while he emphasizes an existential element of evangelical spirituality, Webber does not posit evangelical faith as subjective experience. Rather, he anchors experiential faith in Christological *kerygma* and on the revelatory experience of worship in early Christianity. His is a grounded subjectivity that participates in the person and work of Jesus Christ. This is why Webber equates the spirit of early church *kerygma*—i.e., the death, resurrection, and second coming of Jesus Christ, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the assurance of salvation through repentance—with personal experience of the gospel. Evangelicals are connected to the biblical tradition by means of the word *euangélion*. In a biblical sense, for Webber "anyone who stands in the biblical tradition and preaches this gospel is evangelical no matter which denomination he belongs to—whether Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, one of the major Protestant denominations, or any of the many churches which stand in the free church tradition."[522] His evangelical conception is categorized by a *kerygmatic* identity rather than an ecclesial one.

Despite his more ecumenical view, Webber situates the evangelical term in an ancient ecclesial context in contrast to its being a later, modern church movement via his reference to the *kerygma* of the early church. Given his biblical schema of the evangelical identity, Webber faults Kenneth Kantzer, William Pannell, Bill Bentley, Martin E. Marty, and Sydney E. Ahlstrom for "tracing the origins of evangelicalism as a movement to no earlier than the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation, except for an occasional reference to Augustine." Webber writes, "This strange silence toward the ancient and medieval church could lead one to believe that the history of God's *real* people began in the sixteenth century."[523] Webber's statement also stands contrary to David Bebbington, who seats the origins of evangelicalism in the eighteenth-century British renewal movement.[524] Webber's narrative of evangelicalism, in contrast, is as old as the church itself. He sets evangelicals in the long line of apostolic commitment to the story of redemption through Jesus Christ. Unlike Bebbington, Webber highlights a longstanding biblical commitment to Christological *kerygma* as typical of the

[522] Ibid., 26. Webber states in *The Younger Evangelicals*: "This common linguistic use belongs to the whole church and to all who affirm Jesus Christ and the gospel." See Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 14.

[523] Webber, *Common Roots*, 15.

[524] See Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 2-19.

evangelical identity instead of defining an evangelical according to a particular historic expression or social development.[525]

2.2 Theological implications

The second category in Webber's evangelical taxonomy concerns the theological implications, or the historical theological connotations of the evangelical term. This category refers to "those who affirm Scripture as the authoritative Word of God and accept the creeds of the early church as accurate reflections of the gospel."[526] Referencing *Christ the Controversialist* by John Stott, Webber establishes a baseline for evangelical doctrines, stating they should be biblical, original, and fundamental. He writes, "They are biblical in the sense that they affirm what the Bible teaches, original because they constitute the apostolic faith, and fundamental in that they are loyal to biblical Christianity."[527] He does not offer any interpretation of this statement, however, nor does he clarify how fidelity to these doctrines is measured. Webber's conclusive remarks in *Common Roots* are of little help but reaffirm his conviction that evangelicalism is constituted by a basic common doctrine: "...in the theological sense [evangelical] includes an affirmation of the doctrines about Jesus which the church has always affirmed."[528] Despite the vagueness of Webber's conclusion, three characteristics surface in his theological interpretation of the evangelical term. First, once again Webber claims the evangelical tradition is centered in the person of Jesus Christ, i.e., it affirms "doctrines about Jesus." Second, Webber asserts that evangelicalism stands on historic principles and creeds, i.e., what "the church has always affirmed." (Although his remarks here are not comprehensive, they are noteworthy since Webber locates evangelicalism in the context of historic orthodox Christianity rather than a deviation from it.) Third, Webber sees the gospel as the point of reference for the evangelical term. He places centrality on the gospel, which is seen in Webber's claim that evangelicals are those who affirm the creeds as accurate reflections of the gospel, contrary to valuing the creeds as important historical declarations or assertions. For Webber, evangelicals are creedal because they are

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[525] Webber's reframing of the evangelical term outside of one historic expression or cultural identity in order to show how it permeates the whole of the church's history is not an original concept. For example, the same approach is seen in the works of C.H. Dodd and Erasmus Middleton, who writings influenced Webber's own work. See C.H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments: Three Lectures with an Appendix on Eschatology and History* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951); Erasmus Middleton, *Biographica Evangelica* (Charleston: Nabu Press, 2010), reprint. Cf., Webber, *Common Roots*, 25-33.

[526] Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 14.

[527] Webber, *Common Roots*, 27.

[528] Ibid., 33.

gospel-centered, a stance that bucks against many anti-creedal evangelical movements, such as Webber's own American Baptist upbringing, who tend to see the creeds as extra-biblical human developments that are unnecessary to the Christian faith.[529]

Within his theological interpretation, Webber offers a narrative of evangelical history. He associates evangelical theology with three main historical accounts of doctrinal development: Martin Luther's four theological convictions, the nine articles of faith developed by the Evangelical Alliance in the mid-nineteenth century, and the five fundamentalist doctrines developed in the twentieth century.[530] Whereas in his biblical categorization Webber is careful not to identify evangelicalism as a post-Reformation ecclesial movement, here he aligns evangelical theology with specific theological developments beginning with the Reformation. He turns first to Luther, noting his four theological convictions of *sola gratia* (grace alone), *sola fide* (faith alone), *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone), and *sola Christus* (Christ alone) as important theological principles of evangelicalism.[531] He observes that Luther's four theological convictions were "clarified, and defined more clearly in the many confessions produced as a result of the Reformation," the most well-known of which were the *Lutheran Augsburg Confession of 1530*, the *Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles of 1563*, and the *Westminster Confession of Faith of 1643*.[532] Webber then turns his attention to the nine articles of faith developed by the Evangelical Alliance in the mid-nineteenth century. He notes that over 800 delegates, representing more than 50 churches, adopted the nine statements of faith of the Evangelical Alliance. As an expansion of Luther's four theological convictions, the nine articles of the Evangelical Alliance included: 1) the divine inspiration, authority, and sufficiency of the Scriptures; 2) the right and duty of private judgment in the interpretation of the Scriptures; 3) the unity of the godhead and the trinity of persons in the godhead; 4) the depravity of human nature; 5) the incarnation of the Son of God and His atonement for the sins of others; 6) the justification of sinners by faith alone; 7) the work of the Holy Spirit as sanctifier; 8) the immortality of the soul, the resurrection of the body, and the final judgment by Jesus Christ; 9) the divine institution of the Christian ministry.[533] Finally, Webber looks at the fundamentalist-modernist debate of the early twentieth century and how it led to the development of the five fundamental doctrines insisted upon by fundamentalists in

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[529] See Webber, *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail*, 13.
[530] Webber, *Common Roots*, 26-27.
[531] Webber, *Common Roots*, 26.
[532] Ibid.
[533] Ibid., 27.

order to "preserve the truth" of the Christian faith: 1) the verbal inspiration of the Bible; 2) the virgin birth of Christ; 3) Christ's substitutionary atonement; 4) Christ's bodily resurrection; 5) Christ's imminent and visible second coming.[534] According to Webber, these five fundamental doctrines "list the doctrines of Christianity which are felt to be essential to the Christian faith."[535] Given his biblical interpretation of the evangelical term, it can be concluded that Webber does not uphold these expressions of doctrine as bounded sets that regulate insiders from outsiders of the evangelical faith; rather, his concern is adherence to the theological teachings of the Church throughout its history on the nature and work of God, specifically the person of Jesus Christ. The historic Christological commitments embedded in the doctrines is what Webber emphasizes as being truly evangelical. All three theological developments he identifies represent the church's responses to issues that challenged historic Christological teachings of the church. Whether it be full participation in the worship of Christ in Roman Catholicism prior to the Reformation or a response to theological liberalism in the nineteenth and twentieth century that denied the supernatural work of Christ, Webber identifies evangelicals as those who hold fast to the doctrines of Christ as articulated in the bible and confirmed by the ancient church.[536]

Webber's rationale for choosing only these three instances in his theological narrative of evangelicalism is unclear. It would be appropriate for him also to include the early ecumenical councils as they would affirm his doctrinal and creedal connection to the church throughout the centuries. Likewise, his framework tends to be biased toward western and European expressions of the church. As a holistic account, the scope of his theological assessment is limited. Webber's examples are more indicative than substantive in identifying an evangelical theology that permeates the church's history. What Webber's theological description does determine, however, is an unwavering commitment among evangelicals to the person and work of Jesus Christ rather than doctrinal specificity. The centrality of biblical and creedal testimony to Christ allows for an evangelical ecumenism that brings together ancient and contemporary church movements and sets the narrative of Christ's saving work as the primary, unchanging feature of the evangelical identity.

2.3 Historic sources

[534] Ibid.
[535] Ibid.
[536] Ibid.

Webber's first two evangelical categories construct a framework for evangelicalism that, as Melanie Ross claims, could easily encompass anyone who claims to be a Christian.[537] He confers an evangelical identity primarily through Christological commitments. In the third category of his evangelical taxonomy, Webber examines a variety of historic sources that influenced evangelical movements. Webber concedes that the diversity of the movements and figures as well as shifts that occurred within many evangelical traditions makes identifying evangelicals quite complex. He specifies that evangelicals do not come from a single historical source and identifies nine major movements over four and a half centuries that produced varying expressions of evangelicalism: the Reformation; Protestant intellectualism; Puritanism; pietism; revivalism and the missionary movement; the Pentecostal movement; dispensationalism; the fundamentalist movement; neo-evangelicalism; and the charismatic movement.[538] He then names a number of divergent strands birthed out of these nine major movements.[539] Webber does not qualify why or how each of these movements are evangelical. Perhaps he trusts the other categories in his taxonomy have given adequate explanation. Nonetheless, he recognizes a common reformational identity among the various evangelical movements throughout the church's history.[540] He writes in *The Younger Evangelicals*, "The *historical* usage of evangelical refers to all those movements in history that have attempted to restore a vital historic Christianity to the church at those moments when the church has become dead in spirit or has departed from the faith of the fathers."[541] Webber names the following as a small sample of those who exemplify this evangelical heritage: the monastic communities in the medieval era, the Protestant Reformation, Puritanism, pietism, the Oxford movement, revivalism, fundamentalism, Pentecostals, Anabaptists, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, Billy Sunday, Donald Bloesch, and Billy Graham.[542] In a sense,

[537] Ross, *Evangelical Versus Liturgical*, 128.
[538] Webber, *Common Roots*, 28.
[539] Ibid.
[540] See Webber: *Common Roots*, 28-29; *The Younger Evangelicals* 14.
[541] Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 14.
[542] See Webber: *Common Roots*, 27-28; *The Younger Evangelicals*, 14.

Webber's list serves as an evangelical genogram.[543] He claims the work of reform as typical of evangelical behavior.[544]

In his examination of the historic sources of evangelical identity, Webber is keen to note the central spirit of renewal active within evangelicalism and to point to important figures and incidents typical of that spirit. Although he does not expand on their reformational work, his historic categorization emphasizes the restorative character of evangelicalism, and that such restoration occurs when the church returns to historic Christianity. Webber's historic categorization is quite broad given how it ranges from the Oxford movement to Puritans and anabaptists. The wide-ranging inclusion is somewhat surprising considering how Anglican historians such as J.R.H. Moorman find evangelicals and the Oxford movement to be at odds with one another due to their differing views on ecclesiology, liturgy, and the sacraments.[545] Webber, however, holds them together due to their commitment to church renewal despite their differing approaches. Although Webber offers no rationale for his historic evangelical list, it is implicit that he sees each of these groups as figures who attempted to restore a vital historic Christianity to the church. For example, the Puritans sought reform through a more heart-felt, primitive, and experiential faith devoid of liturgical trappings. On the other, the Oxford movement sought to restore Christ-centered worship through the reinstatement of historic traditions of faith and their inclusion into High-Church Anglican liturgy and theology. Thus, rather than pitting the two against each other, Webber allows both to coexist within his evangelical concept.

It is notable that Webber does not include any examples from the early church in his catalogue of historic characters and movements, nor does he mention any non-Western or non-Anglo figures.[546] Webber's exclusion of both may be due to a desire to compile a catalogue of historic evangelicals who are more familiar and accessible to his white American evangelical context. Regardless, his historic list sequesters minority voices as well as influential figures in the global south. It also limits the history of the evangelical identity to a white, western context. Webber's omission of the early church

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[543] A genogram is a diagram that illustrates family membership, relationship, and history, revealing hereditary patterns of behavior—often medical and psychological—that run through the family. See: Michael S. Robbins, José Szapocznik, James F. Alexander, and Jamie Miller, "Family Systems Therapy with Children and Adolescents," in *Comprehensive Clinical Psychology*, 5, (1998), 149-183.

[544] To this point, Webber uses the phrase "semper reformada" in relation to the church's need for continual reformation. See Webber, *Worship Old and New*, revised ed., 13.

[545] See J.R.H. Moorman, *The History of the Church in England*, 3rd. ed. (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 1980), 342-343.

[546] Notably, all his examples are male.

is more understandable given his emphasis on recovery of ancient practices and principles in the contemporary church. The ancient church stands as the archetype of Webber's evangelical concept due to its *kerygmatic* character; thus, for Webber, evangelical reform should return to an ancient Christological identity and *kerygmatic* commitment. It can be concluded, then, that the ancient church is absent from his list because Webber views the ancient church as the ideal standard for mature evangelicalism. The theology and practices of the ancient church embody the faith of that later reformational figures and movements seek to reclaim. A return to the Christological, *kerygmatic* character of the historic church thus distinguishes Webber's reformational approach to the faith. For Webber, a church is dead in spirit and has departed from the faith when the focus is on subjective experience rather than participation in Christ. Evangelical reform occurs when movements return to Christological foundations and seek to participate in the proclamation and activity of Christ that is characteristic of an historic evangelical identity.

2.4 Sociological and cultural distinctions

The final category in Webber's evangelical taxonomy is the sociological or cultural distinctions of the term. Webber explains: "A cultural evangelical is defined by the biblical, theological, and historical uses of the term but goes one step further to be rooted in a particular paradigm of thought."[547] Whereas Webber's first three categories can be seen as having a gravitational center they move toward, in this final category Webber recognizes the nuance and elasticity of the evangelical movement, allowing space for contextual concerns to be considered in his evangelical concept. While Webber nods to the diversity of evangelical expressions elsewhere, his sociological category opens the door for cultural nuance within the evangelical identity. Webber does not waver on his prior evangelical principles, as seen in his comment: "a cultural evangelical is defined by the biblical, theological, and historical uses of the term"; however, in his sociological evangelical classification, Webber opens a door for diverse category membership and attempts to avoid being partisan or sectarian. Accordingly, in *Common Roots*, Webber groups together fourteen sub-cultures of evangelicalism to show how evangelicalism can be both centered in Christological identity yet varied in expression: Fundamentalist Evangelicalism; Dispensational Evangelicalism; Conservative Evangelicalism; Nondenominational Evangelicalism; Reformed Evangelicalism; Anabaptist Evangelicalism; Wesleyan Evangelicalism; Holiness

[547] Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 14.

Evangelicalism; Pentecostal Evangelicalism; Charismatic Evangelicalism; Black Evangelicalism; Progressive Evangelicalism; Radical Evangelicalism; and Main-line Evangelicalism.[548] Webber admits that with such diversity, the definition of an evangelical can be so broad as to be meaningless.[549] Thus, in an attempt to be more specific about what holds together unity amid diversity, Webber writes, "All these groups reflect a theological unity at the center – in their confession of Christ and the doctrines which the Protestant church has always believed. But because of their various historical origins and cultural shapes they reflect a diversity of expression in theological particulars and practice in areas where differences of opinion have been tolerated."[550] Webber's statement underscores the centrality of Christological *kerygma* in his interpretation of evangelical identity. For Webber, the unifying evangelical factor is confession of Jesus Christ and "the doctrines which the Protestant church has always believed," which his biblical, historical, and theological work reflect. Nonetheless, Webber adds the sociological category to his taxonomy to take his interpretation one step further. Evangelicals stand not only in the long line of apostolic witness of Jesus Christ, but they also are heirs of a particular contextual movement and tradition that has given meaning and vitality to the term.[551]

Interestingly, Webber's treatment of the fourth category of his evangelical taxonomy varies between *Common Roots* and *The Younger Evangelicals*. Whereas the first three categories are identical in both books, with *The Younger Evangelicals* providing a shortened summary of Webber' work in *Common Roots*, he labels the fourth category in his taxonomy "sociological distinctions" in *Common Roots*, but he labels the category "cultural evangelicals" in *The Younger Evangelicals*. His treatment of sociological distinctions in *Common Roots* addresses diverse category membership within evangelicalism and acknowledges how contextual realities contribute to distinct expressions of the movement. In *The Younger Evangelicals* Webber focuses on cultural paradigm shifts, specifically paradigms of thought.[552] Webber singles out the shift from

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[548] See Webber, *Common Roots*, 32.

[549] Ibid, 31.

[550] Ibid.

[551] Ibid.

[552] The variance in Webber's work is understandable given the twenty-four-year gap between the publication of the two books. While the basis of his evangelical concept does not change, (i.e., Christological *kerygma*), Webber nuances his concept differently in *The Younger Evangelicals* based on the cultural shift that occurred between 1978 and 2002. In 1978, Webber mainly was concerned with modernity's influence on evangelicalism. By 2002, although modernity is still a concern for Webber, he also sees a need to address evangelical pragmatism. Moreover, in 1978 Webber did not see a need to address the contemporary praise and worship movement, but by 2002, the topic was unavoidable when talking about worship. In order to address the concerns of his time, therefore, Webber shifts the last

modernity to postmodernity in *The Younger Evangelicals* as the dilemma facing evangelicalism at the end of the twentieth century, stating that the transition "has created a great deal of dissonance and confusion" among evangelicals.[553] Webber states the twentieth century modernist paradigm in which the evangelical faith was explained, proclaimed, and defended has come to an end, and that a new evangelical awakening in the biblical, theological, and historic sense of the word is emerging at the dawning of the twentieth century.[554] Webber sees two problems accompanying this shift. First is evangelical resistance to the change to a new cultural paradigm and insistence on preserving the old, modernistic paradigm. Second is the way evangelicals rush to make alliances with new cultural conditions without carefully considering how the evangelical faith should be translated into a new cultural context.[555] He sees each of these postures as uncritical and untethered from historic evangelical commitments.

Differences between the two books aside, like in *Common Roots*, Webber recognizes in *The Younger Evangelicals* the contextual influence on evangelical identity. He emphasizes in both works the significance of navigating the Christian faith with cultural sensitivity and communicating it with contextual awareness.[556] Therefore, although Webber is committed to the unchanging nature of the Christian faith, he also is conscious of the need for expressing the faith in a manner the culture can receive and participate in it. Simply put, the fourth category in Webber's evangelical taxonomy demonstrates how culture and context impact the *kerygmatic* work of an evangelical.

2.5. Webber's Christological evangelical concept

Webber's evangelical taxonomy is helpful as it distinguishes his interpretation of an evangelical identity and reveals central features of his Christological concept. When the taxonomy is examined as a whole, six attributes emerge. For Webber, evangelicals are rooted in ancient Christianity, i.e. the earliest centuries of Church; accept revelatory experience as the basis of evangelical faith; are gospel-oriented, centered in the life and work of Jesus Christ; adhere to the long-standing theological convictions of the church expressed in the ecumenical creeds; are committed to continual reformation, renewal, and maturity that restores a vital historic Christology to the church; and engage with contemporary cultural contexts and paradigms in order to communicate the work of

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category in his evangelical taxonomy slightly while still emphasizing a similar point about the important of contextual influence.

[553] Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 15.

[554] Ibid.

[555] Ibid.

[556] See Webber: *Common Roots*, 101-103; *The Younger Evangelicals*, 61-70.

Christological *kerygma*. To be evangelical in the biblical, theological, historical, and social sense, therefore, is to embody all six traits. Together they constitute Webber's evangelical concept and establish the basis for his critique and reform of evangelical worship.

Webber's emphasis on Christology (i.e., confession of Christ), *kerygma* (i.e., proclaiming Christ's mighty works of salvation and redemption in word and deed), and theology (i.e., holding to the doctrines which the Protestant church has always believed) as what constitutes unity amidst evangelical diversity is worth noting. Although he acknowledges a variety of sub-cultural expressions of evangelicalism in his biblical, theological, and historical interpretation, adherence to the historical narrative of Jesus Christ as proclaimed throughout the church's history is paramount since it is the thread that runs throughout them. Webber's continual emphasis on Christology elevates evangelicalism as a Christological and *kerygmatic* movement, rooted in proclamation of and participation in Christ's saving work.

Webber's commitment to Christological and *kerygmatic* recapitulation makes his practical worship theology distinct. He identifies this approach in the latter part of his career as an "ancient-future" faith. In setting forth an ancient-future form of worship, Webber's goal was not to create a new style of worship; rather, he desired to give evangelicals a worship theology anchored in the Christological and *kerygmatic* character he saw present in the ancient church as they moved into the future within the bounds of contextuality. His aim was to catalyze a new wave of evangelical renewal, seeking to rekindle evangelicalism's authentic and shared foundations. Essentially, his practical worship theology was an optimistic effort to inspire American evangelicals to recapture the evangelical spirit through introspection and self-correction.

3. Webber's historic concept

Webber's practical-theological stance on worship was rooted in his interpretation of the Christian tradition, much like his evangelical concept. His extensive study of selected writings and practices from the first three centuries of the church shaped his understanding of the ancient tradition. Webber identified principles from this early period as definitive standards for assessing all subsequent historical developments. He established these early centuries as a benchmark for purity and fidelity to apostolic teachings, setting a bar for evaluating later church history. His methodology enabled him to critique later developments through the lens of early traditions' however, his

selective approach also had its limitations, as he tended to overlook the theological, cultural, and liturgical advancements that unfolded in the later centuries.

Webber's historical framework informed his perspective on the relationship between Scripture and tradition, revealing a nuanced approach to their interplay. He was committed to the Protestant principle of *sola scriptura*, which means "Scripture alone," but he also acknowledged the instrumental role of tradition in interpreting and applying the Scriptures, which he framed within a *prima scriptura* approach.[557] *Prima scriptura*, which means "first Scripture," is a Christian theological doctrine that asserts the Scriptures are the primary and highest source of authority in matters of faith and practice; however, the stance also allows for the use of tradition, reason, and experience as secondary authorities that can help interpret and apply the Scriptures. In Webber's view, a *prima scriptura* approach is essential to ensure robust and holistic understanding of Christian faith and practice; thus, the tradition of the church, particularly as manifested in the first three centuries, provides important interpretive keys for understanding Scripture. He argues that while Scripture holds a primary place in the formation of doctrine and practice, the tradition of the church should not be disregarded. The rich heritage of the early church provides contemporary Christians with vital insights into how the Scriptures were understood and applied by the early Christian communities. This same perspective on Scripture guided Webber's approach to worship. He saw traditional liturgical practices of the church as deeply rooted in Scripture and providing a powerful model for contemporary Christian worship. Therefore, while the Scriptures always remain the primary source for developing liturgical practices, the tradition of the church provides Webber a critical guide for interpreting and applying these Scriptures in the context of worship.[558]

Webber justified his use of historical norms in his practical worship theology through his belief in the "one holy catholic and apostolic Church" as professed in the Nicene Creed.[559] To Webber, the Nicene Creed was more than a statement of faith; it was a foundational framework that linked Christian worship throughout history to its

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[557] *Sola scriptura* is a theological doctrine central to the Protestant Reformation that asserts the Bible alone is the supreme authority in all matters of faith and practice. According to this doctrine, all teachings, traditions, and practices of the church must agree with the Bible, and it is the Bible that ultimately guides and governs the beliefs and conduct of Christians. Sola scriptura rejects the notion that church tradition or ecclesiastical interpretations hold equal authority to the Scriptures. Instead, it upholds that Scripture is self-authenticating, clear to the rational reader, and its own interpreter, meaning that the Bible provides all that is necessary for salvation and living a life pleasing to God. See Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 134-136.

[558] See Webber, *Common Roots*, 117-129. Cf. Webber: *The Majestic Tapestry*, 183-220; *Ancient-Future Faith*, 176-201.

[559] Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*, 28. Cf., Webber, *The Majestic Tapestry*, 15.

ancient roots. He viewed the early church, closer in time to Christ and the apostles, as possessing a more authentic understanding and expression of the Christian faith. This temporal proximity, he believed, enabled the early church to preserve core elements of worship and doctrine in a purer form, less influenced by the cultural changes that affected later developments.

Webber treated the principles he discovered in early church writings as normative standards for worship in any era. He wanted to retrieve the form of worship that emerged close to the New Testament, which he believed reflected a more accurate apostolic teaching and practice. For Webber, the first three centuries of the church were formative and offered the most compelling paradigms of worship grounded in scriptural interpretation, apostolic tradition, and the experiential faith of early believers.[560] Webber thus sought to identify and apply these norms not as rigid frameworks but as organic patterns that guide the content and structure of worship.[561] He believed that reclaiming ancient practices and patterns would address the individualism, subjectivism, and historical discontinuity present in modern evangelical worship. Consequently, Webber saw the ancient faith not as a relic but as a living heritage that connects evangelical worship to its roots and its identity. The perceived gap between past and present was illusory. Modern evangelicals needed to pay closer attention to the church's formative early years to build a bridge between contemporary evangelical experiences and the broad historical faith of the church.[562]

In his exploration of church history, Webber shows particular interest in the writings of Justin Martyr (c. 100-165), Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130-202), and Hippolytus of Rome (c. 160-236). He saw these early figures as central for understanding worship and unpacking theological themes in the church's formative centuries.[563] Justin Martyr was a Christian apologist and philosopher who lived in the second century and sought to defend Christianity to the Roman authorities and intellectuals of his time. He is known for his writings on Christian doctrine and apologetics, especially his *First Apology*. Many theologians and scholars, including Webber, refer to Justin Martyr's works to understand early Christian beliefs, practices, and interactions with the Roman culture. Webber found Justin's *First Apology* important as well due to the way it shed light on how early Christians worshipped and engaged in religious practice. Irenaeus of

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[560] Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*, 27-28.

[561] Ibid., 27, 97, 103-14.

[562] Webber, *Common Roots*, 20. Webber also presents his case for the synthesis he believed possible between evangelical values and an ancient faith in his Ancient-Future book series.

[563] See Webber, *Worship Old and New*, revised ed., 51-63.

Lyon was an influential early Church Father who also lived in the second century and wrote extensively against the pervasive heresies of his day, particularly Gnosticism. His most famous work, *Against Heresies*, is a critical source for understanding the theological challenges the early church faced and how they responded to those challenges. Irenaeus's writings explore the development of orthodox Christian doctrines and the early Church's efforts to establish orthodoxy amidst early theological controversies. Although Irenaeus did not write explicitly on worship practice, Webber had an affinity for Irenaeus's concept of Christological participation as it related to the purpose of Christian worship. Hippolytus of Rome was a third-century theologian and early Christian martyr. The work *Apostolic Tradition*, which has been attributed to Hippolytus, provides valuable insights into early Christian liturgy, worship practices, and ecclesiastical structures.

Webber appreciated the works of these three historical figures for several reasons: their close ties to the apostolic church, their insights into the evolution of Christian worship and theology during the second and third centuries, the rich historical context they offer about the beliefs, practices, and structures of early Christian communities, and their unwavering focus on a Christ-centered faith. He reflects in *Ancient-Future Faith*:

> The Fathers of the church have taken me back into a dynamic worldview, an understanding of the interrelationship of all things. . .The challenge for us is to return to the Christian tradition. For here is a faith that, like a tapestry, weaves everything in and out of the main thread—Christ. My own experience with this rediscovered tapestry is a renewed and enriched faith.[564]

Although he mentions "the Fathers" broadly, Webber limits his points of historical reference in his writings to Justin, Hippolytus, and Irenaeus. He views these figures as critical voices from the ancient church, whose insights hold significant relevance for the contemporary evangelical context.[565] Interestingly, Webber does not approach their writings as a historical theologian would, offering a detailed analysis of their historical context, theological development, or liturgical practices. Instead, he takes a more

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[564] Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 204.

[565] For Webber's reliance upon Justin Martyr, Hippolytus of Rome, and Irenaeus of Lyons in his practical worship theology, see Webber: *Common Roots*, 104-108; *Worship is a Verb*, 60-61; *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail*, 40, 79; *Worship Old and New*, 18, 45-49, 51-65, 89, 123, 126, 130-144, 166; *Worship Old and New*, revised ed., 51-63, 95, 98-100, 164, 174-181, 220-224, 234, 236-240; *Ancient-Future Faith*, 34, 56-60, 110-111, 123, 136, 148, 157-169, 184-188, 192; *The Younger Evangelicals*, 110-111; *Ancient-Future Evangelism*, 23-25, 44, 76-84, 93-95, 99, 111-114, 141-142, 147; *Ancient-Future Time*, 49, 61; *Ancient-Future Worship*, 92-96, 101-103, 170-177.

practical-theological approach, focusing on what they did and how the content they detail aligns with his own theological agenda for worship. Webber clumps together overarching ideas that he sees emerge from these early writings, making his historic concept selective in its development. Perhaps this limited treatment is a risk when reading history as a corrective to contemporary concerns. Nonetheless, Webber has an agenda for contemporary evangelicalism; thus, he employs early sources to reinforce his vision of worship. He aims to bridge the gap between ancient traditions and modern practice and to revitalize contemporary worship with the depth and authenticity he discovered in the early church.

Moreover, when looking at Webber's use of historical practices and patterns, it is important to recognize his goal was not to mimic ancient traditions but to extract their Christological essence, which he believed would integrate seamlessly into contemporary practice. Webber approaches history seeking to identify normative principles that blend an "evangelical spirit" (the experiential revelation of Christ) with the theological substance of worship (the Christ-centered narrative).[566] He discovered in the writings of Justin, Hippolytus, and Irenaeus content that underscores the participatory and transformative nature of Christian worship, connecting liturgical practices to the person and work of Jesus Christ. The following content provides an overview of Webber's treatment of these three figures, detailing how he interprets their contributions to shape his vision for contemporary evangelical worship.

3.1 Justin Martyr

Justin Martyr is known for his defenses of Christianity against its early pagan critics. One of Justin's primary contributions is the detailed exposition of Christian worship provided in his *First Apology*. Webber relies heavily on Justin's description of worship when detailing his own worship theology, seeing Justin's description as a window into the worship practices of the post-apostolic church.[567]

Webber sees Justin's description of worship to be a template for the ordering of a service, detailing patterns and elements of worship that should transcend cultural and historical contexts.[568] For example, in Chapter 67 of his *First Apology*, Justin delineates

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[566] See Webber, *Common Roots*, 17-23.

[567] See Webber: *Common Roots*, 104-108; *Worship is a Verb*, 60-61; *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail*, 40, 79; *Worship Old and New*, 18, 45-49, 51-65, 89, 123, 126, 130-144, 166; *Worship Old and New*, revised ed., 51-55, 98-100, 164, 174-176 220-224, 237-239; *Ancient-Future Faith*, 104-109; *Ancient-Future Worship*, 92-96, 101-103, 121, 139-140, 172-177.

[568] Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 45.

the order of Sunday worship.[569] He commences with readings from the memoirs of the apostles and writings of the prophets. This is followed by the presiding minister delivering an exhortation to emulate the virtuous principles drawn from the readings. Subsequently, the congregation stands to offer communal prayers. After these prayers, there is an exchange of the peace, followed by the presentation of bread, wine, and water. The presiding minister then offers prayers and thanksgiving, with the congregation affirming with an "Amen." The consecrated elements are then distributed to the participants and deacons take them to those who are absent. Justin's structured approach offers to Webber a timeless model that captures the essence of early Christian worship, emphasizing community, scripture, prayer, and sacrament.

Central to Webber's appropriation of Justin's worship order is an emphasis on the structural narrative of Christian worship.[570] Webber sees worship in Justin's writings not as a mere ritual but as a reenactment and participation in the grand story of salvation. He believes this is evident in the reading of Scriptures, the communal prayers, and especially in the celebration of the Eucharist. Webber sees this pattern of worship as one that immerses believers in the narrative of God's salvific action in history. Furthermore, Webber resonates with Justin's description of the integration of Word and Sacrament.[571] In the *First Apology*, the reading and exposition of the Scriptures seamlessly transition into the Eucharistic celebration. Webber perceives this integration as underscoring the need for worship to encompass both proclamation and participation, both hearing the story of God and actively partaking in it.[572]

Webber's reliance upon Justin Martyr in constructing a vision for contemporary worship appears in his chapters on worship in *Common Roots*, *Worship is a Verb*, both editions of *Worship Old and New*, *Ancient-Future Faith*, and *Ancient-Future Worship*.[573] Webber advocates for ongoing congregational participation in liturgical elements like prayer, the public reading of Scripture, and the Eucharist, claiming they are important means of shaping a community's faith, communal life, and experience of Christ. Moreover, in *Ancient-Future Worship* Webber states in a reflection on Justin's description of worship, "Here we see that worship is not that which I do, but *that which*

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[569] Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, trans. A. L. Williams (London: SPCK, 1917), 67.
[570] Webber, *Common Roots*, 104-108.
[571] See Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 139-147.
[572] Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 139-140.
[573] See Webber: *Common Roots*, 104-108; *Worship is a Verb*, 60-61; *Worship Old and New*, 18, 45-49, 51-65, 89, 123, 126, 130-144, 166; *Worship Old and New*, revised ed., 51-55, 98-100, 164, 174-176 220-224, 237-239; *Ancient-Future Faith*, 104-109; *Ancient-Future Worship*, 92-96, 101-103, 121, 139-140, 172-177.

is done in me. That is, worship, which reveals Christ, forms me by making me aware that Jesus is my spirituality and that worship is to form my spiritual life in the pattern of living into the death and resurrection of Jesus."[574] Webber's statement reflects the transformative, participatory, and Christocentric nature of Christian worship he sees in Justin's writing. His transformative understanding of worship undergirds his statement "worship is not that which I do, but that which is done in me." The key point is that worship is not merely a performance of external rituals but also an internal transformation that aligns the believer more closely with Christ. This perspective is imperative in Webber's objective of orienting worship as a transformative participation in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The development of Webber's historic concept of worship, based on Justin's *First Apology*, underscores Webber's desire to preserve a continuity of foundational liturgical elements across church history. Justin's account of early church worship practices provides Webber with what he believes to be a normative description of the participatory nature of worship and the integration of Word and Sacrament in a Christological orientation. Moreover, Webber reads into Justin an approach to worship that is not merely about performing rituals but also about undergoing an internal transformation that aligns believers with Jesus Christ. This perspective is crucial to Webber's objective of orienting worship as a transformative participation in Christ's life, death, and resurrection. Webber's selective engagement with Justin's *First Apology*, however, raises questions about the comprehensiveness of his approach. Although his selective use of Justin is effective in reinforcing his vision for worship, Webber may overlook other significant theological and liturgical developments and limit a fuller understanding of the rich diversity and evolution of early Christian worship practices in the second century. Despite these critiques, Webber seeks to ensure that Justin Martyr's voice has a place in his construction of a worship theology, highlighting the enduring relevance of early Christian practices in shaping contemporary evangelical worship.

3.2 Hippolytus of Rome

Another figure Webber relies upon to identify historic normative principles of worship is Hippolytus of Rome. A document attributed to Hippolytus entitled the *Apostolic Tradition* stands as a significant resource for understanding the rituals, liturgies, and

[574] Webber *Ancient-Future Worship*, 93.

structure of worship during the early centuries of the Christian church.[575] While the *Apostolic Tradition* remains a crucial document for the study of early Christianity, its precise origins and authorship are a matter of scholarly debate. Webber himself attributes the work to Hippolytus, treating the *Apostolic Tradition* as a unified document from a single author at a singular time; however, scholars like Paul Bradshaw highlight the need for a nuanced approach to understanding this complex and influential text, arguing the document is not the work of a single author but rather a composite. Bradshaw suggests that the *Apostolic Tradition* was compiled over time by different authors or communities, reflecting a broader range of early Christian traditions.[576] If the document is indeed a composite, it indicates that the development of early Christian practices was more complex and diverse than Webber's work suggests. Incorporating the nuanced perspectives of scholars like Bradshaw could have enabled Webber to better illustrate how liturgy evolves within a community of faith, highlighting the dynamic and adaptive nature of early Christian worship practices. Nonetheless, Webber's reliance on the *Apostolic Tradition* remains valuable for understanding his perspective on historical foundations of Christian liturgical practice.

The *Apostolic Tradition* offers a detailed account of early Christian practices—ranging from the ordination of clergy and the celebration of the Eucharist to specific liturgical prayers and catechetical instructions.[577] In all these practices, the document underscores the importance of both individual and communal engagement in worship and ecclesial life, highlighting that the Christian faith is not just about individual belief but also is intertwined with community life and shared practices. A noteworthy section in the work delineates the rite of Christian initiation where candidates undergo a period of instruction, after which they are baptized, anointed, and then participate in the

[575] James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship*, revised ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 124.

[576] Paul Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 74-84, 164-165. Cf. Paul F. Bradshaw, Maxwell E. Johnson, and L. Edward Phillips, *Apostolic Tradition: Hermeneia – A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Mineappolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 2-5. The exact date of the Apostolic Tradition is also disputed. The traditional dating Webber accepts places it in the early third century, around 215 A.D. Bradshaw argues for a later date, possibly extending into the fourth century, due to the document's apparent evolution and the incorporation of later practices. Moreover, The Apostolic Tradition survives in several languages, including Greek, Latin, Coptic, and Ethiopian. The existence of multiple versions with significant variations supports the theory of a composite origin. These variants indicate that the text was widely used and adapted by different Christian communities, which further complicates efforts to pinpoint a single author or date.

[577] See Hippolytus of Rome, *On the Apostolic Tradition*, Alistair Stewart-Sykes, trans. (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), 53-173.

Eucharistic celebration.[578] The rite underscores the gravity of embracing the Christian faith, viewing baptism not merely as an external rite but as a transformative journey of participation in Christ's death and resurrection.[579]

In his work, Webber's considers the *Apostolic Tradition* to be an authoritative resource that provides important insights on how liturgical practices shape and maintain consistency in worship. Webber consistently points to the detailed account of the Eucharist in the *Apostolic Tradition*.[580] He posits that according to the *Apostolic Tradition*, the narrative arc of worship in the ancient church culminated in the Eucharist celebration. He emphasizes its pivotal role in the Christological orientation of worship and its capacity to foster communal participation in the person and work of Christ. He writes in *Common Roots*:

> The form and content of communion described by Hippolytus shows us how the ultimate focus of worship is on the cross and resurrection. Both Word and sacrament point to the cross and resurrection, but the sacrament is the climactic point of worship because of the intensity of its focus, because Jesus Christ is uniquely present, and because the church is nourished and strengthened by feeding on him.[581]

Webber centers his focus on the narrative of Christ's death and resurrection as sees presented in the *Apostolic Tradition*, treating it as a normative principle that shaped early church worship and defined the unique role of the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist, within the gathered worshiping community. For Webber, the Eucharist represents a moment in worship where the divine and human intersect on earth.[582] It draws believers into the mystery of Christ's sacrifice and unites them with His resurrection in a mystical yet tangible manner. Consequently, Webber emphasizes the Eucharist as a vital conduit of grace and a profound means of encountering God in worship. He relies on the Apostolic Tradition to urge the church to rediscover and restore the centrality of the Eucharist, viewing it not as a mere ritual but an essential

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[578] The influence of the *Apostolic Tradition* on Webber also stretches to his view of baptism and catechesis, which he calls "liturgical evangelism." As noteworthy as Webber's work is in catechesis and discipleship based on the process set forth in *Apostolic Tradition*, it is beyond the scope of the current study. For more on Webber's views and practical theology of discipleship/catechesis, see Webber: *Celebrating Our Faith: Evangelism through Worship* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986) also published as *Liturgical Evangelism: Worship as Outreach and Nurture* (Fayetteville: Morehouse Publishing, 1992); and *Ancient-Future Evangelism*.

[579] Webber, *Ancient-Future Evangelism*, 89-99.

[580] See Webber: *Worship is a Verb*, 37-46, 128-151; *Signs of Wonder*, 123; *Worship Old and New*, 17-18, 59-65, 68, 89, 94, 111, 166; *Worship Old and New*, revised ed., 95, 98-100, 126, 174-181, 220-224, 234, 236-240; *Ancient-Future Faith*, 109-111; *Ancient-Future Worship*, 58-66, 133-148, 152-165. Cf. Hippolytus, *On the Apostolic Tradition*, 133-148.

[581] Webber, *Common Roots*, 107.

[582] See Webber, *Signs of Wonder*, 123. Cf. Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 146-147.

practice for participating in Christ's redeeming work and the broader narrative of God's salvation story.[583]

Building on this foundation, Webber also highlights the communal nature of the Eucharist, detailing the active responses and movements within the Eucharistic prayer that demonstrate the engagement of the entire community in the ritual. In *Ancient-Future Worship*, Webber turns again to the *Apostolic Tradition* to explain the Eucharistic prayer, noting its dual focus on remembrance and anticipation.[584] This perspective invites believers to recall Christ's salvific work through His death and resurrection while also looking forward to the eschatological feast in the Kingdom of God. Webber champions this Eucharistic outlook, advocating for worship that is both retrospective, reflecting on Christ's completed work, and prospective, anticipating His promised return.[585]

Furthermore, Webber sees the Eucharist as a transformative participatory event where the individual and the community are jointly and actively involved in reenacting and remembering the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The celebratory nature of the Eucharist reinforces the idea that the sacrament not only serves as a moment of spiritual communion with Christ, but also as a key vehicle for building and strengthening the bonds within the Christian community. This shared participation exemplifies an important aspect of Webber's practical worship theology, namely that worship is an integrative act, uniting theology, spirituality, and community in the dynamic celebration of God's redeeming work through Jesus Christ.[586]

3.3 Irenaeus of Lyon

Although Webber draws extensively from Justin and the *Apostolic Tradition* in identifying historical normative principles of worship, he also extends his investigation of the early church to the work of Irenaeus of Lyon. Although Irenaeus was one of the most influential theologians of the second century, he did not write explicitly on worship. Nonetheless, Webber often references his work in discussions on worship.[587]

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[583] Webber: *Worship is a Verb*, 77-83; *Worship Old and New*, 17-18, 59-65, 68, 89, 94, 111, 166; *Worship Old and New*, revised ed., 95, 98-100, 126, 174-181, 220-224, 234, 236-240; *Ancient-Future Faith*, 109-111; *Ancient-Future Worship*, 94-96, 101-103, 170-177.

[584] Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 94-104. Cf. Hippolytus, *On the Apostolic Tradition*, 133-134.

[585] Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 41-66, 94-104.

[586] See Webber: *Worship is a Verb*, 37-46, 128-151; *Ancient-Future Worship*, 58-66, 133-148, 152-165.

[587] See footnote 567. Much like Webber seeks to bridge the ancient church to contemporary evangelicalism, Irenaeus can be seen as a bridge between the eastern and western church of his day. He wrote in the language of the east (Greek), but he lived in the west (Lyons, France). Irenaeus's work of

The concept that makes Irenaeus an integral part of Webber's practical-theological understanding is his articulation of participation in the divine life, which tethers his work to Christology. Irenaeus's theory of participation, also known as recapitulation theory, is foundational to his overall theological framework, as articulated in his major work, *Against Heresies*. Irenaeus argues in *Against Heresies* that God created human beings in His image and likeness, intending for them to participate in His divine life; however, due to the Fall and the subsequent corruption of humanity, participation in God was distorted and fractured.[588] The Fall resulted in death and decay, subjecting humans to the power of evil and the dominion of death. In response to the fallen state of humanity, Irenaeus presents Christ as the new Adam, who enters fully into human existence to set things right. Christ's humanity and living a sinless life provides a fresh start for humanity and inaugurates a new order of existence. In Christ, God participates in human life, reconciling it to Himself and restoring what was lost through Adam's sin.[589] The salvific work of Christ is the means through which humans are restored to their original state of participation, wherein Christ's incarnation, life, death, and resurrection serve as a restorative process that recapitulates and renews human nature.

Irenaeus's conception of recapitulation emerges as a critical theological framework for understanding how humanity regains its lost participation in the divine life. The term "recapitulation" in Irenaeus' work means a "summing up" or "reintegration" of something that has been fragmented. Irenaeus argues that Christ, as the new Adam, recapitulates—or re-sums up—the entirety of humanity in Himself. He retraces human history, from creation to redemption, undoing the consequences of Adam's actions. In doing so, Christ represents all of humanity in His life, death, and resurrection.[590] Overall, Irenaeus' theory of participation highlights the central role of Christ, who fully participates in human life to redeem and restore what was lost

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recapitulation sought to maintain the Christological emphasis of the east as Christianity expanded to the west. Although the eastern church has held the writings of Irenaeus in high esteem for centuries, there was a resurgence of scholarship on his work in the west among eighteenth century Pietists and Puritans, such as William Perkins, who was the subject of Webber's PhD dissertation. See: R. Scott Clark, *Caspar Olevian and the Substance of the Covenant: The Double Benefit of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008), 104-143; Robert E. Webber, "The Controversy Provoked by William Perkins' Reformed Catholike: A Study in Protestant—Roman Catholic Relations in the First Quarter of the Seventeenth Century in England," PhD diss, (Concordia Seminary, 1969).

[588] Saint Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Ex Fontibus, 2015), 454-460.

[589] Ibid., 553-570, 608-612.

[590] Ibid., 569-571, 608-612, 652-655

through sin. Thus, as humans participate in Christ, they are brought back into communion with God, and the divine image is renewed in them.

The resonance of Irenaeus's theology of participation extends beyond the concept of recapitulation, also impacting a particular approach to the atonement. Although not explicitly articulated by Irenaeus, Webber found the *Christus Victor* motif of atonement consistent with Irenaeus' theological emphasis of participation.[591] *Christus Victor*, which translates from Latin as "Christ the Victor," refers to a classic view of atonement theology that emphasizes Christ as the victorious conqueror over the powers of sin, death, and evil defeating the forces of evil and liberating humanity from bondage. Although a prevalent idea in the early centuries of the church, Gustaf Aulén recovered the *Christus Victor* atonement motif in the twentieth century in his 1931 work *Christus Victor*.[592] Aulén sought to return to what he saw as the biblical and early Christian understanding of the atonement, putting it in conversation with other prominent theories that had developed. Aulén believed *Christus Victor* was the central theme in the New Testament, and he saw it prevalent in the writings of early Church Fathers like Irenaeus, which he discusses at length in his book.[593]

While Aulén laid the groundwork for understanding the significance of the *Christus Victor* motif, Webber expanded upon it, offering insights into its role in shaping vibrant, participatory worship experiences that he believed to be consistent with early Christian practices. Drawing inspiration from Aulén, Webber proposes in his writings a narrative quality of worship that focuses on the victory of Jesus Christ. He writes in *Who Gets to Narrate the World?*:

> The biblical and historical understanding of the incarnation is that God *becomes* creation. He takes into himself all the effects of fallen humanity spread throughout his creation. He assumes all of creation in the womb of Mary in order to reverse the effects of sin and "bring it into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Rom 8:21). The death and resurrection of God in Christ is then not a "release of the soul from its imprisonment to the material realm" (As Gnostics and the new spirituality assert) but a second act of creation, the redemption of the whole created order.[594]

He continues:

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[591] See chapter sections "*Christus Victor* in the Apostolic Writings," "The Theology of Recapitulation," and "Christ, the Center," in Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*, 56-67. Cf. Webber, *The Majestic Tapestry*, 25-33.

[592] Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement* (London: SPCK, 1931).

[593] Ibid., 16-35.

[594] Webber, *Who Gets to Narrate the World?*, 75-76.

> God, in the incarnation took up into himself the entire creation, so that the creation redeemed by God himself is now to be once again, as in the Garden, the theater of his glory.
>
> The ancient church understood the impact of creation, incarnation and re-creation on all of creation, and that is why Christians were the leaders in the arts, in learning and in the sciences. The Christian faith narrates the world and gives shape to culture-making and to all of civilization.
>
> [This] historic understanding of the incarnation as the assumption of the entire created order has been replaced by a view that in the incarnation God *stepped into* history to save souls. The focus is no longer on the cosmic work of God in history but on personal salvation.[595]

While Webber later acknowledges the importance of not losing a personal focus on God's saving work, his larger concern is the loss of the cosmic vision of God's work of redemption.[596] He sees the loss of a cosmic vision of God's redemption as diminishing the comprehensive narrative of Christianity, which stretches far beyond individual salvation; rather, it is a tale of how God's love encompasses and seeks to restore all of creation. When this narrative is sidelined, Christians run the risk of overlooking the profound impact of Christ's victory over sin, death, and all that has marred creation.[597] In recognizing the cosmic scope of God's redemptive plan, however, the Christian community is empowered to engage more deeply with the world around them, not as escapists waiting for a personal rescue, but as active participants in God's ongoing work of restoration and renewal. Such an understanding of God's restorative work hold potential to reinvigorate worship and daily life, positioning them all as acts of co-laboring with Christ in his work of redemption.[598] In particular, worship is the time for the people of God to come together to celebrate, remember, and participate in Christ's ongoing triumph over sin and death; thus, Webber's advocacy for a more participatory worship experience where the church collectively proclaims and re-enacts the narrative of Christ's victorious work.

Webber anchors his theological discourse in *The Majestic Tapestry* in the *Christus Victor* motif. He explores the foundations of this motif, highlighting the

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[595] Ibid., 76.

[596] Ibid., 76-77.

[597] Ibid., 77. Webber sees the result of a vision of Christ's victory over sin and death as leading to cultural accommodation of social betterment, i.e., a "rehabilitation" approach to making the world a better place through social activism, and leading to a culture of privatism, i.e., a focus on individual experiences of Christ's work and on personal journeys of faith. See Webber, *Who Gets to Narrate the World?*, 84-86.

[598] Ibid., 117.

transformative power of Christ's victory over evil. In the first section of the book, "The Tradition about the Work of Christ," Webber writes:

> … the Fathers took me back to the biblical idea that the victory of Christ over evil results in the *recapitulation*. His victory over evil is the key not only to the early tradition but to the renewal of our personal faith, and to the renewal of the life of the church. I want to show how every aspect of the Christian life relates to Christ's victory over the power of evil and to the ultimate renewal of all things.
>
> The early church saw how faith centers in Christ. For them the faith did not begin with the church, with worship, with Scripture, with theology, with spirituality, with education, with evangelism or social action. All these aspects of Christianity, important as they were, were servants of this central theme of the Scriptures: *Christ became one of us in order to destroy the power of evil and restore us and the world to its original condition*.
>
> I am convinced that our whole life can be changed when we rediscover this radical vision of the work of Christ. A fuller view of Christ's work will form our vision of life and our acting out of that vision in the here and now. I believe the rediscovery of this vision is transforming the renewing congregations of our time. In this emerging church, whether Catholic, mainline Protestant, evangelical, or charismatic, the centrality of Christ's victory over the power of evil is the dynamic that breathes new life into the church.[599]

Webber underscores the central notion in Christian theology of Christ's victory over evil. He posits that this victory is the cornerstone not only to ancient Christian traditions but also to the modern individual's faith and the contemporary church's vitality. Webber's use of the term "recapitulation" references Irenaeus' theological concept, wherein Christ, through His life, death, and resurrection, has "summarized" or "recaptured" humanity's story, rewriting the narrative of sin and fall and culminating in redemption and renewal. Like Irenaeus, Webber views Christ's victory as the restoration of all things to their original, uncorrupted state.

In *The Majestic Tapestry* and *Who Gets to Narrate the World?* Webber identifies what he perceives to be a lack of fragmentation in the early church's attention.[600] He claims that while many facets of the early church's spirituality, including worship, Scripture, theology, and mission, are critical components of their faith, each one stands in service to a central narrative: Christ's incarnational journey to defeat evil and to restore humanity and the world. Webber treats the *Christus Victor* motif as a call to modern Christians to recalibrate all things related to faith, including

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[599] Webber, *The Majestic Tapestry*, 37. Interestingly, although Webber mentions "the church Fathers" in this quote, the only church Father he references in the book in relation to *Christus Victor* is Irenaeus.

[600] Ibid.

worship. Instead of prioritizing various branches of Christian practice or thought, he invites believers to focus their faith on the triumphant work of Christ. This reorienting act, according to Webber, possesses transformative power. It can reshape personal visions of life, influence actions in the present, and breathe fresh vitality into diverse congregations, irrespective of denominational distinctions.[601]

Although Webber's commitment to *Christus Victor* as the fulcrum of the Christian faith is overly simplistic, especially given his limited treatment of early church writings, it provides the backbone of his practical worship theology. This motif serves as the lens through which he interprets the writings of Justin and Hippolytus. In his practical worship theology, Webber encourages churches to create worship experiences that highlight the narrative of Christ's redemptive work and to implement practices that foster active participation in this narrative. His theology accentuates celebration of and participation in Christ's victorious work, which he believes is a transformative agent that reshapes personal faith and rejuvenates the worshiping congregation. Webber not only draws attention to the foundational narrative of Christ's victory over evil in worship but also connects this narrative to the lived experiences of believers. His emphasis on *Christus Victor*, integrated into his broader practical worship theology, provides a blueprint for Christian communities to rediscover the fullness of Christ's saving work and to experience renewal.

In sum, Webber's use of the *Christus Victor* theory encapsulates the expansive, cosmic dimensions of the atonement and its far-reaching implications for the practice of Christian worship.[602] Webber values the *Christus Victor* motif for several reasons. First, he states in *The Majestic Tapestry* that Irenaeus helped him, "discover the biblical teaching that sin is not only individual but also extends to everything in the world; everything including relationships, nature, and institutions such as the family, the state, and economic systems…"[603] Secondly, as a result of the previous point, Webber acknowledges how the *Christus Victor* motif extends the impact of the atonement beyond individual salvation, encompassing the transformation of the entire creation.[604] Thirdly, he admires its emphasis on participation in the life and work of Jesus Christ, particularly triumph over sin and death, which is integral to the *Christus Victor*

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[601] Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*, 189-191.

[602] Webber, *The Majestic Tapestry*, 25-38; *Ancient-Future Faith*, 56-61; *Ancient-Future Worship*, 86, 103, 170-171.

[603] Webber, *The Majestic Tapestry*, 25-26.

[604] Ibid., 27. Cf. Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 57-66.

motif.[605] Fourthly, Webber sees harmony in how *Christus Victor* and Irenaeus's theory of participation weave together various strands of Christian theology such as ecclesiology, eschatology, doxology, and sacramentology.[606] Christ's victory is not merely an isolated event but one that permeates the life of the church (ecclesiology), pointing to the ultimate fulfillment of God's kingdom (eschatology), inspiring worship and praise (doxology), and profoundly experienced in the sacraments (sacramentology). In ecclesiology, the *Christus Victor* narrative reinforces the communal identity of the church as the body of Christ, sharing in His victory and mission, fostering a deep sense of unity and purpose among believers, as they collectively embody the triumph of Christ in their daily lives and communal worship. Eschatologically, the *Christus Victor* theme resonates with the hope of ultimate restoration and the renewal of all creation, providing a future-oriented vision that not only anticipates the final consummation of God's plan but also invigorates present living with a sense of purpose and expectation. Doxologically, the triumph of Christ naturally leads to exuberant worship and adoration, which Webber suggests enhances the depth and richness of Christian worship, as believers are moved to respond with heartfelt praise and thanksgiving, recognizing the magnitude of what has been accomplished on their behalf. Sacramentally, Webber sees the sacraments as vital means through which believers participate in the life and victory of Christ. Irenaeus' theory of participation emphasizes the real, transformative presence of Christ in the sacraments, which is not merely symbolic but a genuine encounter with the divine, where the benefits of Christ's victory are imparted to the faithful.

Consequently, the *Christus Victor* motif is the framework through which Webber interprets the early church. He regards it not as an abstract theory but as a central reality that shapes Christian worship, discipleship, and mission. He uses the *Christus Victor* motif as a vital roadmap for the substance of worship, prioritizing the *kerygmatic* re-telling of Christ's redemptive story through liturgy and emphasizing liturgical and sacramental practice, especially the Eucharist, as embodied participation in Christ's victory.[607] His embrace of the *Christus Victor* motif provides a concrete foundation for an ecclesiological paradigm shift. Instead of viewing the church as an

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[605] Webber, *The Majestic Tapestry*, 26-27. Likewise, Webber writes in a section entitled, "Christ is Victor" in *The Majestic Tapestry*, "The early church was convinced that the work of Christ was a great victory over sin, the devil, and the domain of darkness." Webber, *The Majestic Tapestry*, 25. Cf., Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*, 49-55.

[606] See Webber, *The Majestic Tapestry*, 34-36. Cf. Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 170-177.

[607] Webber, *The Majestic Tapestry*, 87-93. Cf. Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 144-145.

institution or a gathering of like-minded individuals, he sees it as a body actively participating in Christ's ongoing victory. This perspective necessitates a worship experience that presents a compelling vision where the church continuously proclaims, enacts, and relives the triumph of Christ, making every worship act a renewed affirmation of Christ's victory over sin and death.

The *Christus Victor* motif that runs through Webber's practical worship theology illustrates his desire to construct a theology for worship that would not be formed in isolation but that aligned with a rich, historic theological tradition. Irenaeus was an important figure in helping Webber discover a new theological framework for God's redemptive plan and work. The motif thus functions as the selective framework through which Webber appropriates specific ancient practices and principles in his practical theology. Another significant work by Irenaeus, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, provides pivotal insights that enriched Webber's views on worship and participation.[608] In the work, Irenaeus offers a window into early Christian thought and hermeneutics, portraying Jesus as the cornerstone of salvation history.

Irenaeus's Christological focus asserts that the story of Jesus is not an isolated event but the culmination of God's eternal plan, tying together the disparate strands of the Old and New Testaments. His goal is to bridge the perceived gap between the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Gospel, emphasizing the integral nature of the Incarnation within the metanarrative of Scripture.[609] Irenaeus roots Christ's work of redemption in history, steering clear of an allegorical interpretation of Scripture. In his reading, the Old Testament serves as a direct precursor to the Christ event rather than a collection of shadowy figures and symbols awaiting Christological illumination. Consequently, Adam's fall and Christ's redemption are more than symbolic bookends; they are historical realities connected in the unfolding narrative of salvation.[610]

Irenaeus's insistence on the historicity of the Incarnation underscores his theory of Christological recapitulation. He posits that Christ, as the second Adam, retraces the steps of the first Adam, correcting the errors of humanity's progenitor through His obedience.[611] The narrative thread of the Gospel, then, is the history of humanity, marred by sin and corruption, finding reconciliation in the life, death, and resurrection

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[608] See Irenaeus of Lyons, *On the Apostolic Preaching*, John Behr, trans. (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997).

[609] Ibid., 92-100.

[610] John Behr, *The Way to Nicaea*, vol. 1 in *The Formation of Christian Theology* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), 89.

[611] Irenaeus, *On the Apostolic Preaching*, 60-61.

of Jesus Christ. The Incarnation serves as the axis around which history revolves, transforming a story of slavery to death into one of redemption to life. Through his focus on the historical and redemptive aspects of Jesus Christ's life, Irenaeus crafts a cohesive, compelling narrative that ties together the entirety of Scripture.

Webber's practical worship theology draws further from Irenaeus's work, emphasizing the centrality of the Christ narrative in worship. Repeatedly, Webber proposes that worship is not merely an act of cognitive remembrance but a participatory experience that allows worshipers to step into the story of Jesus Christ.[612] He recognizes the power of narrative not only for understanding theological truth but also for experiencing Christ's transformative work. Expanding upon Irenaeus's emphasis on narrative, Webber showcases how the lived experience of believers in worship is a real-time recapitulation of the Christ-event. He posits that worship allows participants to enter God's grand story, a narrative centered around the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.[613] Through this immersion, worshipers form a bond with Christ and enter a unique communion with Him. Furthermore, in worship, believers engage with and actively participate in the Christological narrative, reiterating the story of Jesus Christ through Christological *kerygma* and reinforcing their identity as God's people. This transformative journey connects them with the person and work of Jesus Christ. For Webber, active participation in the Christological narrative of worship is a transformative process that fosters spiritual growth and deepens believers' relationship with God. He finds biblical resonance with this perspective in passages such as: Romans 6:3-11, where Paul elucidates how believers are united with Christ in His death and resurrection; in the Johannine theology of believers "abiding" in Christ (John 15:1-11); and in the synoptic Gospel's Eucharistic theology of "eating the flesh" and "drinking the blood" of Christ (Mark 14:22-24).[614] Collectively, Webber sees these passages underscoring the centrality of active participation in the narrative of Christ's life, death, and resurrection as a pivotal aspect of Christian worship.

Overall, the intersection of Webber's worship theology with Irenaeus's understanding of Christ's redemptive work reveals his deep appreciation for the

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[612] See Webber: *Worship is a Verb*, 27-46; *Worship Old and New*, 97-108; *Signs of Wonder*, 76-77; The *Majestic Tapestry*, 79-83; *The Younger Evangelicals*, 199-201; *Ancient-Future Faith*, 97-101; *Ancient-Future Worship*, 29-55, 89-111.

[613] See Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 29-40. Cf. Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*, 59-67.

[614] Robert E. Webber, ed. *The Biblical Foundations of Christian Worship*, vol. 1 of *The Complete Library of Christian Worship* (Nashville: Star Song, 1993), 87-89, 318-336.

historical, transformative power of the Christ event. Both Irenaeus and Webber emphasize the incarnational nature of Christ's journey, proposing an approach to worship that is rooted in both historical remembrance and present experience. Irenaeus paints a rich picture of Christ as the linchpin of salvation history, bridging the Old and New Testaments and grounding the Gospel in the tangible history of humanity. Inspired by Irenaeus, Webber underscores the experiential dimension of worship, viewing it as a journey where believers do not merely recall but actively relive the Christ event, especially in and through worship, forging deep communion with God. This synthesis of narrative and participation suggests that true Christian worship involves immersing oneself in the ancient yet ever-renewing story of Christ, creating a dynamic bond between historical remembrance and present transformative engagement. For both Irenaeus and Webber, genuine engagement with the Christian narrative means stepping into a living story that shapes, renews, and deepens Christian faith. This perspective encapsulates Webber's vision of worship as a transformative process, rooted in the historical reality of Christ's life, death, and resurrection, and continually renewing the spiritual life of the worshiping community.

4. Webber's liturgical concept

Webber's practical worship theology was influenced not only by Justin Martyr, Hippolytus of Rome, and Irenaeus of Lyons, but also by the liturgical tradition of the Episcopal Church. This tradition, part of the Anglican heritage from the Church of England, emphasizes a worship style rich in Scripture, prayer, sacraments, and music. Rooted in the practices of the early Church, Anglicanism sought to balance Protestant reforms with the preservation of Catholic liturgical traditions.[615] The liturgical heritage of Anglican worship is its focus on the reading and proclamation of God's Word, the Eucharist, and the church's responsive actions, creating a dialogical rhythm between God and the congregation.[616] This rhythm is evident in Webber's practical-theological model of worship, particularly in his book *Worship is a Verb*. Although Webber does not explicitly label his liturgical model as Anglican, his preference is clear through examples that reflect the Anglican approach to structured, participatory worship.[617]

[615] The Church of England was established during the English Reformation in the sixteenth century when King Henry VIII broke away from the Roman Catholic Church, leading to the formation of a distinct Anglican tradition. The Episcopal Church in the United States later emerged from this Anglican tradition, becoming independent after the American Revolution while maintaining its liturgical and theological heritage.

[616] Christopher L. Webber, *Welcome to the Episcopal Church: An Introduction to Its History, Faith, and Worship* New York: Church Publishing, 2017), 25-40.

[617] See Webber, *Worship is a Verb*, 49-59, 94-102, 133-151, 165-171.

Central to Anglicanism is the Book of Common Prayer (BCP), a liturgical guide that has been adapted over time and in global contexts, but that is filled with historical, theological, and liturgical directives. Webber was drawn to Anglican forms and patterns, particularly those detailed in the 1979 BCP used in the Episcopal Church. In his writings, Webber favors the Prayer Book tradition, asserting that it embodies a "thoroughly evangelical" perspective and mirrors historic, catholic worship values due to its Christ-centeredness, biblical emphasis, and doxological essence.[618] Webber viewed the BCP as a representation of practices from the ancient church contextualized for the modern day, making it a natural fit for his practical worship theology.[619] He was drawn to how the liturgy detailed in the BCP emphasizes both the service of the Word and the service of the Sacrament.[620] This liturgical pattern mirrors Webber's interpretation of early Christian worship, namely that it is a participatory event in which believers receive the Word and partake in the sacred body and blood of Christ through the Eucharist.[621] Furthermore, Webber noticed a harmonious interplay between weekly worship, the commitment to the church's annual liturgical cycle, and its pattern of daily devotion.[622] He thus attempted to bring a similar balance in his practical worship theology, underscoring the significance of the Christian liturgical calendar and consistent engagement with both Word and Sacrament in worship.

Webber regarded the BCP as a prime example of Christological participation and narrative focus. He believed its liturgy, organized around the Christian liturgical calendar, provides a narrative framework that guides worshipers through the life of Christ and significant events in the Christian story.[623] Moreover, the weekly structure of Anglican worship is a key element in Webber's practical-theological model. Drawing from a pattern the British Anglican monk Dom Gregory Dix (1901-1952) introduced in his 1945 book, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, Webber advocates for a fourfold structure for weekly worship throughout his writings and teachings.[624]

Dix outlines in *The Shape of the Liturgy* a fourfold structure of Eucharistic practice rooted in Jesus's Last Supper: 1) Taking; 2) Blessing; 3) Breaking; and 4)

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[618] Webber, *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail*, 41.

[619] See Webber, *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail*, 40-42. Cf. Webber, *The Divine Embrace*, 22, 196.

[620] Vicki K. Black, *Welcome to the Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2005), 5-7.

[621] James F. White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 54.

[622] Ibid., 14-16. Cf., *Worship Old and New*, revised ed., 112, 154-155, 183-186.

[623] Vicki K. Black, *Welcome to the Church Year: An Introduction to the Seasons of the Episcopal Church* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2004), 1-12.

[624] Dom Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1945), 48-50. Cf. Webber, *Common Roots*, 104; Webber, *Worship Old and New*, 128-129.

Giving. Dix argues that Jesus's fourfold action forms the foundational structure of the Eucharist and sets the standard for its observance. Webber's adoption of Dix's structure, however, includes the stages of: 1) Gathering; 2) Word; 3) Table; and 4) Sending.[625] While both Dix's and Webber's structures share a fourfold pattern, they differ in focus. Dix's structure centers on the sacramental act itself, evoking the tangible, historical moment when Jesus shared the Last Supper with His disciples. In contrast, Webber's structure provides a broader framework that encompasses the entirety of the worship service. It begins with the congregation's assembly in the presence of God, proceeds through the proclamation and reception of the Word, celebrates the Eucharist, and culminates in the commissioning of believers to go forth and embody Christ's mission in the world.[626] Webber's expanded framework reflects his belief that worship is not just a moment of sacred encounter but a continuous cycle of divine engagement and human response.[627]

Regardless of his adaptations, Webber regards Dix's conceptualization of the fourfold Eucharistic structure as indicative of biblical and historic worship. He thus seizes the opportunity to apply the structure across a broad scope of Christian traditions.[628] Webber asserts that every worship service, irrespective of its tradition, should incorporate the four folds of gathering, word, table, and sending, although the specifics of their enactment might differ.[629] He maintains a balance between a regulated pattern and the need to contextualize liturgical practices according to cultural realities that foster participation in the liturgy, a tension he sees rooted in the Anglican tradition. Historically, Anglicanism has ensured that worship remains rooted in a liturgical tradition while remaining relevant to a contemporary context. The BCP acknowledges this need for adaptability in liturgical practices, provided such adaptations remain faithful to Scripture and the foundational patterns of ancient liturgy.[630] Article XXXIV

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[625] See Webber: *Common Roots*, 99-103; *Worship is a Verb*, 47-66; *Worship Old and New*, 117-130; *The Majestic Tapestry*, 84-87; *Signs of Wonder*, 37-41; 80-81; *Planning Blended Worship*, 20-21, 50-189; *Worship Old and New*, revised ed., 150-151, 153-194; *Ancient-Future Faith*, 104-105. Notably, Webber sees the fourfold structure of worship as a biblical model of worship outlined in Acts 2:42 and in the experience of the disciples meeting with Jesus on the road to Emmaus outlined in Luke 24.

[626] Ibid.

[627] See Webber, *Worship is a Verb*, 135-138. Cf. Webber: *Common Roots*, 101-102; *Worship is a Verb*, 59, 64-65; *The Majestic Tapestry*, 84-87; *Signs of Wonder*, 37-41; 80-81; *Planning Blended Worship*, 20-21, 183-186; *Worship Old and New*, revised ed., 150-151, 191-194; *Ancient-Future Faith*, 104-105.

[628] See Webber, *Worship is a Verb*, 59-66; Cf. Webber, *Common Roots*, 99-103 and Webber, *Planning Blended Worship*, 20-31.

[629] See Webber, *Worship Old and New*, revised ed., 150-151, 153-194; and Webber, *Planning Blended Worship*, 20-21, 50-189.

[630] J.G. Davies, *The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 170.

in the Anglican Articles of Religion, (one of the foundational texts for Anglican polity and practice), entitled "Of the Traditions in the Church," states:

> It is not necessary that Traditions and Ceremonies be in all places one, and utterly like; for at all times they have been divers [*sic*], and may be changed according to the diversities of countries, times, and men's manners, so that nothing be ordained against God's Word."[631]

Webber's emphasis on contextualization in his practical-theological work in worship embodies this Anglican principle, particularly as he seeks to adapt Anglican forms in a broader evangelical context. While his practical worship theology draws inspiration from Dom Gregory Dix and the BCP to outline a standard worship structure, it also allows for flexibility and variation to accommodate the nuances of specific cultural and contextual settings.

Another way in which Webber aligns with Dix's writing is through a shared perspective on the Eucharist. In *The Shape of the Liturgy*, Dix views the Eucharist as more than just a memorial of Christ's sacrifice; he sees it as a means of grace and a way to engage in Christ's life, death, and resurrection.[632] Webber echoes Dix's views on the sacraments as pathways to grace, upholding the Eucharist as the pinnacle of Christian worship and a sign of deep commitment to Christ-centered engagement in worship.[633] Furthermore, Dix emphasizes the importance of historical continuity in worship; however, Dix links the structure of the liturgy to Christ's actions in the institution of the Eucharist while Webber sees the fourfold shape of the liturgy as a bridge that connects contemporary worship to early church practices and the biblical narrative. Webber relies on this connection to build stability and continuity in his practical worship theology, affirming that contemporary Christians are part of God's ongoing narrative in the world.

Webber's practical-theological work further reflects the Anglican tradition is in his steadfast adherence to the liturgical calendar. For Webber, this calendar, deeply embedded in the BCP, is a testament to the historical ties and influences the tradition inherited from the Roman Catholic Church and Eastern Orthodoxy.[634] Emerging from

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[631] The Episcopal Church, *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church: Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David According to the Use of the Episcopal Church* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 874.

[632] Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, 255-267.

[633] See Webber: *Common Roots*, 99-103; *Worship is a Verb*, 47-66, 133-151; *The Majestic Tapestry*, 84-87, 91-93; *Signs of Wonder*, 80-81, 116-189; *Ancient-Future Faith*, 104-105, 110-111; *Ancient-Future Worship*, 133-147.

[634] It is important to note, however, that while Webber presents the liturgical calendar as a historic pattern, it was not an immediate fixture in the early Church. The earliest Christian communities, although they observed significant events such as Christ's resurrection, did not adhere to a standardized

its roots in the Roman Catholic tradition, especially in the post-Reformation era, Anglicanism has consciously retained and emphasized the liturgical cycle. Within the Anglican context, the calendar is not just routine but a sacred guide enriching the worship experience. The liturgical calendar, as detailed in the BCP, provides a structured framework leading worshipers through the Christological narrative each year.[635] Webber describes it as a spiritual journey that commences with Advent's anticipation, culminates in the celebration of Christ's birth at Christmas, proceeds through the contemplative season of Lent and the triumphant Easter resurrection, and finally leads to the season of Pentecost, marking the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Through this journey, worshipers are immersed in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.[636] The liturgical calendar invites worshipers to participate in the rhythms of salvation history, fostering a connection to the Christian story and an invitation to the mysteries it embodies. It is not merely a tool for marking time but a sacred vehicle for spiritual formation and embodying the faith.[637]

Dix's exploration of the liturgical calendar in *The Shape of the Liturgy* underscores the calendar's role in reliving the events of Christ's life, death, and resurrection through worship.[638] His historical and theological exploration of the calendar reveals a conviction that, through liturgy, worshipers are not passive observers but actively participate in the saving events of Christ. Participation is not done merely as a memorial or remembrance of a past act but rather as a transformative immersion into the narrative of Christ's redemptive work. The liturgical calendar, as elaborated by Dix, offers worshipers an annual opportunity to journey through this narrative. Of significance is how Dix sees the calendar as an elaboration of the Eucharistic celebration where time and eternity intersect and where the community is invited to partake in the ongoing unfolding of the divine drama of salvation.[639] In Dix's perspective, the liturgical calendar is a sacred pathway that guides believers through Christ's life, death, and resurrection. It serves as an ever-renewing opportunity for worshipers to be actively engaged in the ongoing work of redemption, reinforcing the

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liturgical calendar. As the Church sought cohesion and faced various theological controversies during its first few centuries, a need to formalize and systematize worship practices emerged. See Black, *Welcome to the Church Year*, 6-9. Cf., Thomas J. Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1991).

[635] Marion J. Hatchett, *Commentary on the American Prayer Book* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995), 64-65.

[636] Webber, *Ancient-Future Time*, 16.

[637] Ibid, 20-22.

[638] Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, 237-240.

[639] Ibid., 246.

idea that Christian worship is a dynamic encounter with the living Christ. Through the calendar, Christ is not just remembered; he is encountered, embraced, and lived anew with each passing liturgical season. Dix holds the same to be true in every Eucharist celebration.[640]

Like Dix, Webber emphasizes the importance of narrative participation in worship. He believes that Christian worship should enable believers to enter and experience God's overarching story, with the events of Christ's life at the center.[641] Webber argues that the liturgical calendar provides a narrative framework for worship and faith, guiding worshipers through key events in the Christian story.[642] This cyclical journey, he contends, allows believers to embody the gospel narrative, making the historical events of Christ's life present and effective in their contemporary context.[643]

Webber employs the liturgical calendar in his practical worship theology not merely as a timeline but also as a foundational blueprint for spiritual formation. He views the calendar's liturgical progression, rooted in the narrative of Christ, as providing worshipers with a cohesive and structured approach to engaging with Christ's redemptive work.[644] He writes in *Ancient-Future Time:*

> Through Christian-year spirituality we are enabled to experience the biblical mandate of conforming to Christ. The Christian year orders our formation with Christ incarnate in his ministry, death, burial, resurrection, and coming again through Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, and Pentecost. In Christian-year spirituality we are spiritually formed by recalling and entering into his great saving events.[645]

Webber views Christian-year spirituality as a means of conforming to Christ by ordering formation around His life events, from incarnation to resurrection and return. As worshipers recall and participate in events through the liturgical seasons, they experience spiritual growth and transformation. Like Dix, he highlights the importance of remembrance and participation as integral parts of the liturgical calendar. Drawing

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[640] Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, 243-247.

[641] See Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 22-23, 29-31. Cf. Webber: *Worship is a Verb*, 34-37; *The Majestic Tapestry*, 34-36.

[642] Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 74-76. Cf. Webber: *Common Roots*, 108-111; *Worship is a Verb*, 157-172; *Worship Old and New*, 165-168; *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail*, 40-42; *Signs of Wonder*, 99-115; *The Majestic Tapestry*, 93-98; *Worship Old and New*, revised ed., 221-225; *Ancient-Future Time*.

[643] Ibid.

[644] This is the central theme of Webber's book *Ancient-Future Time*. Also see Webber: *Common Roots*, 108-111; *Worship is a Verb*, 157-172; *Worship Old and New*, 165-168; *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail*, 40-42; *Signs of Wonder*, 99-115; *The Majestic Tapestry*, 93-98; *Worship Old and New*, revised ed., 221-225; *Ancient-Future Worship*, 74-76.

[645] Webber, *Ancient-Future Time*, 22.

on the Jewish concept of time as experiencing past events anew in the present, Webber frames remembrance not as a cognitive recall of events in Christ's life but as active engagement where believers re-enter these events.[646] Each season in the liturgical calendar invites worshipers to participate in the narrative of Christ, from the anticipation of His coming (Advent) to the celebration of His resurrection (Easter) and the acknowledgment of the Holy Spirit's presence and work in the Church (Pentecost). Moreover, each season immerses the Church in various dimensions of Christ's salvific work.[647] The detailed attention given to each part of Christ's story allows believers to delve into the meanings and implications of each event. Webber sees this participatory approach of the liturgical calendar as a means of deepening believers' connection to the divine narrative and fostering spiritual growth in Christ. He emphasizes the transformative power of the Christian liturgical year in his practical worship theology, highlighting how its rhythms and patterns help worshipers align their lives and spiritual journeys with Christ.

The influence of the Anglican tradition on Webber's liturgical concept provides important insight to his method of crafting a practical theology of worship within the American evangelical landscape. Narrative serves as a key theological foundation for Webber's vision of weekly and annual worship patterns. In his fashioning of a practical worship theology, Webber discerned within Anglicanism the very elements he aspired to integrate into evangelicalism, namely a rich liturgy that aligned with his historic reading of the church, which was filled with participatory worship components and an emphasis on an intimate relationship with Christ. Due to the absence of a codified liturgical tradition in evangelical worship, Webber endeavored to establish one for it. He aimed to render the liturgical patterns of the ancient church embedded in the BCP comprehensible and adaptable across a variety of traditions and contexts. Consequently, the liturgical tradition of Anglicanism served as his conduit for melding what he perceived as the time-honored catholic faith with the evangelical emphasis on individual spiritual experience. Although Webber maintained an unwavering allegiance to the tenets he interpreted in early church writings, he refrained from directly adopting

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[646] Ibid., 31-32. Webber writes, "…when the Christian year is turned into a mere repetition of the past, we miss the point. The spiritual purpose of celebrating God's saving events is to be formed by Christ, to die with him, to be raised with him, to be born anew, and to live in the hope of his resurrection and return." See Webber, *Ancient-Future Time*, 31. Cf. Webber: *Worship Old and New*, 162-163; *Worship Old and New*, revised ed., 218.

[647] Webber, *Ancient-Future Time*, 31. Cf. Webber: *Common Roots*, 109-111; *Worship is a Verb*, 157-172.

their forms into his practical worship theology. He instead opted for Anglican forms as instruments to promulgate these principles within contemporary evangelicalism.[648]

Webber's reliance on the Anglican tradition for infusing evangelicalism with the principles he valued in the ancient church is not without its shortcomings and potential deficiencies. While it is true that the Anglican tradition has a rich liturgical heritage, it is important to question whether it is the most suitable bridge for all evangelicals. For example, Webber's practical-liturgical approach hinges on the assumption that the Anglican tradition is a seamless conduit for translating theological principles into contemporary evangelical liturgical practices; however, this assumption overlooks the fact that the Anglican tradition itself has evolved over time and has its own theological nuances and variations. Anglicanism is not a monolithic tradition, and what Webber may have seen as a faithful representation of the ancient church in the BCP may not align with the perspectives of all Anglicans. For example, Webber never talks about the Anglican formularies or the Book of Homilies in his work, which are central to Anglican identity. Similarly, Webber's practical-theological approach may be criticized for its potential to homogenize the diverse landscape of evangelicalism. By prescribing a particular liturgical framework founded upon the Anglican liturgical tradition, Webber risks marginalizing other expressions of evangelical worship that may have valid theological foundations but different cultural or contextual needs. His one-size-fits-all approach may prove insufficient in addressing the intricate tapestry of contemporary evangelicalism, particularly in diverse global or minority cultures and within traditions influenced by charismatic approaches to worship. It is imperative to question whether Webber's adaptation of ancient insights into these varied contexts faithfully preserves the theological integrity of both traditions and if it inadvertently diminishes the ethos inherent to either. It is critical to recognize that the effective integration of historical and Anglican liturgical practices into evangelical worship

[648] Notably, throughout his writings Webber elevates four longstanding liturgical practices as paramount for preserving historic Christological content in the contemporary church, namely the fourfold structure of worship, the proclamation of the Word, the celebration of the Eucharist, and the liturgical calendar. Although these four acts are indicative to Anglican worship, Webber sees them reflect ancient practices and commitments to Christology as well. To a lesser degree, though still present in his writing at time, Webber suggests other acts for worship practice that tend to be more Anglican and Roman Catholic in origin, but still embody Christological symbolism and proclamation. Such acts include: the opening procession; the reading of an Old Testament lesson, a Psalm, an Epistle lesson, and a Gospel reading; the standing for the reading of the Gospel; the prayers of the people; the passing of the peace; and the use of the lectionary for preaching. Each of these is thoroughly Anglican in nature and the patterns he sets forth when speaking of them model the rubrics of the weekly Eucharist service in the BCP. See Webber: *Worship is a Verb*, 52-53, 96; *Worship Old and New*, 118-119, 122-123, 129-130; *Signs of Wonder*, 45-46; *Worship Old and New*, revised ed., 155, 165-169; *Planning Blended Worship*, 55-57; 90-91, 116-118, 121. Cf. *The Book of Common Prayer*, 323-366.

necessitates not only liturgical changes but also comprehensive training and education of the laity. Without a deliberate effort to educate and familiarize a community with the theological, historical, and Christological underpinnings of these practices, their mere introduction may not be sufficient to effect meaningful change. The adaptation and assimilation of these liturgical practices and their Christological significance inherently requires an informed and engaged congregation.

5. Conclusion

Webber's exploration of worship, spanning historical, theological, and cultural dimensions, provides a multifaceted understanding of the normative principles he seeks to preserve in his practical worship theology. Several themes emerge as pivotal for grasping the depth of his insights and vision for worship.

First, Webber's evangelical taxonomy presents a robust and multifaceted approach to the evangelical identity. Webber delineates six distinct attributes that serve as pillars of evangelicalism, capturing its essence rooted in ancient Christianity while actively engaging with modern cultural paradigms. The dual emphasis on history and an ever-renewing present reality showcases how Webber sees evangelicalism as a movement entrenched in tradition but dynamic enough to remain relevant in contemporary contexts. The linchpin of Webber's evangelical concept is the pronounced emphasis on Christology. The teachings, life, and works of Jesus Christ emerge as the primary interpretative lens, serving as the center point for the diverse expressions of evangelicalism. This Christological anchor ensures that regardless of varied sub-cultural understandings, the crux of the evangelical message remains aligned with the historical narrative of the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Webber's practical worship theology maintains what he believes to be its historic, theological evangelical character. He neither promotes a complete deviation from traditional worship nor supports the mere mimicry of ancient practices; instead, he presents in his practical worship theology a balanced approach, merging the time-tested wisdom of ancient voices with the contextual mindedness required to meet the needs of contemporary worshipers. Accordingly, while Webber's "blended" approach champions the merits of historical precedence, it also underscores the necessity of relevance in the evolving contemporary religious landscape.

Secondly, Webber's examination of the early centuries of the church reveals normative theological principles of worship he identifies as present in the historic church. Key figures such as Justin, Hippolytus, and Irenaeus play crucial roles in

Webber's interpretation of early church practices, each adding depth to his practical-theological approach to worship. Their collective emphasis on Christological participation in worship provides a contrast to the more individualistic and subjective focus prevalent in American evangelical worship traditions of his time. The insights of these early church thinkers illuminated for Webber the transformative power of worship that engages with the Christological narrative of *Christus Victor*. As he synthesized their teachings, it became evident that the act of worship is not a mere formalized ritual but a participatory journey into the heart of the Christian story. Webber thus sought to realign worship with this ancient and Christocentric framework and to present a theological paradigm that invites believers to immerse themselves in the redemptive narrative of Jesus Christ, thereby deepening their relationship with Christ and enriching their spiritual experience.

Webber also viewed Christological participation as the normative concept necessary for the reshaping of worship, especially as it is applied through liturgical practice. He focuses his practical worship theology on collective participation in the objective work of Christ, as understood through the *Christus Victor* motif, encountered through transformative immersion in the Christological narrative of worship. He thus sets forth four normative liturgical practices in worship the allow people to engage in such Christological participation: the structure of worship; the liturgical calendar; the proclamation of the Word; and participation in the sacraments. In Webber's perspective, these patterns and practices hold potential for worship to foster active encounter with God and engagement with Christ's victory over sin and death.[649] Moreover, such Christological reframing allows worshipers in all times and places to see the activity of worship not as isolated gestures but as dynamic components of a broader narrative, specifically one that invites them into a participatory relationship with the person of Christ and His victorious work.[650] Christological participation thus nurtures a profound and enriched understanding of worship, turning it into a transformative journey rather than mere routine.[651]

Thirdly, Webber's commitment to integrate Anglicanism with evangelical worship demonstrates his deliberate intent to align principles from the early church with practices accessible to his contemporary context. Notably, although Webber never obscures his Anglican identity, he also does not emphasize how thoroughly Anglican

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[649] See Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 92-111.
[650] Webber, *The Majestic Tapestry*, 25-38.
[651] Ibid., 34-38.

his worship theology is. One reason he refrains is due to an ingrained prejudice amongst evangelicals toward Roman Catholicism, which included a bias against any formalized structures of worship.[652] Many evangelicals would never accept a formalized Anglican way of worship, he believed; therefore, because accessibility is necessary to bring liturgical reform, Webber presents his liturgical vision to evangelicals in a simple way. The purpose of his practical worship theology was not to turn evangelicals into Anglicans; rather, he wanted evangelicals to engage in liturgical practices that set forth what he believed to be historic Christological approaches to worship. Through his prolific writing, teaching, and speaking, Webber subtly popularized Anglican forms of worship in contemporary evangelical contexts, seeking to re-orient evangelical worship away from subjective experience to richer experience of the person and work of Jesus Christ.

In conclusion, Webber's work in worship presents a careful, methodical exploration into what he believes true, historically minded evangelical worship should be. His emphasis on Christocentric worship, coupled with his incorporation of early church teachings, offers a blueprint for worship that is both rooted in history and applicable in contemporary evangelical churches. Moreover, his ability to integrate Anglican norms into contemporary evangelical contexts, without overtly labeling them, speaks to his strategic approach. The result of Webber's commitment to the normative historic, theological, and cultural dimensions of worship is his commitment to four essential principles that comprise a conceptual framework for his practical worship theology: one, the return to historic Christianity rooted in the earliest expressions of the church;[653] two, the recovery of God's narrative in the worship of the church;[654] three, the active participation of the congregation in worship;[655] and four, the recalibration of the experiential dynamic of evangelical worship through the person and work of Jesus Christ.[656] Webber's attention to history, narrative, participation, and experience aims to root worship in the story and character of Jesus Christ based on God's covenantal and redemptive acts as well as the witness of the church throughout the ages.[657] In synthesizing these principles, Webber underscores his imperative that worship practices

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[652] See Webber: *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail*, 11-17, 45, 63; *Signs of Wonder*, 6-7.

[653] Webber, *Common Roots*, 22.

[654] Ibid., 99-103; Cf. Webber, *Worship is a Verb*, 34-46; Webber, *Signs of Wonder*, 31-34; Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*, 102-106; Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 93-101.

[655] See Webber, *Worship is a Verb*, 17-20.

[656] Ibid., 9-15.

[657] See Webber, *Common Roots*, 91.

must remain anchored in foundational theological tenets while also fostering contextual engagement with contemporary believers.

4. Webber's Practical-Theological Process

1. Introduction

The current chapter attempts to answer the following questions: How does Webber's work in worship reflect the discipline of practical theology? How does his work in worship serve as a practical worship theology? The goal of the chapter is to distinguish Webber's practical-theological process, its key concepts, and its contribution to the practice and theology of Christian worship. The chapter also evaluates the usefulness of Webber's practical worship theology for implementing changes in liturgical content and practice.

2. Webber as a practical worship theologian

As the introduction to this thesis states, given its expansive scope as a discipline, practical theology can mean different things in different contexts and is applied through a variety of methods. While the following material attempts to explore Webber's work in worship within this broad spectrum, it is crucial to underscore a distinction. Despite the seeming parallels between his work and the field of practical theology, Webber never self-identified as a practical theologian.[658] Nowhere in his work does Webber utilize or propose a particular model or approach to practical theology, including those outlined in the current chapter. Webber was educated as a historical theologian and not a practical theologian. Even though his practical worship theology places theology and praxis in conversation with each other, Webber considered his field of expertise to be historical theology and not practical theology.[659] Additionally, during much of Webber's tenure as a student and a professor, practical theology was not a prominent discipline in American theological education. It is probable, then, that Webber was not exposed to various models of or approaches to practical theology, save for the ministerial education paradigm explained in the following material. When studying Webber as a practical theologian, therefore, one must be careful not to pigeonhole his

[658] For example, from 1968 to 2000 Webber served as Professor of Theology at Wheaton College and was named Professor Emeritus upon his retirement in 2000. He was then appointed William R. and Geraldine D. Myers Professor of Ministry and Director of the M.A. in Worship and Spirituality at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary in the fall of 2000. His time at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary had more of a practical or applied ministry focus, but Webber did not focus his teaching or writing specifically in the discipline of practical theology.

[659] Nowhere in Webber's writings does he ever mention the term "practical theology" or use the label of "practical theologian" to describe his work in worship. He does often relate his work in worship to his studies and training in historical theology, however, which is seen in his final publication on worship, *Ancient-Future Worship*, which was published posthumously. See *Ancient-Future Worship*, 168-169.

work into a pre-established model, especially given his lack of formal engagement with the discipline.

Despite his lack of formal engagement with practical theology, Webber's work in worship is representative of the discipline. His work does not fit squarely within one paradigm of practical theology but rather integrates them; thus, his work also connects to significant concepts outlined in each of the models while also expanding beyond them. Each paradigm highlights a different feature of Webber's work and confirms his commitment to maintaining a healthy relationship between content and praxis in worship.

Webber spent most of his career as a professor of theology at Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois. Prior to his professorship, he was educated in historical theology at Concordia Seminary in Saint Louis, Missouri where his doctoral research focused on Protestant-Roman Catholic relations in England during the first quarter of the seventeenth century.[660] Academic training aside, Webber was not content to deal with theology in the abstract. During his tenure at Wheaton College, he seldom attended any conference that was academic and not practical in nature.[661] Rather than propose and debate academic theories, Webber's ambition was to train pastors and lay people to reconcile historical theology with contemporary praxis in the worship of the local church. He preferred to write popular books over academic treatises and chose to lead ministry workshops instead of presenting at academic conferences.[662] His reasons were threefold: one, he wanted church leaders and congregants to understand how historic liturgical content and practices invite worship of God more fully; two, he wanted to assist leaders and congregations in implementing theological content and participating in historic practices of worship; and three, he wanted to help leaders and laity in the local church become change-agents as they incorporated historic practices of worship in their contextual settings.[663] Webber functioned as a practical theologian, therefore, because he dedicated his time and his work to addressing worship theology and practice in the lived reality of the local church.

Webber also functioned as a practical theologian inasmuch as he himself served as a theological ethnographer in American evangelicalism at the turn of the twenty-first

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[660] See Webber, "The Controversy Provoked by William Perkins' Reformed Catholike."

[661] Ibid.

[662] Robert Hosack, conversation with author, Wilmore, February 3, 2021. Hosack was a good friend of Webber's and served as his publishing editor at Baker Books, as is seen in Webber's acknowledgements in *Ancient-Future Worship*. See Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 15-16.

[663] Robert E. Webber, *Worship: In the Heart, in the Home, and in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Lamplighter Books, 1985), 8.

century. As an insider to the American evangelical movement, Webber was able to engage his context as a participant observer, offering critique of his context and laboring as an agent of evangelical reform, especially in the field of worship. Throughout his work in worship Webber engaged patterns of practice and thinking operant particularly in contemporary American evangelical churches, putting the American evangelical worship setting in conversation with historic theories and practices of worship. Webber's goal was to assist American evangelicals in rediscovering lost or neglected aspects of tradition, doctrine, and practice. He thus paid equal attention to the traditional doctrines of the church and to the theology embedded in the church's liturgical activity. Unique to Webber's work was his advocacy for worship to reveal Christ and be grounded in the church's historic faith while not neglecting personal experience and cultural expression.[664] Webber saw theology, liturgy, experience, and culture working together in an inseparable relationship in worship to faithfully embody the Gospel. For example, Webber continually urged church leaders and laity to retrieve historic liturgical practices in worship—such as the Eucharist and the liturgical calendar—that reflect the story of Jesus Christ as proclaimed in the Scriptures.[665] At the same time, Webber obliged to provide training aids for church leaders and laity on how to implement formative concepts, patterns, and practices of worship contextually in their local ecclesial contexts in order to preserve Christological participation.[666] Thus, although he was devoted to protecting the historic content of the Gospel in worship, a commitment to helping stoke worship renewal in American evangelicalism through the study, planning, and implementation of historic worship practices in contextualized forms also is seen in his work. Webber spent time in local churches and listened to the concerns of local church leaders and members to address actual concerns rather than theoretical ones. Many of Webber's publications

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[664] Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 168.

[665] See especially Webber: *Common Roots*, 77-88, 104-111; *Worship Old and New*, 131-149, 161-174; *The Majestic Tapestry*, 77-98; *Signs of Wonder*, 34-41, 99-115, 121-123; *Worship is a Verb*, 47-66, 153-172; *A Workshop on Worship*, 50-57, 74-82; *Planning Blended Worship*, 127-181; *Worship: Journey into His Presence*, 70-100; *Renew Your Worship*, 63-73; *Rediscovering the Christian Feasts*, 2-105; *The Younger Evangelicals*, 195-204; *Ancient-Future Faith*, 110-112; *Ancient-Future Time*, 15-181; *Ancient-Future Worship*, 106-111, 133-148, 176-177. Also see: Webber, *The Renewal of Sunday Worship*, vol. 3 in the *Complete Library of Christian Worship*; *The Services of the Christian Year*, vol. 5 in the *Complete Library of Christian Worship*; and *The Sacred Actions of Christian Worship*, vol. 6 in the *Complete Library of Christian Worship*.

[666] See especially Webber: *Common Roots*, 88-90; *Worship Old and New*, 87-96; *The Majestic Tapestry*, 21-38; *Signs of Wonder*, 29-34; *Worship is a Verb*, 27-46; *Planning Blended Worship*, 21-34; *Renew Your Worship*, 11-21, 30-37, 104-122; *Worship Old and New*, revised ed., 149-151; *Ancient-Future Faith*, 102-104; *Ancient-Future Worship*, 107-109.

recount stories of his experiences meeting with and teaching in local churches.[667] In the preface to *Worship is a Verb* Webber writes, "*Worship is a Verb* has grown out of workshops I have led on worship. These workshops are designed to help a congregation evaluate the worship of their church, step by step, and plan a specific program of worship renewal that meets the needs of their church."[668] His concern was for renewal within the local church; thus, Webber spent time observing, listening, and addressing concerns as both a theological ethnographer and ministerial educator among the people of local American evangelical churches.

Webber's emphasis on the contextual dynamic of worship also illustrates his approach to worship as a practical theologian. Besides the attention he gives to his own cultural context of American evangelicalism, Webber proposes in his work that the theological principles he sets forth should be applied in local settings through indigenous worship praxis, i.e., contextual practices that allow those within a local area to fully participate in worship. For Webber, worship is rooted in participatory proclamation and reenactment of the story of God culminating in the person and work of Jesus Christ. He thus advocates for contextualization of worship that is open and flexible based on cultural dynamics within the local congregation such as ethnicity, generation, background, and preference to ensure the Gospel is communicated clearly in any worship setting and to safeguard participatory engagement in worship.[669] While he insists the content and structure of worship should not be altered, Webber believes context is subject to considerable variety since it is relative to the ever-shifting patterns of culture, differing according to time and place.[670] Each local congregation has a responsibility to develop practices that allow for local expression in worship and foster congregational participation.

Finally, Webber's work in worship represents practical theology by virtue of his holistic approach to worship practice. Most significant to Webber's practical worship theology is his grounding of worship in the person and work of Jesus Christ. For Webber, Christian worship is the celebration of God's mighty acts of salvation, seen specifically in God's uniting with humanity through Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection, and in humanity's uniting with God through the reception of new life in

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[667] For example, see Webber: *Worship is a Verb*, 7, 68, 77, 82, 94, 127, 153, 189; *Signs of Wonder*, "Acknowledgements," ix-x, 47, 52-55, 61, 99-100, 131-132; *Planning Blended Worship*, 36, 102-103.

[668] Webber, *Worship is a Verb*, 7.

[669] Webber, *Worship Old and New*, revised ed., 263.

[670] Webber, *Planning Blended Worship*, 21.

the crucified, risen, and ascended Christ.[671] Accordingly, he sets forth a model for congregational worship that offers Christ to the church through the inclusion of theological content that proclaims the narrative of Christ's redemptive story and liturgical practices that foster participation in Christ's saving work.[672]

3. Paradigms of practical theology

To give a more critical look at Webber's practical-theological process, the following material sets forth a pathway for assessing various facets of Webber's work as a practical theologian of worship and identifies features that distinguish it. In particular, the research of Ray Anderson, Paul Ballard, Deborah Bhatti, John Browning, Hellen Cameron, Catherine Duce, Glenn Packiam, John Prichard, James Sweeney, Pete Ward, and Clare Watkins is used to cover a range of approaches for how practical theology develops authentic connections between theology, practice, culture, and lived experience.[673] Six preeminent paradigms of the discipline emerge from their work: the ministerial educational model; the critical-correlational model; the interpreted action model; the habitus virtue model; the classical tradition model; and the scriptural cycle.[674] Each paradigm offers a different way of doing practical theology and distinct ideas about the discipline. Likewise, each paradigm offers specific insights to how Webber's work in worship functions as practical theology. Each of the six paradigms are reviewed in the following material to understand Webber's work better as a practical theologian. Following an examination of the six paradigms, Webber's unique process of practical theology is distinguished and evaluated.

3.1 Ministerial education

The first paradigm of practical theology to be considered is the ministerial education model, which is the model that established practical theology as a discipline.[675] The purpose of the ministerial education model is skill-based training for ministry. In the ministerial education model, practical theology is separated into areas of study where clergy training methods are developed for various roles and functions of ministry, such

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[671] Webber, *The Divine Embrace*, 16.

[672] Ibid.

[673] See: Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action*; Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*; Packiam, *Worship and the World to Come*; Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*.

[674] Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 69-93.

[675] As the Introduction to this thesis notes, Fredrick Schleiermacher first proposed practical theology as its own discipline. His vision for practical theology was the professional training of clergy through academic engagement with source criticism and evidential argumentation. See Gräb, "Practical Theology as Theology of Religion: Schleiermacher's Understanding of Practical Theology as a Discipline," 181–96.

as preaching, worship, evangelism, leadership, youth ministry, and Christian education. Each of these ministerial roles provides a different way of thinking about the applied practice of ministry in theological education, so each is treated as a practiced responsibility in the local church rather than a discipline of theoretical analysis.[676] The idea in the ministerial education model is that theology begins with the examination of practices rather than through biblical or theoretical inquiry that then applies practice in the church.[677] Preference is given to the lived-reality of the pastor in the local church who determines different theological questions and perspectives. The goal is to treat theology not in the theoretical or the abstract but for theological processes to emerge from the life of the church. Training is focused on honing skills and developing tools for employing best practices in the face of ever-changing ecclesial situations.

Not all approaches to the ministerial education model are anti-theoretical, however. Expanding beyond a purely skill-based understanding of the ministerial education model, in their book, *Practical Theology in Action*, Ballard and Prichard claim that all practices are a form of applied theory, especially in ministry.[678] Noting the influence of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Ballard and Pritchard explain that practical theology emerged out of the bedrock of historical theology and philosophical theology as a way of shifting theological examination away from rational discussion and toward the study of human experience and Christian faith as a cultural form. They consider the function of the ministerial-education model (or the applied-theory model, as they call it) to be twofold: one, evaluation through deductive examination of what theory should be brought to bear on a particular ecclesial practice; and two, discernment through inductive analysis of the theory implicit in an ecclesial practice. For Ballard and Pritchard, the ministerial education model places abstract and theoretical thinking in an ecclesial perspective, bringing to the foreground questions and issues that arise from the life of the church. As Ward comments, "This attention to practice moves the methodological discussion in practical theology from a relationship between subject areas in an academic discipline to the embodied life of communities."[679] In other words, for Ballard and Prichard, both applied theory and communal experience of that applied theory are integral to the work of practical theology. Pastors must be trained to apply

[676] Ibid., 70.
[677] Ibid., 76.
[678] Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action*, 54.
[679] Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology,* 77.

theological theory through best practices, see the connection between theology and practices, and evaluate the communal experience of practices.

The ministerial education model is helpful inasmuch as it keeps an ecclesial focus at the forefront of theological thought and gives practice hermeneutical value. Several critiques can be made of the model, however. To begin, one problem with the model is that it isolates practical theology as a discipline solely for ministry professionals. As the name suggests, the ministerial education model relegates practical theology to those called to professional ministry, thereby establishing a disparity between clergy and laity.

Secondly, given the focus on the lived reality of the pastor and/or the communal experience of the church, the ministerial education model risks being anthropocentric rather than theocentric. Theology is the study of God and God's relationship to the world; thus, any theological endeavor should keep God and the ongoing ministry of Christ at the center of reflection. The purpose of the ministerial education model, however, is to equip congregational leaders to engage in the interpretation of events, situations, and contexts that confront them in ministry, which places contemporary issues and personal experience at the forefront of reflection. As such, the ministerial educational model emphasizes how human experience impacts ecclesial practices, which can lose sight of theological commitments that must be maintained in praxis and result in a pragmatic approach to ministry.

Thirdly, Ballard and Prichard's explanation of the ministerial education model points out another shortcoming of the model. In their work, Ballard and Prichard show how the ministerial education model emphasizes applied theology through the learning of practical skills, which can appear to abdicate all theological responsibility.[680] The priority given to ministry practices suggests that theological inquiry and discourse is better housed in disciplines like systematics, philosophy, and historical studies while the scope of practical theology is limited to growth in skill-based proficiency. As a result, the ministerial education model creates a rationalistic distinction between theory and practice and forges a unidirectional theological process, giving precedence to theory and making practice derivative. Ballard and Pritchard observe, on the other hand, "there is no simple, deductive relationship between theory and practice. Rather, there is a dialectical exchange between them."[681] In other words, theology and practice are necessary conversation partners. For example, Christian history has proven that the

[680] Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action*, 63.
[681] Ibid., 62.

church's beliefs often are worked out in its practices and controversies, while simultaneously the activity of the church is informed by a living faith. Both are true of the ecumenical creeds. The creeds are informed by the living faith of the church but also have been formulated by the controversies of the church. As a liturgical act of worship, the creeds thus stand as a proclamation of theology. Thus, practices are not derivative of theology but embody it. Theological theory is completed in praxis not as a secondary step but as an integral part of the whole theological reflection process.

Finally, the ministerial education model is deficient due to its failure to address theological forms of knowledge that relate to the social sciences. As Ward recognizes, academic methods of practical theology have developed over the years through conversations on the correlation between theology and the social sciences.[682] The ministerial education model is concerned with practice oriented by ecclesial perspective and personal experience and does not express the engagement of theology with the wider society. It keeps practical theology bound within the walls of the church and does not offer much critical reflection on the relationship between the church and the world.

The ministerial education paradigm illuminates aspects of Webber's work in worship as practical theology, particularly considering Webber's inclination to train pastors and church leaders in Christological content and praxis of worship. At one level, throughout his career Webber's predilection was to speak at church gatherings and workshops instead of academic conferences. Although as a professor he was committed to ministerial education in the classroom, Webber was also committed to education in an ecclesial context. Webber thus wrote several training manuals and practical guides to assist church leaders in the planning, leading, and evaluation of services of worship, such as his books: *Planning Blended Worship*; *A Workshop on Worship: In the Heart, in the Home, and in the Church*; *Worship: Journey into His Presence*; and his *Alleluia! Series*.

Webber's desire for training pastors and church leaders in worship is further reflected in the distinctives articulated in the curriculum of IWS. The curriculum explicitly names "ministerial skills in Christian worship" as one of the school's core program outcomes.[683] Likewise, Webber's educational philosophy for the school states:

> Each course has a particular content and students are to work within the parameters of its subject. Each person is asked to think, "How can this material be integrated into my ministry?" With that question in mind,

[682] Ibid., 77.

[683] Institute for Worship Studies, "Doctorate of Worship Studies: Program Outcomes," accessed July 4, 2022, https://iws.edu/academics/curriculum/dws/.

> the learner appropriates the material of the course into his or her work: the classroom, week-by-week worship planning or preaching preparation. In this way the learner is not working for the teacher but for his or her own knowledge and immediate use in ministry.[684]

Central to the school's philosophy is education of leaders who can apply learned knowledge to "immediate use in ministry." The goal of worship education at IWS is for leaders to be trained in such a way that newly gained knowledge can be applied through ministerial practices in the local church. To achieve this goal, classes at the school follow a three-step process: 1) pre-course reading and reflection that asks students to identify an issue in their congregational setting considering how course material can enhance their ministry; 2) interaction with material in the classroom environment on biblical, historical, theological, missiological, and cultural factors related to worship; and 3) preparation of a paper or project integrated with the student's ministry context.[685] Doctoral students at IWS also are required to participate in a practicum that focuses "purposefully and creatively on areas of worship renewal addressed in their classes and in their places of ministry."[686] As can be seen in these descriptions, Webber believes worship education must be rooted in a local church or ministry context. Worship education is not to be solely theoretical but also practical in nature, equipping leaders with necessary principles and skills to serve in local ministry contexts.

Webber's work spans far beyond the ministerial education model, however. Exclusive focus on clergy education concerned him. His unease is seen clearly in critique of the disparity between clergy and laity in his book *Worship is a Verb*. Webber asserts in the book that the pastor tends to dominate services of evangelical worship, making the congregation little more than a passive audience.[687] As he reflects on his own experiences in evangelical worship, Webber writes, "I feel as though I'm not worshiping; I'm not actively participating. Rather, the pastor is doing everything for me. I'm simply a receiver, a passive recipient of the actions of another person."[688] For Webber, worship education is not meant for the pastor alone, but for the whole church. He desires to educate pastors so they in turn can equip congregations to engage

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[684] Institute for Worship Studies, "Educational Philosophy," accessed July 4, 2022, https://iws.edu/about/unique/educational-philosophy/.

[685] Ibid.

[686] Institute for Worship Studies, "Doctor of Worship Studies: Curriculum," accessed July 4, 2022, https://iws.edu/academics/programs-offered/dws/.

[687] Webber, *Worship is a Verb*, 13.

[688] Ibid.

in practices that reflect and inform the faith. Engaged participation in the actions of worship is the key to returning worship back to the people, in Webber's opinion. As the pastor fosters participation in worship through liturgical practices and helps the congregation understand its corporate activity, the gathered church can engage in active communion, conversation, and response to God.[689] He writes in the "Welcome" to his *Alleluia! Series,* "The mission…is to make the study of worship available to everyone in the church—academician, pastor, worship leader, music minister, and layperson."[690] For Webber, worship education is meant for the whole church, not just the clergy. The laity's full, active participation in proclaiming and enacting the story of Jesus Christ in worship is paramount; thus, throughout his career Webber developed book series, teaching aids, and even his own contemporized editions of prayer books to assist in lay training and not just ministerial education.[691]

3.2 Critical-correlation

A second model of practical theology to be considered is the critical-correlation model, which, unlike the ministerial education model, pairs practical theology with the social sciences, allowing anthropology to shed light on human experience and behavior. The critical-correlation model is not predisposed to keeping practical theology within a professional ministry sphere but makes it a public activity. Along these lines, James Whyte describes the model as a three-fold engagement between "theological disciplines, the social sciences and the actual situation."[692] The goal of the model is to set alongside each other the imperatives of the gospel (based on the Bible and tradition)

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[689] Ibid., 128-129.

[690] See Robert E. Webber, *Learning to Worship with All Your Heart: A Study in the Biblical Foundations of Worship*, in *The Alleluia! Series of the Institute for Worship Studies* (Nashville: Hendrickson, 1997), ix. The same "Welcome" appears in the subsequent six books of the *Alleluia! Series*: *Rediscovering the Missing Jewel: A Study of Worship through the Centuries* (Nashville: Hendrickson, 1997), ix; *Renew Your Worship!: A Study in the Blending of Traditional and Contemporary Worship* (Nashville: Hendrickson, 1997), ix; *Enter His Courts with Praise: A Study of the Role of Music and the Arts in Worship* (Nashville: Hendrickson, 1997), ix; *Rediscovering the Christian Feasts: A Study in the Services of the Christian Year* (Nashville: Hendrickson, 1998), ix; *Encountering the Healing Power of God: A Study in the Sacred Actions of Worship* (Nashville: Hendrickson, 1998), ix; *Empowered by the Holy Spirit: A Study in the Ministries of Worship* (Nashville: Hendrickson, 1998), ix.

[691] See Robert E. Webber, *A Workshop on Worship: In the Heart, in the Home, and in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985); Robert E. Webber, *The Book of Family Prayer* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986); Robert Webber, *The Book of Daily Prayer* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993); Twila Paris and Robert Webber, *In this Sanctuary: An Invitation to Worship the Savior* (Nashville: Star Song, 1993); Webber, *The Alleluia! Series of the Institute for Worship Studies*, 7 vols. (Nashville: Hendrickson, 1997-1998); Robert Webber, *Worship: Journey into His Presence* (Mansfield: Kingdom Publishing, 1999); Robert E. Webber, *The Prymer: The Prayer Book of the Medieval Era Adapted for Contemporary Use* (Brewster: Paraclete Press, 2000).

[692] James Whyte, "Critical-Correlation Model," in Alastair Campbell, *A Dictionary of Pastoral Care*, (SPCK 1987).

and social realities (based on present social and ethical concerns). Similarly, David Tracy proposes that a correlational model of practical theology should be built on the precept that practical theology is the ethical outworking of the faith.[693] The model is concerned primarily with the religious significance of social and political movements and cultural situations, he claims, and is oriented toward ethical praxis rather than theoretical frameworks as it gets taken up into these movements.[694] The critical-correlation model thus approaches theology through an anthropological lens.

Over the past few decades, the critical-correlation model has been a classic in the field of practical theology thanks to the work of Don S. Browning. In his book, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, Browning integrates theory and practice in an ongoing process of action and reflection by placing the theologian at the center of a social context.[695] The theologian stands alongside the church, mediating the Gospel from that center, seeking to understand and describe the ethical life of the church first and then offer critical and corrective frameworks that help communities change and renew their praxis.[696] Theological reflection relates these social and contextual experiences and behaviors to God as it discerns the conflicting cultural and religious meanings that guide action and practical questions.[697] For Browning, practical theology must remain in touch with human experience and lead to development of specific plans for the church to engage in praxis, not only in an ecclesial setting but also in the broader society. The critical-correlation model establishes a method for doing practical theology in such a way that it engages the lived faith practiced both inside and outside of an ecclesial context. According to Browning, practical theology is not applied systematic or biblical theology, as he believes is the case in the ministerial education model. Instead, practical theology constitutes "the most complex, most difficult" of the theological disciplines, because it requires the theologian, church leader, and minister to "study, interpret and understand with an end toward action, description, decision."[698]

One hazard in the critical-correlation model is how it sets theological truth as subject to culture rather than transcending it. If not careful, too much focus on secular social science theories and contemporary ethical ideologies can erode a classical

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[693] David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1975), 46.

[694] Ibid.

[695] Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*.

[696] Ibid., 11. Cf. Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 79.

[697] Ballard and Prichard, *Practical Theology in Action*, 55.

[698] Don S. Browning, "Integrating the Approaches. A Practical Theology," in *Building Effective Ministry: Theory and Practice in the Focal Church*, ed. Carl S. Dudley, San Francisco (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 221.

theological character, setting practical theology under the discipline of social ethics rather than the opposite. As Thomas Oden reflects, ethical methodologies and strategies can end up setting the parameters for practical theology "without much self-conscious identity formation from the [Christian] tradition."[699] When considering the critical-correlation model, therefore, it is important to recognize that all cultural situations are complex and multi-layered with varying perspectives. Ballard and Pritchard observe, ". . . the model threatens to be as confusing as the actual situation."[700] No singular interpretation or description of any given social situation exists, and each person involved may understand a situation differently. Some kind of grounding and stabilizing factor is needed.

Also, like the ministerial education model, the critical-correlation model does not guide reflection in a relational manner to the divine, nor does it set forth a vision of participation in Christ's ongoing ministry in the world. The model sets up a guard against fideism (the doctrine that knowledge depends on faith and revelation) and is not clear on what should be considered *a priori* for praxis. No basis is given for correlation between theological reflection, experience, and ethical practice. Thus, when exploring the church's ethical responsibility to the surrounding culture through renewed praxis, any conversation may be seen as beneficial simply because it is critical of the church or of the culture and pushes toward some ethical framework. The model can lead to an assumption that deconstructive analysis and social advocacy is enough to produce significant outcomes. This makes it difficult for the practical theologian to discern good from superficial theological reflection, especially since individual performance and personal conviction can guide critical reflection rather than theologically inspired insights for the church and the world.

While connections can be made between Webber's work in worship and the critical-correlation approach to practical theology, they are not as obvious as connections to the ministerial education paradigm. Aspects of critical-correlation are revealed in instances where Webber interfaces with anthropology and emphasizes the social/ethical dimension of worship outside of the church.

Regarding anthropology, although Webber's work in worship was done in and for the church, he did not ignore the surrounding culture. Throughout his work Webber maintains the necessity of cultural awareness for the study, planning, and

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[699] Thomas Oden, *Care of Souls in the Classic Tradition: Theology and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 32.

[700] Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action*, 64.

implementation of worship since culture influences the style in which worship is done. Awareness of the surrounding culture allows church leaders to know the language and communication style of the people so they can foster active participation in worship practices. Applying ethnic style is not to be done for the sake of cultural appeal but rather to make the content, pattern, and practices of worship indigenous to a local setting.[701] Webber writes in *Planning Blended Worship*:

> …the style of worship is subject to considerable variety. This is because worshiping styles are rooted in the ever-changing kaleidoscope of human culture. There is no one style of worship that is suitable for all people always and everywhere. Instead, the style of worship will differ according to time and place relative to the changing patterns of culture…we must allow our style to reflect who we are as a people.[702]

Similar to how the critical correlation model places the practical theologian at the center of a social context to offer corrective frameworks for renewing communal practices, Webber's worship theology urges pastors and church leaders to pay attention to the culture and implement practices in styles that elicit rather than hinder the praise of God.[703] Such work of contextualization is necessary in worship to communicate God's narrative of salvation of Jesus Christ via the language of the people.

Concerning the ethical dimension of the critical-correlation model, connections are seen in Webber's claim that worship extends to all of life—home, work, and even leisure.[704] According to Webber, worship is a vision of the new creation that Christ is bringing to earth; therefore, "Worship also reveals the action that the body of Christ must take to participate in the transformation of the world."[705] Webber situates worship as an enactment of the work of Christ who offers praise and thanksgiving to the Father. He then asserts, "But it is equally important that we *act on* what we have enacted…true worship of God inevitably leads the people of God into positive social action."[706] For Webber, worship recalibrates the experiential dynamic of worship as participation in Jesus Christ not only inside the church but also outside it as people go forth to minister with Christ in the world. Although he emphasizes worship as resulting in outward social action in his work, Webber does not expound upon what such social action entails.[707] The lack of enumeration on renewed social praxis confirms Webber's work

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[701] Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 91.
[702] Webber, *Planning Blended Worship*, 21-22.
[703] Webber, *Worship Old and New*, revised ed., 151.
[704] Webber, *Planning Blended Worship*, 183.
[705] Webber, *Worship is a Verb*, 192-193.
[706] Webber, *Worship Old and New*, revised ed., 194.
[707] See Webber: *Worship is a Verb*, 150-151; *Worship Old and New*, revised ed., 193-194; *Planning Blended Worship*, 183-186; *Ancient-Future Worship*, 65-66.

in worship does not fit securely in the critical-correlation model even though some connections are present.

3.3 Interpreted action

A third connection that can be drawn between Webber's work in worship and practical theology is seen in the interpreted action paradigm, also sometimes called the praxis model. The interpreted action approach to practical theology seeks to develop new transformative actions and outcomes through a fourfold cycle referred to as the "pastoral cycle."[708] The purpose of the pastoral cycle is to seek "conscientization to injustice for transformative, liberating practice…and the formation of Christians for ministry."[709] This method of practical theology emerged in 1960s Latin America within the context of liberation theology. Influenced by Marxism, liberation theologians such as Gustavo Gutiérrez and Juan Luis Segundo developed approaches to theology that prioritized the oppressed and focused on sociological factors that led to oppressive situations. The pastoral cycle developed as a "method of theology-in-action" for "ensuring faithful and just action."[710] Its goal is the implementation of actions that promote human liberation from oppression.[711]

While the pastoral cycle is rooted in liberation theology, its basic components have been utilized for broader work in practical theology through interpreted action. In the interpreted action model, each component of any given situation is put under scrutiny and filtered through a theological imperative in order to develop a new praxis. The first phase is experience, where attention is given to an identified situation, chosen and named by a person committed to reflect upon it. The second stage is exploration, where the person describes and analyzes the situation, often using sociological tools. Exploration leads to reflection, the third stage in the cycle. Here the situation is analyzed and set against the backdrop of beliefs in general and theology in particular. As discernment of the situation takes place, necessary actions are identified considering the normative theological sources that have guided the discernment process. The final stage is action, where initiatives for ministry are outlined and outcomes of the actions

[708] Ibid., 72. See also: Cameron et al., *Talking about God in Practice*, 27-29; Packiam, *Worship and the World to Come*, 15-16; Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 96-103.

[709] Hellen Collins, *Reordering Theological Reflection: Starting with Scripture* (Norfolk: SCM Press, 2020), 31.

[710] Ibid., 12.

[711] Ibid.

are determined. Emphasis is placed on how action calls for new reflection, starting the cycle over again.[712]

The interpretive action model has merit inasmuch as it allows theory to interrogate practice and experience; however, there are noteworthy limitations. As noted of other models, the interpretive action model is not theocentric inasmuch as it privileges human experience in theological reflection. Authority is placed upon the person doing the critical thinking throughout the process. Divine agency is marginalized, causing the method to rely on human thought and action to give rise to new actualities, such as a new communal ethos, understanding of morality, or knowledge about God. Hellen Collins reflects:

> It is therefore possible, and perhaps even common, to carry out theological reflections without any discourse to prayer, spirituality or expectations of divine encounters. God's activity…becomes conflated with human action or indistinguishable from the wisdom of Christian tradition…a theology that denies divine agency does beg the question of what it even means to say 'God' if God has no independent reality.[713]

In addition to Collins' critique, Ward notes how the interpretive action model emphasizes occasions of tension and conflict, which dislocates theological reflection from the ordinary ways Christians engage in connecting theology and practice.[714] For example, the approach fails to account for affective and intuitive ways people understand personal encounter with God in the person of Jesus Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit. It imposes a process that disempowers Scripture reading, worship, and prayer as normative means of theological reflection. Moreover, Helen Cameron, Deborah Bhatti, Catherine Duce, James Sweeney, and Clare Watkins claim that connections with theology are often weak or superficial rather than genuine and transformative in the interpreted action model.[715] The focus on personal experience and renewed practice is limited; thus, the model can lead to nothing more than activism, resulting in a theological foundationalism that replaces one fixed dogmatic structure with another.[716] Cameron et al. suggest that practical theology instead needs to have a sense of continuity with the wider Christian tradition that transcends any singular experience or practice.[717]

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[712] See Ballard and Prichard, *Practical Theology in Action*, 74. Cf. Cameron et al., *Talking about God in Practice*, 27-28; Osmer, *Introduction to Practical Theology*, 4; and Packiam, *Worship and the World to Come*, 15.

[713] Collins, *Reordering Theological Reflection*, 52.

[714] Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 100.

[715] Cameron et al., *Talking about God in Practice*, 28.

[716] Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action*, 72.

[717] Ibid.

Another deficiency of the interpretive action model is that while it takes seriously sociological and ethical aspects of the faith, it also assumes theological neutrality, which is unrealistic, especially for those who are committed to the work of the church. For example, the act of choosing a situation for reflection is an act of interpretation. By taking away privilege from one group, the model grants privilege to another. Thus, no work can be unbiased or fully equitable. Consequentially, the model takes for granted an openness among practical theologians to subject their theories and newly developed practices to the same analysis and scrutiny as the original situation they criticized, challenged, and sought to change. This allows the model to be prone to short cuts and to develop theoretical problem-solving systems that apply abstract principles to circumstances, downplaying the need for careful, patient theological reflection by the practical theologian.[718] The interpreted action model's relegation of theological reflection to only one stage in the model's fourfold process also creates a segregation between Christian faith and the other stages in the process. Theological reflection can thus be used as an end rather than a guiding principle throughout the model. Even when theological reflection is thoroughly utilized, the model is apt to be a system for validating preconceived social, political, and theological ideas.

The interpreted action paradigm sheds light on Webber's work in worship particularly when considering the role of experience in the pastoral cycle. Webber did not construct his worship theology based on the pastoral cycle, but the process through which his worship theology developed aligns with it, making the pastoral cycle a useful tool for highlighting features of his work. The pastoral cycle emphasizes the development of new practices to address a sociological situation. The cycle progresses through four stages of experience, exploration, reflection, and action in order to scrutinize the components of a given situation, filter them through a theological imperative, and develop new praxis. Webber's work in worship, as well as his process and objectives, reflect the pastoral cycle inasmuch as he seeks to address the "situation" of American evangelical worship through renewed liturgical praxis.

A significant feature of the pastoral cycle is the primacy of experience. Experience is the starting point of theological reflection in the cycle, which has benefits and dangers, as has been noted. Experience also has a key role in Webber's worship theology. For example, Webber's experiences in American evangelical worship

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[718] Kathleen Cahalan and James Nieman, "Mapping the Field of Practical Theology," in *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry*, eds. Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 84-85.

prompted his work in worship. His discontent with practices and patterns of worship in American evangelicalism led him to question the purpose of worship, to analyze his evangelical situation, to reflect on alternate models of worship, and finally to suggest changes in praxis.[719] Personal experience instigated the process.

Besides being the impetus for Webber's work in worship, Webber often builds upon his experiences in worship to communicate his worship theology. For example, Webber begins each chapter in his book *Worship is a Verb* with a story that recalls a personal experience related to worship. He takes time to describe and explore this worship experience, identifying what was good and/or bad about it. He then uses this experience as a basis for reflecting on worship in general and to establish theological principles that should be used to guide worship praxis. Finally, he proposes the recovery of historic patterns and practices of worship that fit his liturgical outlook and embody his theological principle. To give an example, Webber begins the chapter on "The Order of Worship" in *Worship is a Verb* with a story about a guest who spoke at a church he pastored while in seminary. Webber notes, "Just before the service was to begin, [the guest] came to me and said, 'Get the preliminaries over quickly. I have a lot to say today.'"[720] Reflecting on this interaction, Webber admits that at the time, his own attitude toward worship was the same as the guest speaker's—sing a few hymns, read Scripture, pray, and get to the sermon.[721] The structure of worship had no meaning for him, and everything in the service revolved around the sermon. Examining this experience, Webber realized that he, like other evangelical pastors he consulted, did not understand the purpose of worship.[722] Building off this experience, Webber compares a sermon-centric approach to worship to the approach of the ancient church, which he claims was centered in the celebration of Christ. Webber then asserts that if worship today is to celebrate Christ, then the activity of worship should tell and act out the life, death, resurrection, and coming again of Christ through the proclamation of the Word and at the Table.[723] He then spends the remainder of the chapter explaining how to order a service of worship around Word and Table, naming specific practices that, when implemented in worship, foster congregational participation in the worship of Jesus Christ and in his story.[724]

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[719] See Webber, *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail*, 36.
[720] Webber, *Worship is a Verb*, 47.
[721] Ibid.
[722] Ibid., 48.
[723] Ibid., 49.
[724] Ibid., 49-66.

In a general way, the four stages of experience, exploration, reflection, and action are all present and progress through the same order as the pastoral cycle in Webber's work. While the correlations are noteworthy, there are significant differences between Webber's work in worship and the pastoral cycle. First, in his writings, Webber is not attempting to come to new theological or practical conclusions. His mind is set already on principles and practices of worship that he discovered in selected writings from the early church guided especially by the *Christus Victor* motif. His writing may reflect the progression of the pastoral cycle, but it is more a method of communication than a commitment to theological interrogation and discovery.

Second, while testimonial evidence demonstrates similarities between Webber's development of his worship theology and the process of the pastoral cycle, each has a different purpose. The pastoral cycle is a method for proposing new praxis that must constantly be reevaluated. Webber's worship theology proposes a baseline for worship praxis. In other words, Webber does not examine the American evangelical worship situation for the sake of developing a new praxis of worship but rather to preserve historic Christological content in worship through the patterns and practices of worship. His goal is to present a normative approach to worship that can be used to evaluate and plan worship in any era.

3.4 Habitus virtue

A fourth significant model of practical theology is the habitus virtue model, which views virtue as a learned habit. This contrasts with the classical Christian view of virtue as a good, operative habit that develops characteristics infused by God into the souls of the faithful.[725] In the classical view, virtues are rooted in the love of God and guide individuals to consistently practice good, demonstrating love for God and neighbor, with the eschatological goal of achieving eternal union with God. Christian ethicist Stanly Hauerwas and philosophers Alasdair McIntyre and James K.A. Smith have popularized the habitus virtue approach to practical theology over the past few decades.[726] The habitus virtue model also makes a distinction between contemporary and classical understandings of *habitus* (habit). In contemporary usage, the word habit

[725] See: Saint Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*, trans. William Babcock (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2012), 173-174, 352-356, 537-542; Augustine of Hippo, *Teaching Christianity*, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park: New City Press, 1996), 117-126; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Question 55, Articles 1-4, accessed June 28, 2024, https://www.newadvent.org/summa/2055.htm.

[726] See Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991); Alasdair McIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); Smith, *You Are What You Love*.

connotates something that is done without putting thought into it, as if it is beyond a person's cognitive control.[727] In classical thinking, however, a habit is something that has become second nature to a person, induced by long training.[728] Habits can be either good or bad. Bad habits are known as vices while good habits are known as virtues. The aim is for good habits to become engrained in a person through long training and commitment, resulting in action that is no longer done by deliberate ethical choice but rather because the action has become a natural outward expression of the inward disposition of the soul. The task of practical theology in the habitus virtue model is not development of clerical skills nor to be a methodological process for addressing public concerns, but rather to be a means for training the mind and the heart.[729] Because growth in virtue is a long and continuous task that requires discipline and commitment in order to nurture and establish traits that result in action, the habitus virtue model is concerned first with internal character and secondarily with outward action as a natural byproduct. Ministerial service and public ethics are a natural outworking of virtue, and theological inquiry, evaluation, and analysis serve the goal of developing Christian character. As Ballard and Pritchard observe of the model, "It is constantly fed by learning and discovery about the world and about the faith. But it also insists on keeping together the mind and the heart, for it is also about the will and emotions. In other words, we are concerned with building spirituality…"[730]

One of the benefits of the habitus virtue model is that it keeps practical theology focused on the spiritual development of the person, not just communal action. It requires self-awareness through self-examination and a realistic understanding of one's own strengths and shortcomings. Additionally, it urges the development of prayer habits and other formative disciplines that lead to spiritual growth. In terms of pastoral practice within the church, the habitus virtue model seeks to enable the whole Christian community, collectively and personally, to grow in grace and Christian wisdom. The model is theocentric as it emphasizes virtue as a gift God bestows and as a sharing in God's own character. The Christian grows in holy habits by participating in means of grace via the Christian community, such as prayer, worship, acts of mercy, partaking in the sacraments, and mutual accountability. Pete Ward concludes, "Absorbed theology in this sense is the most basic and ordinary form of practical theology. We live out our

[727] See Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action*, 73.
[728] Ibid.
[729] Ibid., 74.
[730] Ibid.

absorbed theology. Practical theology in all its manifestations starts from this residue within us that has been shaped by the life of the Christian community."[731] The practices of the gathered community, therefore, are crucial to the inner development of virtue in the Church.[732]

One of the shortcomings of the habitus virtue model is that it risks treating virtue as an end unto itself. The model assumes growth (whether good or bad) occurs simply because practices are followed and kept. Teleologically, this can lead to the idea that human flourishing rather than communion with God is the chief end of humanity. The emphasis on habit development can disregard transformation as an act of God, turning virtue development into a humanistic endeavor void of divine agency and Christological identity. Additionally, the model can favor longer processes of transformation over immediate needs in a person's life.

Another limitation of the habitus virtue model is how it overlooks cultural particularities. There is no set baseline for discerning good from bad practices, which becomes complicated considering cultural distinctives and rituals, especially since local contextual variables might go ignored. Moreover, Kevin Vanhoozer identifies postmodern theologians like James W. McClendon who point out that practices are not neutral but mask and hide all kinds of distortions that foster social control of one group over another.[733] It is important, therefore, for practical theologians to expand cultural understandings of Christian practices, including how practices change and develop over time, and to learn how to discern the cultural forces that inhibit and foster practices. Finally, the habitus virtue model risks being insular to individual lives. Practices have personal impact, but they also establish a public ethic by virtue of their social and communal dimensions. More needs to be said about how intentional practiced habits in the church, the home, and the parish become a foundation for the broader society's capacity to build institutions, structures, and political systems that foster humane ways of life for all.

The habitus virtue paradigm provides insight to Webber's work in worship as the model affirms spiritual formation via liturgical practice. The model claims that outward action is an expression of the inward disposition of the soul; therefore, the mind and the heart must be nurtured through discipline. Webber believes worship has

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[731] Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 17.

[732] See Smith, *You Are What You Love*.

[733] See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Theology and the Conditions of Postmodernity - A Report on Knowledge (of God)," in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 19-21.

similar formational value as it nurtures relationship with Christ, love for God, and love for others.[734] For such nurture to occur, however, he claims worship must be rooted in content and practices that invite the congregation to participate in the story of God's saving work through Jesus Christ.[735] He writes:

> When we situate spirituality in God's embrace, the church and its worship are seen as sources that nourish the spiritual life, not by what the church and its worship demand of us but by what they *reveal to us*. The church and its worship are sources of nourishment precisely because they embody God's story and witness to God's divine embrace and constantly keep God's vision of a restored people and renewed earth before us.[736]

Since liturgical practices nourish Christian character, Webber acknowledges that malformation can occur when worship loses its proper focus. In his book *Who Gets to Narrate the World*? Webber evaluates worship in twenty-first century American evangelicalism, stating it often is an entertaining program that presents Jesus in a winsome way. This approach to worship stokes a spirit of consumerism rather than mystical union with God, he claims.[737] Christians become products of the culture rather than participants in God's Kingdom, and self-focus replaces the narrative of God's saving act in history through Jesus Christ and his final victory over sin, death, and all the powers of evil in the world.[738] Worship forms a Christian's view of God and of the world, according to Webber; thus, he upholds worship as the pathway to spiritual renewal in the church.[739] Webber proposes that as worship connects the congregation to Christ and allows the people to participate in his life, his worship, his ministry, and his story through practices like the reading of Scripture, the Eucharist, and the Church calendar, continual submission to practices will cultivate an attitude and orientation of worship in all of life.[740]

James K.A. Smith draws an interesting connection between Webber and the habitus virtue in his book *You Are What You Love*. In the book, Smith examines the relationship between practices and desires to show that the practices of worship are formative, and that a person's heart is shaped by who and what they worship. He

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[734] See Webber: *Worship is a Verb*, 44-46; *Planning Blended Worship*, 45-48; *Encountering the Healing Power of God*, 4; *The Divine Embrace*, 220-221.

[735] Webber, *The Divine Embrace*, 221.

[736] Ibid., 220.

[737] Webber, *Who Gets to Narrate the World?*, 18.

[738] See Webber, *The Divine Embrace*, 220-221. Cf. Webber: Ancient-*Future Worship*, 86; *Who Gets to Narrate the World?*, 19.

[739] Webber, *Signs of Wonder*, 16.

[740] Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 200.

writes, "Christian worship doesn't just teach us how to think; it teaches us how to love, and it does so by inviting us into the biblical story and implanting that story in our bones."[741] Smith's work significantly reflects Webber's even though Smith does not interact with Webber in the book. He does make a general connection to Webber in the dedication to the book, writing, "In memory of Robert Webber, one of my most important teachers, though we never met."[742] It can be concluded that Webber's work helps Smith recognize the relationship between practices in worship and spiritual formation; however, connections must be assumed since Smith is not explicit regarding Webber's influence.

Although Smith esteems Webber, spiritual formation plays a different role concerning worship in Webber's work. While formation through worship is a dominant feature of Webber's work, it must be recognized that for Webber formation is a byproduct of worship and not its goal. The purpose of worship is not spiritual formation but participation in Christ. Practices help shape and guide that encounter, but for Webber it is Christ at work through the Holy Spirit who forms Christian character. In fact, Webber warns against a human-centric approach to spirituality, which he describes as giving time and energy to disciplines that determine a spiritual condition.[743] He writes:

> The problem…is that we turn things around and instead of seeing church and worship as the means of nourishing our mystical union with God, we see our life in the church and in worship as *our work*. We subvert God's way of nourishing our union with him by looking to self as if we sustain the union, only to grow weary in our own self-righteousness.[744]

For Webber, there is a danger in focusing too much on practices so that worship becomes a human endeavor to sustain life with God. Practices instead need to be centered in participation in Christ's life and story first and foremost, trusting that the natural byproduct will be personal edification and formation. Webber reflects:

> Consequently, when we worship, the conflict between good and evil which we experience in our everyday lives is confronted and resolved. We leave worship once again with the personal assurance that the battle is won—Satan has been, is now being, and will be defeated. Because we are confident in Christ's victory, we experience a great release from the burden of our sin and we become filled with joy and peace.[745]

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[741] Smith, *You Are What You Love*, 85.
[742] Ibid., v.
[743] Webber, *The Divine Embrace*, 220.
[744] Ibid., 221.
[745] Webber, *Worship is a Verb*, 39-40.

When worship is rooted in the person and work of Jesus Christ, Webber believes the patterns and practices of worship will re-present Christ to the church in the midst of the gathered congregation.[746] His worship theology, therefore, stresses the significance of practices in virtue development, but only inasmuch as the practices invite a person as part of the larger body of the church to participate in the narrative, work, and life of Jesus Christ.

3.5 Classical tradition

A fifth model of practical theology to be considered is the classical tradition model. The classical tradition model seeks to keep classical theological reflection at the center of practical theology. The model developed as a corrective to what is perceived as the erosion of theological ways of thinking about practice in other models.[747] Proponents of the classical tradition model, such as Ray Anderson, Thomas Oden, and Andrew Purves, argue that prevailing trends of practical theology in the United States tend to be human-centric, embracing modern psychological methods and secular theories of the self.[748] The classical tradition model seeks to rediscover theological voices from the past and to redefine the field of practical theology in theological rather than sociological or psychological terms. The turn toward historical, classical theology does not mean rejecting contemporary theories or practices but seeks to recover a logic of practical theology in relation to secularizing forces. For such recovery to occur, classical traditional theologians claim practical theology must draw upon Scripture and the classical Christian tradition.[749]

It is important to recognize that in calling for a return to classical Christian theology, figures like Thomas Oden do not attempt to set forth a singular ecumenical tradition that agrees on all points of doctrine. The approach is not meant to be prescriptive. Rather, the model seeks to observe and identify principles that emerge in the ways the church has thought about practice and pastoral care throughout the centuries. It seeks to hold on to contemporary values while not losing contact with the scriptural wisdom, historical awareness, and constructive theological reasoning that comprise the central witness of the Christian tradition. As Andrew Purves states:

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[746] Ibid., 65.

[747] Ward, *Introduction to Practical Theology*, 86. Cf. Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology*; Collins, *Reordering Theological Reflection*; Oden, *Care of Souls in the Classic Tradition*; and Andrew Purves, *Pastoral Theology in the Classical Tradition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

[748] Ward, 86-87.

[749] Oden, *Care of Souls in the Classic Tradition*, 32. Cf. Collins, *Reordering Theological Reflection*, 52-56.

> . . . in their rootedness in Scripture, their theological perspicuity, their soteriological insistence, their sense of spiritual preparedness for ministry, their understanding of the complexities and demands of the pastoral office, and their awareness of God at work through the pastor in the lives of God's people, they have much in common . . . enough commonality is present to suggest a tradition, a broad consensus concerning the essential focus of pastoral work in any age.[750]

In essence, tradition is the central witness on a wide variety of issues in the classical tradition model. As the church looks back and reflects upon its traditions, it discovers a rich treasury of concrete practices that have gone ignored in the contemporary era.[751]

One notable critique of the classical tradition model is how it privileges the past over the present. While Collins is right to note how other approaches to practical theology privilege the present over the past, the classical traditional model risks being myopic and uncritical of the past, romanticizing specific time periods while ignoring potential biases or shortcomings from those eras of the church's history. The approach can also ignore modern developments in philosophy and sociology that impact cultural ideologies. Likewise, the model can be treated pragmatically instead of theologically, advocating for mere replication of historic forms instead of reclamation of traditional principles that need careful cultural discernment as they are applied in contemporary contexts. Moreover, the model can favor retrospective theology in place of a teleology. Theological emphasis can be placed on faithfulness to past commitments to the neglect of participation in Christ's coming Kingdom and his ongoing ministry in the world.

Another concern, like the ministerial education model, is that the classical tradition model relegates practical theology to ministry professionals who have studied the classical tradition, at least to some degree. A disparity is created between those who are trained in classical theology and those who are not. Moreover, the approach offers no singular methodology for engaging the classical tradition, nor does it define what constitutes the classical tradition. Points of connection can be assumed and obscure. Engagement with the classical tradition, therefore, is likely to differ based on factors such as the ecclesial tradition, the educational training, or the whim of any given theologian. It can also privilege certain cultures and expressions of Christianity, especially, as in Webber's case, those in western European contexts, and dismiss expressions that were formed and have been practiced for centuries in other areas of the world. In sum, the classical tradition approach is not helpful as a methodology for

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[750] Purves, *Pastoral Theology in the Classical Tradition*, 8.
[751] Oden, *Care of Souls in the Classic Tradition*, 8.

doing practical theology, although it can provide a guiding ethos when parameters are set and acknowledged.

If any singular established paradigm of practical theology represents Webber's work in worship, a case can be made for the classical tradition model. Webber's constant mantra throughout his work is that "the road to the future runs through the past."[752] For Webber, retrieval of the ancient Christian tradition is the indispensable vehicle of renewal in the church.[753] As a practical theologian of worship committed to the ancient tradition, he seeks to observe and identify principles that emerge in the ways the church has thought about worship practice throughout the centuries.[754] To proceed into the future heedless of history is irresponsible and harmful to a church's ministry, discipleship, and worship. As he writes in *Common Roots*, "to ignore the development of Christian truth in history is a grave mistake."[755] He thus sets out to teach evangelicals the meaning of historic liturgical practices, especially how they point to and embody Christ, so that the church can implement them appropriately and enter more fully into the worship of Jesus Christ. Webber does not focus on the ancient tradition to the neglect of contemporary awareness. He values contemporaneous contextual forms and styles of worship and sees them as important means of communicating the narrative of Christ's saving work and fostering congregational participation in worship. Still, Webber is unwavering in his commitment to the restoration of traditional liturgical practices in the worship of the church.

Although Webber is most known for his advocacy of the classical Christian tradition in worship, he is selective about the historic influences and traditional liturgical practices he emphasizes in his work, which is something not commonly acknowledged in Webber's work in worship. Despite his call for evangelical return to the ancient church, Webber does not provide a comprehensive evaluation of the ancient church nor does he propose full replication of ancient Christian worship; rather, he concentrates his attention on specific structures and practices of worship that he believes need to be reclaimed in contextual ways. In particular, Webber elevates four longstanding liturgical practices from the ancient Christian tradition of worship as paramount for preserving historic Christological content in the contemporary church: a fourfold order of worship, the liturgical calendar, the proclamation of the Scriptures,

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[752] See footnote 1 in the Introduction to the current thesis.

[753] Webber, *Common Roots*, 14.

[754] The previous chapter of this thesis addresses the practices and principles Webber sees emerge from the ancient church.

[755] Webber, *Common Roots*, 20.

and the Eucharist.[756] While inclusion of other liturgical material varies from book to book, Webber comes back to these four practices of worship in his major publications.[757] It can be deduced, then, that Webber sees these practices as the epitome of classical liturgical forms that embody his historic Christological vision of worship.[758]

While Robert Webber's commitment to the classical Christian tradition and his emphasis on specific liturgical practices in worship are evident throughout his work, they come with certain limitations and potential disparities. Webber's relentless focus on the first five centuries of the church as the primary source of theological and liturgical inspiration risks narrowing the scope of historical reference, potentially neglecting valuable developments and insights that emerge in later periods of the church. Likewise, his privileging of Anglican practices as the vehicle for his practical-theological work in bridging the old and the new could inadvertently overshadow other meaningful traditions, creating a hierarchy that favors those who are trained in Anglican worship and potentially causing a divide between the liturgically educated and the uninitiated within evangelical communities. Lastly, Webber's emphasis on Christology may not resonate with all evangelicals. Some may believe they already possess a sufficient Christological understanding, potentially leading to a disconnect between his theological priorities and the perspectives of certain segments of the evangelical community.

3.6 Scripture cycle

Although not as longstanding as the other established paradigms, Hellen Collins' work is worth evaluating as a newly emerging model of practical theology. In her work, Collins sets forth a method she believes represents a distinctly evangelical paradigm for approaching practical theology. Having taught practical theology to evangelical, charismatic students for several years, Collins observes that her students find most theories and approaches of practical theology inaccessible since the models do not align with their theological convictions. She therefore advocates for a new method of theological reflection called the Scripture cycle that "foregrounds the authority of Scripture, the agency of the Holy Spirit, and experience as defined as testimonies with

[756] See Chapter 3 of this thesis.

[757] See Webber: *Common Roots*, 77-111; *Worship is a Verb*, 47-86, 153-172; *Worship Old and New*, 109-174; *Signs of Wonder*, 72-82, 99-130; *The Majestic Tapestry*, 71-101; *Worship Old and New*, revised ed., 149-194, 217-228; *The Younger Evangelicals*, 191-204; *Ancient-Future Faith*, 102-115; *Ancient-Future Worship*, 113-178.

[758] See Chapter 3 of this thesis.

Christ."[759] Part of Collins' goal is to ground experience in theological reflection, viewing it as testimony of encounter with God that tests theological paradigms and transforms reading, understanding, and living in ways that more faithfully cohere with God's story.[760] Her Scripture cycle progresses through five movements along with five guiding questions: 1) Scripture—what does Scripture tell us about God and ourselves?; 2) testimony—which part of our lives does the Holy Spirit bring to mind to share as testimony?; 3) discernment—how do we discern an encounter with Christ through Scripture and in our lives?; 4) encounter—how are we encountering Christ's ministry through Scripture and testimony?; 5) participation—in light of how we discern Christ's ministry, how does the Holy Spirit invite us to participate?[761] Collins positions theological reflection as a communal rather than an individual act, stating that the five stages of the Scripture cycle are to take place within "a worshipful, community-centered engagement with Scripture."[762] Within this communal context, the cycle continually returns to Scripture "to enable the ongoing process of reading the Bible to discern the faithfulness of our anticipation and potentially to examine the interpretation of Scripture."[763] Collins's hope is that the Scripture cycle will produce theological reflectors who are confident in discerning personal encounters with Christ in order to participate in his ministry so that they can enable others to engage in the same process of discernment with passion, humility, intelligence, and faithfulness.[764] In order to engage the Scripture cycle faithfully, Collins asserts theologians must be governed by the core convictions that theological reflection starts from Scripture as God's authoritative story, testifies to the agency of the Holy Spirit in mediating Christ's ministry, and discerns encounters with Christ in order to worship Christ through participation in ministry with him.[765]

Collins' scriptural cycle paradigm has many notable qualities, such as her emphasis on Christology and pneumatology in theological reflection. The person and work of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are not assumed; rather, their divine agency is part of the process. Likewise, Collins is to be lauded for conceiving a model of practical theology that aligns with evangelical and charismatic convictions. She is right to recognize the value placed on both Scripture and experience in these traditions, and

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[759] Collins, *Reordering Theological Reflection*, 8.
[760] Ibid., 128.
[761] Ibid., 155-167.
[762] Ibid., 20, 152.
[763] Ibid.
[764] Ibid., 21.
[765] Ibid., 150-152.

to put the two in dialogue within her method. Moreover, Collins avoids debates over the inerrant and infallible nature of Scripture, opting instead to frame Scripture as the authoritative story of God. In doing so, Collins emphasizes the narrative quality of the Bible, and highlights its authority in giving meaning to personal testimonies of God's work. Similarly, although her process starts with Scripture, Collins does not ignore personal experience in theological reflection, but grounds it in more than subjective sentiment or individual insight. For Collins, theological reflection is about encounter with and participation in the divine so that the church may continually "form and train Christians to testify to Christ in a way that coheres with God's story revealed in Scripture, and to participate with Christ in ministering reconciliation, forgiveness, peace and hope to a broken world."[766] Experience, therefore, is grounded in Scriptural testimony of encounter with Christ and the Holy Spirit's continual work.

One limitation of Collins' Scripture cycle is how it creates a unidirectional theological process. Theological reflection on ecclesial practice is relegated to the final stage of the scriptural cycle, disallowing praxis to be an integral part of the whole theological reflection process. This is especially problematic in liturgical studies since many rites, such as the Eucharist and baptism, precede the scriptural canon. Biblical reflection can be challenging since details of ecclesial practices are scarce. Similarly, the model is unclear on whether a regulatory or a normative principle of worship is appropriate since both affirm the truth of Scripture but differ on how Scripture establishes an unalterable blueprint for corporate worship. Any liturgical or ecclesial praxis could be defended or rejected based on a group's preconceived biases.

Another concern is that Collins' Scripture cycle paradigm can be viewed as a process for guiding group Bible study rather than as a method for doing practical theology. Collins recognizes this potential criticism and accepts that the model is very similar to what many Christians already do; however, her hope is that the scriptural cycle provides a structure for facilitating greater rigor, discernment, self-examination, accountability, corporate engagement, and critical thinking among evangelicals and Pentecostals.[767] Collins assumes the scriptural cycle can function as a normative process for any Christian to engage theological reflection. There is no clear instruction for identifying biases that may skew the process, however, so her method is prone to misuse. One the one hand, the method may become a means of proof-texting preconceived biases. On the other, it opens a door for Scripture to be used to abuse,

[766] Ibid., 167.
[767] Ibid., 169.

oppress, or manipulate situations and people—especially minorities—under the guise of theological reflection.

One final limitation of Collins' model is its insular focus. The Scripture cycle keeps theological reflection based solely on Scripture and Christian experience within an ecclesial context, meaning the approach risks ignoring wisdom from corrective voices outside of the church. Likewise, the cycle limits perspectives to group members engaged in the reflection process. Although Collins encourages employing the scriptural cycle within a particular cultural context, she does not acknowledge ethnographical dynamics that may aid or hinder the process. Insights from minority cultures may go ignored or be dismissed in favor of other, more dominant cultural views and experiences, especially if the group engaged in the process is homogenous.

Webber's work in worship aligns well with Collins' scriptural cycle paradigm. At a basic level, just as Collins seeks to offer an evangelical approach to practical theology, so Webber's goal is to offer a distinctly evangelical approach to worship.[768] Like Collins, Webber is aware of his audience and sphere of influence. Webber is an American evangelical who speaks to an American evangelical audience, as pointed out in the previous chapter of this thesis. Webber considers himself, his work, and his audience to be evangelical.[769] As an evangelical who taught and wrote to evangelicals, Webber places primacy on Scripture in the regulation of worship renewal. For example, the first basic principle of worship Webber outlines in *Worship Old and New* states, "*Christian worship must be rooted in the Scripture*. The Scripture of the Old and New Testament is the major source and final authority for matters of worship."[770] Similarly, in *Planning Blended Worship*, Webber emphasizes at the onset, "Worship renewal is committed to draw from *biblical resources*."[771] The way Webber seeks to uphold Scripture in his practical worship theology is important for two noteworthy reasons. First, Webber sees scriptural precedent for the ancient practices of worship he implements in his practical worship theology. He believes the patterns and practices of worship present in the ancient church align with scriptural testimony, so he brings forth those patterns and practices into the contemporary church. Secondly, Webber regards the scriptural narrative of God's salvation through Jesus Christ as rudimentary to the

[768] Chapter 3 of this thesis examines Webber's evangelical concept.
[769] See Webber, *Common Roots*, 13. Cf. Webber, *Who Gets to Narrate the World?*, 11.
[770] Webber, *Worship Old and New*, revised ed., 197.
[771] Webber, *Planning Blended Worship*, 17.

theological content of worship. For Webber, worship must be committed to proclaiming and enacting the Scriptures.

Webber also emphasizes the primary place of Scripture in the study of worship. The first book in his *Alleluia! Series* curriculum is *Learning to Worship with All Your Heart: A Study in the Biblical Foundations of Worship*.[772] Likewise, the first volume in his *Complete Library of Christian Worship* is *The Biblical Foundations of Christian Worship*.[773] Webber's commitment to scriptural foundations of worship also is seen in the curricular outline of courses at IWS. The first requirement in both the Master of Worship Studies and the Doctor of Worship Studies programs is a course on the biblical theology of worship. Webber places scriptural knowledge and application as the foundation for education, spiritual formation, and preparation of students and leaders as they develop the ability to think deeply about the worship ministries of the church. The outcome he desires is for students to "understand, as well as demonstrate the ability to articulate and evaluate, worship rooted in and declaring the story of the Triune God as expressed in the Scriptures."[774]

One limitation the Scripture cycle paradigm reveals in Webber's work is the primacy he gives to western contexts of worship. Although Webber's work is not exclusive to American evangelicals, his work is geared toward them. For instance, Webber considers Pentecostal and charismatic contributions to worship in works like *Signs of Wonder* and his revised edition of *Worship Old and New*, but his work in both books primarily focuses on the reclamation of forms that have remained present in traditional western/European expressions of the church. Likewise, the issues and concerns he addresses about worship pertain to almost exclusively white evangelical and Mainline traditions.[775] Additionally, Webber's pronounced emphasis on Christology may create the perception among Pentecostal and charismatic traditions that he underplays the essential role of the Holy Spirit in worship. His focus on Christology may not fully resonate with traditions that emphasize the immediate, active, and spontaneous work of the Holy Spirit in worship. Furthermore, his scope

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[772] See Webber, *Learning to Worship with All Your Heart*.

[773] Robert E. Webber, ed., *The Biblical Foundations of Christian Worship*, *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, vol. 1 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993).

[774] See: "Programs of Study: Doctor of Worship Studies," in *The Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies Catalogue* (Jacksonville: The Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies, 2022), 27; and "Programs of Study: Master of Worship Studies," in *The Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies Catalogue* (Jacksonville: The Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies, 2022), 32.

[775] For more on Webber's treatment of Pentecostal and charismatic contributions to worship, see: Webber, *Signs of Wonder*, 8-9, 54-55; Webber, *Worship Old and New*, revised ed., 122-123, 127-132. Cf.: Robert E. Webber, ed., *Twenty Centuries of Christian Worship*, vol. 2 in *The Complete Library of Christian Worship* (Nashville: Star Song, 1994), 19-20, 105-108, 121-140, 275-280, 307-312.

tends to be limited to the problems of American evangelicalism, which also receives his harshest critiques. It is possible that Webber focused his critique on American evangelicalism because he knew it was his most captive and attentive audience; however, this narrow focus makes it seem as if he has little concern for churches that do not fit his typical American evangelical caricature.

4. Webber's practical worship theology framework

Certainly, the field of practical theology is diverse with varying approaches and models. Webber's work in worship resonates with principles seen in several paradigms of practical theology, as has been outlined in this chapter. When isolated, each model has its own merits and deficiencies; thus, Ballard and Prichard warn against choosing one model to the exclusion of the others and instead posit that each model is one pathway into a larger, complex process of practical theology. Ballard and Prichard suggest that all models should be considered as "strands which are often woven together and affect each other," so they advise an integrative approach be taken when doing practical theology.[776]

While Webber did not label himself a practical theologian, nor did he ever explicitly set out a model of practical theology, his method of engaging the topic of worship for the purposes of evangelical worship renewal set forth a comprehensive approach to his practical-theological thought. Rather than adhering strictly to a single paradigm, Webber's work embodies an interconnectedness of various models, emphasizing their collective strength when applied cohesively. His holistic approach enriches a general understanding of the meaning and purpose of worship and enables him to address the multifaceted aspects of liturgical practice, theological engagement, and the lived experiences of the worshiping community. In essence, Webber's work in worship serves as a testament to what can be achieved when the boundaries of individual practical theology models are expanded and interwoven. By gravitating towards an integrative approach, Webber underscores the centrality of Christology in the discourse of practical theology, something other paradigms of practical theology fail to do. Instead of allowing worship practices to drift into mere ritualistic or cultural expressions, he anchors them in the life, teachings, and work of Jesus Christ. His practical-theological methodology demonstrates that Christology provides an enduring foundation that can harmonize various theological models, thereby ensuring that

[776] Ballard and Prichard, *Practical Theology in Action*, 55, 57.

worship remains a profound encounter with the person and work of Jesus Christ. Webber's model of a practical worship theology thus illuminates the potential of worship to be more than a mere liturgical exercise or entertaining gathering, but rather a deep Christ-centered engagement that spans across diverse theological traditions and practices. His practical worship theology emerges as firmly rooted in the person of Christ, bridging historic theological commitments with the lived reality of the worshiping community.

Webber does not advance his practical-theological process to propose a new method for designing worship; rather, he wants to restore Christological commitments in worship through it to help make better worshipers. To this point, Webber critiques American evangelicalism at the turn of the twenty-first century for having forgotten core Christological commitments of worship in its content and practices. Webber offers a process for examining and changing approaches to worship as a means of reforming and recapitulating worship toward Christological convictions. American evangelical worship needed to move toward a more dynamic, God-oriented, participatory embodiment of the biblical narrative of the person and work of Jesus Christ.[777] Webber thus sees the retrieval of tradition, especially in the area of worship, as a key strategy for producing health in contemporary evangelical churches; therefore, he constructs his practical worship theology based on the retrieval of ancient liturgical forms implemented in contextual ways, not to privilege the ancient church for its historic position, but rather because he discovered within the ancient church a compelling devotion to Jesus Christ in its worship. Webber does not seek to replicate ancient models, but rather to glean historic content and ancient liturgical practices that orient the church to Christ and invite participation in Christ's life and work. Simply put, Webber's practical worship theology is an attempt to recapitulate Christian worship back to the Christological commitments practiced and proclaimed in the church since its earliest expressions.[778] This liturgical recapitulation concept is Webber's most significant contribution to worship studies as he offers a vision of worship that is anchored in historical precedent and resonates with the evolving practical needs of the contemporary church while maintaining a Christological focus. Webber's practical-theological framework of worship thus serves as a touchstone for evangelical faithfulness and facilitates a profound, participatory experience for worshipers. The balance between the ancient and the contemporary, the theological and the practical,

[777] Webber, *Worship is a Verb*, 13-14. Cf. Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 82-83.
[778] Ibid.

and the Christological and the personal makes his approach an asset for churches striving to cultivate meaningful worship experiences in any time or location.

In assessing how Webber's approach to worship renewal functions as practical theology, then, it is necessary to reiterate the two of the preeminent features of his practical-theological process: First, his endorsement of a contextually integrative, historically-conscious approach to worship; and secondly, his emphasis on Christological participation through liturgical practices. These features undergird Webber's commitments in worship renewal and shape his practical-theological model. On the practical side, his model is a method for bringing worship renewal through the incorporation of ancient liturgical principles and practices in contemporary worship. The use of historic liturgical forms in the model provides a sense of continuity with the past and anchors worship in the larger story of God's redemptive work throughout history. Moreover, the same historic liturgical forms set forth a framework for worship that guides the experience of the worshiper in a Christological focus. In particular, he sees the order of worship, the proclamation of the Scriptures, the Eucharist, and the liturgical calendar as means for recapitulating worship as a celebration of the person and work of Jesus Christ. For Webber, it is not enough to understand and appreciate historical liturgy; rather, the liturgy must be incorporated into contemporary worship in accessible, contextual ways that foster Christological participation in the congregation. Webber provides a guide through his practical-theological model for how to achieve worship renewal in local church settings without losing the essence of the liturgy or alienating the contemporary worshipper. Since, for Webber, true worship necessitates participation wherein the entire congregation is actively engaged in Christological proclamation and participation, his emphasis on the use of historic liturgical acts implemented contextually in contemporary worship connects to his commitment to a participatory approach to worship.

While Webber's practical-theological approach contains a strong emphasis on Christology, there are notable omissions concerning the lack of Pentecostal influence and charismatic inclusion. As has been noted, since Webber's primary objective is to restore Christological commitments in worship, his focus on Christology may neglect pneumatological factors important to Pentecostal and charismatic traditions, who place a profound emphasis on the dynamic, experiential encounter with the Holy Spirit as a central facet of worship.[779] These traditions have been instrumental in shaping worship

[779] See Alvarez, *Pentecostal Orthodoxy*, 76-99.

practices in the twenty-first century and have distinctive theological emphases that expand beyond the liturgical forms of the first few centuries of the church.[780] By prioritizing Christology to the exclusion of pneumatology, Webber may alienate a substantial segment of the contemporary Christian worship community, thereby diminishing the comprehensiveness and inclusivity of his practical-theological framework.

Additionally, the Pentecostal and charismatic traditions bring unique theological insights and experiences to the table, such as the recognition of the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in empowering and transforming believers. Ignoring these theological contributions not only misses an opportunity for a more holistic and encompassing approach to worship but also risks sidelining important dimensions of Christian theology. The integration of pneumatological elements within the framework of worship renewal is not merely a matter of inclusivity but also one of theological integrity. Notably, within the first five centuries of the Christian church, early theologians grappled with both Christological and pneumatological dimensions, exploring the connection between the incarnation of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit in God's redemptive plan. For example, the works of the Cappadocian Fathers—Basil of Caesarea (c. 330-379), Gregory of Nyssa (n.d.-394), and Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 329-390)—exemplify a comprehensive theological engagement with the Holy Spirit. These patristic theologians recognized the vital role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer, in sanctification, and in the church's worship and sacraments, as well as the Holy Spirit's role in the life of the Christian and the unity of the Godhead.[781] Therefore, there is room in Webber's practical-theological framework for greater appreciation of the patristic heritage that bridges both Christological and pneumatological aspects, and what that means for worship renewal in the contemporary church. The patristic writings of the Cappadocian Fathers in particular offer a valuable resource for a more holistic understanding of worship that encompasses both dimensions, reflecting the theological depth and breadth of the early Christian tradition.

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[780] Ibid.

[781] See: Fredrick J. Flo, "'Breaking Ground': A look at the Impact of the Cappadocian Fathers on the Establishment of the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit During the Transition Between the Council of Nigeria (325) and the Council of Constantinople (381)," *Verbum* 7, 1 (2009), https://fisherpub.sjf.edu/verbum/vol7/iss1/11. Cf.: Christopher Beeley, "The Holy Spirit in the Cappadocians: Past and Present," *Modern Theology* 26, 1 (2010), 90-119; Saint Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, trans. David Anderson (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997).

A comprehensive approach that encompasses both Christology and pneumatology, drawing from the theological insights of the patristic era, would not only enhance the inclusivity of Webber's practical-theological work, but also ensure its theological robustness and relevance within the diverse landscape of contemporary Christian worship. It is thus imperative for scholars and practitioners to engage in a more nuanced exploration of how both the patristic writings and the theological heritage of Pentecostal and charismatic traditions can inform and enrich the broader discourse on worship renewal.

4.1 Liturgical recapitulation

Rather than imposing a specific model of practical theology on Webber or developing a new paradigm based on his work, this thesis aims to discern the conceptual framework of Webber's practical worship theology. A close analysis of Webber's work reveals that Christology is the central axis of his approach to worship and practical theology. In his writings, Webber consistently positions the life, teachings, and redemptive work of Jesus Christ as the cornerstone that informs and shapes worship practices and theological considerations. This Christological emphasis does more than provide a theological backdrop; it actively determines the trajectory of Webber's thought, guiding his approach to both liturgical elements and broader ecclesial concerns. Every liturgical practice and theological proposition in Webber's corpus originates from his understanding of the *Christus Victor* motif. His Christ-centered framework not only anchors worship practice in the historical and redemptive narrative of Jesus but also ensures that theological formulations remain connected to the person and work of Christ. Such an approach resists tendencies toward abstract theology or ritualistic practices devoid of substantive meaning. Webber instead insists on a theology that constantly recalls and re-engages with the incarnate, risen, ascended, and victorious Jesus Christ, thereby ensuring a worship experience that is both personally vibrant and deeply grounded.

Webber aims to use the *Christus Victor* motif to position his practical theology as a bridge between ancient Christian traditions and contemporary worship contexts. He draws Christological reflections from early church writings and presents them as essential resources for the modern church. Through his practical worship theology, Webber seeks to demonstrate the enduring significance of Christ in worship and to guide the church's ongoing engagement with Him in its diverse contexts. Moreover, Webber's method of re-centering evangelical worship on the person and work of Jesus

Christ serves as a pivotal strategy for worship renewal. He draws on the concept of recapitulation, as employed by Irenaeus, to advocate for a return to liturgical practices that re-enact and embody the Christ-event. He believes that such practices have the potential to rejuvenate contemporary worship, making it more meaningful and connected to the core of Christian faith. For example, in Webber's view liturgy is more than a structured order of service; it is a participatory encounter with Christ. Likewise, the Eucharist is more than a commemoration of the Last Supper; it is a recapitulation of the salvific work of Jesus, inviting worshipers into a tangible experience of the Gospel narrative and encounter with Christ. Similarly, the liturgical calendar serves not as a mere commemoration of past events; it is a regular, annual means of immersing the church in the life and narrative of Christ.

Four cardinal principles play a central role in Webber's liturgical recapitulation method, structuring his practical worship theology: historic-rootedness, which entails a return to the earliest expressions of Christianity; narrative quality, which involves the recovery of God's narrative in church worship; participatory engagement, which emphasizes the active participation of the congregation; and evangelical experience, which focuses on recalibrating the experiential dynamic of evangelical worship through the person and work of Jesus Christ. Each principle serves a distinct yet integral role in his practical worship theological method, guiding his framework for what he believes to be true and proper worship.

First, historic-rootedness anchors Webber's liturgical recapitulation methodology in Christian tradition. The worship patterns, liturgies, and theological principles he interprets from the early church allows for a deeper appreciation of Christ-centered worship that has been nurtured over millennia. Although Webber is selective in his use of history, he desires to show continuity between the early church and his own practical-theological work to ensure that contemporary worship practices resonate with Christian witness from across time.

Secondly, his principle of narrative quality demands that all theological and practical discourse begins and ends with the narrative, person, and work of Jesus Christ. For Webber, this is particularly embodied in the *Christus Victor* motif, positioning Christ's redemptive act as the theological compass guiding worship. By rooting worship in this narrative, all practices, liturgies, and rituals invariably point back to Christ, thus recapitulating worship to its foundational core, i.e., the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Thirdly, Webber advocates for participatory engagement of the whole church in worship. He sees traditions such as creedal recitation, observance of the liturgical calendar, engagement with sacraments, and fervent proclamation of Scriptures are not mere historical artifacts but are essential in grounding worship in a Christocentric ethos. While valuing these traditional practices, Webber also emphasizes the importance of applying them contextually to ensure their adaptability and accessibility in diverse contemporary settings.

Fourth, Webber redefines evangelical experience as a personal, transformative encounter with the living Christ in worship. While acknowledging the importance of personal experience, he aims to ensure worship is not solely dependent on subjective experience. Instead, this principle emphasizes that worshipers should be active participants in Christ's life and work, not mere spectators. In this dynamic, believers do not just remember the Christ-event but actively partake in it, intertwining their individual journeys with the grand narrative of death, resurrection, and new creation. This reorientation to the personal experience of Christ in worship culminates in a corporate worship ethos wherein personal encounters with Christ combine to fortify the communal identity of the church. The overarching goal is the nurture and molding of a community of believers in the likeness of Christ so they might be his hands and feet in the world, continuing his mission and ministry as they go forth from worship.

In sum, Webber's liturgical recapitulation method represents his attempt to integrate historical depth, Christological focus, participatory action, and evangelical transformation. These foundational principles converge in his work to create a practical worship theology that anchors worship a recapitulatory framework, seeking to ensure that Christ remains the central focus of all worship practices. Moreover, Webber not only seeks to help evangelicals design meaningful worship services; he also seeks to help them be good worshipers. Webber's vision extends beyond mere liturgical structure to the formation of individuals who embody the spirit of worship. He emphasizes that true worshipers are those who live out the truths proclaimed in worship, allowing the redemptive work of Christ to transform their hearts and actions. By advocating for a return to historic practices and the recovery of God's narrative, Webber encourages believers to engage deeply with the core tenets of their faith, fostering a holistic spirituality that permeates all aspects of life. His focus on active participation ensures that worship is not a passive experience but a dynamic interaction with the divine, where congregants become co-participants in the ongoing story of God's redemptive work. Furthermore, by recalibrating the experiential dynamic of

evangelical worship, Webber seeks to cultivate an environment where personal encounter with the victorious, resurrected Christ is central. This experiential aspect is not just about emotional engagement but involves a profound, transformative relationship with God, rooted in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Webber's approach thus aims to produce worshipers who are not only well-versed in liturgical practices but who also exhibit a deep, lived faith that reflects the holistic and redemptive nature of the gospel. In essence, Webber's contribution to evangelical worship is twofold: he provides a structured, historically grounded framework for designing worship services and simultaneously nurtures the development of individuals to live out the worship they profess.

5. Assessing Webber's Practical Worship Theology

1. Introduction

The current chapter attempts to answer the following questions: In what ways does Webber's practical worship theology contribute a peculiar vision of and approach to worship? In what ways is Webber's work deficient as a practical worship theology? What further research needs to be done on Webber's work in worship? The goal of the chapter is to discern the outcomes and effects of Webber's practical worship theology and to offer critical reflection on Webber's practical theological model.

2. Summary of findings

This thesis is the first academic research conducted solely on Robert E. Webber and his worship theology. The thesis has attempted to position Webber's work within the broader framework of practical theology to conduct a detailed analysis of his contributions to worship studies and to discern a conceptual framework of what this thesis has categorized as his practical worship theology. Webber's vision emphasizes that worship should be dynamic and multifaceted, deeply rooted in the life, teachings, and redemptive work of Jesus Christ. His approach advocates drawing from diverse theological traditions to construct a worship theology that effectively engages contemporary congregations while remaining historically grounded.

A central tenet of Webber's theology is Christology, ensuring that all worship practices are anchored in the narrative of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. This Christological focus transforms worship into a profound encounter with the living and ascended Christ, who has won the victory over sin and death and who is working for the salvation of the entire cosmos. Webber's retrieval and contextualization of ancient liturgical forms aims to restore core Christological commitments in contemporary worship, encouraging deeper engagement with the biblical narrative and a participatory embodiment of the story of Jesus Christ. Such engagement serves as a corrective to modern tendencies that prioritize the self as well as style over substance, and it emphasizes the need for worship to be theologically rich and historically rooted.

Webber's approach critically engages contemporary worship practices, particularly within evangelical contexts, acknowledging the trend towards experiential and human-centered worship, which often compromises theological depth. It calls for a

reorientation of worship practices towards the retelling of God's acts of salvation through Jesus Christ, celebrating the intimate relationship between God and His people. Rooting worship in Christological *kerygma*—the proclamation of the full gospel of Jesus Christ—ensures its relevance and transformative power across diverse contexts. This Christocentric focus acts as a reformational force, urging worshiping communities to rediscover the depth of worship centered on Christ's redemptive and restorative acts.

Webber's theology also values historical continuity and contextual application, drawing from early Christian leaders such as Justin Martyr, Hippolytus of Rome, and Irenaeus of Lyons, who emphasized Christological participation. Integrating historical wisdom with contemporary relevance, Webber's approach advocates for a worship model that synthesizes ancient practices within modern contexts, ensuring accessibility and contextual applicability. This synthesis fosters active participation and holistic immersion in the Christian story, recovering a sense of depth and continuity in worship.

Drawing from the Anglican tradition, Webber incorporates touchpoints from early Christian worship, including a fourfold structure framing worship as a meeting with Christ, a liturgical calendar orienting time around Christ's narrative, proclamation of the Word centered on Christ's saving acts, and regular sacramental participation emphasizing union with Christ. These practices form a rich tapestry inviting worshipers into the redemptive story of Jesus Christ. Blending Anglican liturgy with patterns that emerge from early Christian worship ensures worship remains substantive, historically grounded, and contextually appropriate.

At the heart of Webber's theology is liturgical recapitulation, emphasizing Christ's holistic role in redemption. Historic liturgical actions foster participation in Christ's victory over sin and death, transforming liturgy into an active re-enactment of Christ's life, teachings, and redemptive work. This approach shifts worship focus from individual experience to Christological proclamation and active participation of the whole church in the pattern of Jesus' death and resurrection. Worship becomes a dynamic, transformative encounter with the living Christ.

Four cardinal principles shape Webber's practical-theological approach to worship: historic-rootedness, narrative quality, participatory engagement, and evangelical experience. Historic-rootedness emphasizes recovering early church liturgical practices, ensuring continuity and a resonant theological focus. Narrative quality ensures all discourse begins and ends with the narrative of Jesus Christ. Participatory engagement advocates active congregational participation through contextual application of the liturgy so that the whole service of worship fosters

connectedness to Christ and one another as well as an awareness of God's activity in worship. Evangelical experience redefines experience as transformative engagement with Christ, emphasizing participation in Jesus' life and work over and against subjective experiences in worship. These principles provide a framework for congregations to cultivate meaningful worship experiences, rooted in tradition while remaining engaged with the present.

In conclusion, a theology of worship faithful to Robert Webber's vision offers a holistic, integrative approach to worship renewal. By drawing from historical practices and contextualizing them for contemporary relevance, it maintains a Christocentric focus, fostering dynamic and transformative worship experiences. This approach provides a robust framework for enriching and revitalizing worship, honoring the past while meeting present needs. It also offers a pathway for worshiping communities to rediscover the depth and richness of worship, creating spaces where believers can encounter the living Christ and his transforming grace.

3. Implications

The tenets of Webber's worship theology offer numerous implications for contemporary worship practice and theological discourse. The following section unpacks consequences of his theological approach and its potential impact on scholarship and the church.

3.1 Historical and cultural studies

Webber's work offers critical insights into the trajectory of American evangelicalism, particularly its ahistorical mindset and consumer-driven approach to worship. His critique invites a deeper exploration of the historical and cultural forces that have shaped contemporary evangelical practices. Scholars can investigate how modernity and consumerism have influenced evangelical worship, examining tensions between tradition and contemporary expressions of faith. Moreover, Webber's emphasis on historical continuity and Christological focus calls for renewed scholarly interest in the retrieval and contextualization of ancient liturgical forms. This can lead to extensive studies on how early church practices can be integrated into modern worship settings and their impact on spiritual formation and community life within evangelical contexts.

3.2 Interdisciplinary approaches in worship studies

Webber's work highlights the need for interdisciplinary approaches in worship studies. By integrating historical, theological, and cultural dimensions, scholars can develop a

nuanced understanding of worship practices and their theological underpinnings. This can include comparative studies between American evangelicalism and other global worship traditions, offering insights into how different cultural contexts shape worship practices. Furthermore, Webber's critique of the consumer-driven approach in worship encourages scholars to examine the broader implications of consumer culture on religious practices. Investigating how consumerism affects theological education, spiritual formation, and church growth strategies can contribute to developing worship practices that resist commodification and promote deeper theological engagement and community participation.

3.3 Participation in worship

Webber's emphasis on active participation contrasts sharply with the passive consumption approach evident in many worship settings and invites deeper exploration into several areas. Scholars can investigate how active participation in worship impacts congregational engagement, spiritual formation, and community building, exploring ways in which different worship practices encourage or hinder active involvement. Webber raises concerns about reductionism in theological training, where over-emphasizing intellectual engagement or emotional stimulation threatens the theological richness of worship. Scholars can examine current theological education curricula to assess how well they prepare worship leaders to facilitate active participation, evaluating the balance between intellectual content, emotional engagement, and practical skills in worship education.

Comparative studies can evaluate how various traditions and denominations incorporate active participation in worship, providing insights into effective practices and highlighting areas needing more participatory elements. Webber's emphasis encourages interdisciplinary research integrating theology, psychology, sociology, and education, exploring how different disciplines understand and support active participation in communal religious settings. This focus underscores the need for practical resources and guidelines for worship leaders. Scholars can contribute to developing these resources, helping leaders design worship experiences that foster deeper engagement and participation from congregants.

Research can also explore how different worship styles (e.g., liturgical, contemporary, charismatic) impact levels of participation, analyzing which elements most effectively engage worshipers and how they can be adapted to enhance participation. Historical analysis of worship practices can shed light on how active

participation has been understood and implemented in different eras and traditions, providing valuable context for contemporary discussions about participation in worship. Additionally, the design and layout of worship spaces significantly affect participation. Scholars can study how different architectural and spatial arrangements facilitate or hinder active engagement in worship.

3.4 Narrative quality of worship

Webber's emphasis on the narrative quality of worship presents several important implications. It invites scholars to delve deeper into the role of narrative in religious practices and how storytelling shapes and influences faith journeys. This involves examining how biblical narratives are integrated into worship and their impact on congregational understanding and engagement with the faith. Additionally, Webber's focus on narrative highlights the importance of exploring the theological and psychological dimensions of storytelling in worship. Scholars can investigate how narrative structures in worship contribute to spiritual formation, identity construction, and community cohesion.

Webber's perspective encourages interdisciplinary research that bridges theology, literature, psychology, and cultural studies. Exploring the intersection of these fields can uncover the ways in which worship narratives interact with and counteract the fragmented stories and messages prevalent in contemporary society. Moreover, the emphasis on narrative quality in worship calls for comparative studies of narrative practices across different religious traditions and cultural contexts. Such research can provide valuable insights into the universal and context-specific aspects of narrative in worship.

3.5 Integrative approach to worship design

Webber's integrative approach to worship design necessitates a harmonious blending of traditional and contemporary elements, presenting several implications. Scholars are encouraged to explore the synergy between historical ecclesiastical traditions and contemporary worship practices, including how ancient liturgical forms, symbols, and rituals can be adapted and made relevant in modern worship settings. Webber's approach also highlights the importance of contextual theology in worship studies. Scholars can investigate how worship practices can be tailored to address the cultural, social, and spiritual needs of contemporary congregations while remaining faithful to traditional theological principles.

Interdisciplinary research that bridges liturgical studies, theology, cultural studies, and practical theology is essential for a deeper understanding of the coexistence and enhancement of traditional and contemporary worship elements. Comparative studies on how various faith communities successfully blend these elements can identify best practices and innovative approaches applicable in diverse worship settings.

Webber's approach has significant implications for theological education and the training of worship leaders. Scholars can develop curricula and training programs that equip worship leaders with the knowledge and skills to design worship services balancing historical richness with contemporary relevance. Research can also focus on the impact of an integrative worship approach on congregational dynamics, studying how the blending of traditional and contemporary elements affects participation, engagement, and spiritual growth.

3.6 Content-rich worship

Webber's emphasis on content-rich worship underscores the importance of theological depth in worship practices. This approach invites scholars to critically examine the relationship between theological content and worship practices. Researchers can explore how aligning worship content with theological tenets focused on God's character and the Christological narrative can transform worship from mere ritualism or sentimentality into a dynamic encounter with Christ. This involves studying the impact of theologically rich worship on congregational understanding, spiritual growth, and overall worship experience.

The focus on theological depth highlights the need for contextual relevance. Scholars are encouraged to investigate how worship practices can maintain theological profundity while addressing the cultural and societal realities of contemporary congregations. This entails exploring the ways in which worship can speak to and engage with the specific contexts of different congregational settings, ensuring that worship remains relevant and resonant with worshipers' lived experiences.

Interdisciplinary research that integrates theology, cultural studies, and practical theology is crucial for understanding how worship can effectively communicate theological truths in diverse cultural settings. Additionally, Webber's emphasis on content-rich worship suggests the need for developing practical guidelines and frameworks for worship leaders. Scholars can create resources and training programs that equip worship leaders to design and lead worship services deeply rooted in

theological principles and responsive to contemporary cultural contexts. This includes integrating theological content into various elements of worship, such as liturgy, music, preaching, and sacraments.

Finally, Webber's vision for worship extends beyond the gathered worship time, emphasizing the role of worship in shaping the church's witness and ministry in the world. Scholars can explore how worship practices can inspire and equip congregations for mission and ministry, studying the connections between worship, spiritual formation, and social action. Investigating how worship can provide a vision for ministry that aligns with the church's theological commitments and engages with the broader cultural and societal context is essential.

In conclusion, Webber's insights on worship challenge and enrich established paradigms. His emphasis on depth, engagement, and Christocentrism offers a robust framework for reimagining worship in the twentieth century and beyond. Both scholars and practitioners would do well to heed his call, crafting worship services that are historically rooted, theologically rich, and contextually resonant.

4. Limitations and critiques

Although Webber presents compelling insights into Christian worship through his practical worship theology, there are several criticisms to consider. The following section seeks to synthesize and analyze these criticisms, focusing on the shortcomings of Webber's work.

4.1. Contextual concerns

To read Webber is to understand him as a Western theologian, especially one situated in the context of American evangelicalism and influenced by the liturgical approaches of Anglicanism. Throughout his works, Webber expresses dissatisfaction with the evangelical worship forms he encountered during his formative years. His personal experiences serve as a foundation for his pursuit of what he deems a more mature expression of worship. However, his perspective, though deeply rooted in personal dissatisfaction, may not resonate universally. Individuals who have not encountered similar discontent with their own worship contexts, or who perceive their current worship expressions as sufficiently efficacious, might question the need for renewal or the evaluative approach Webber advocates. Critics, such as Melanie Ross, argue that Webber's approach is reductionist and does not accommodate those in free church

traditions who do not embrace liturgical forms.[782] This narrowness could limit the appeal of his work primarily to those who share his discontent.

Evangelicals might also find Webber's liturgical approach troubling due to his emphasis on the *Christus Victor* theory of atonement and his tendency to overshadow other crucial aspects of Christology. Webber's focus on *Christus Victor* can displace the more crucicentric dimensions of evangelical faith, which emphasize the atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Such an imbalance risks creating a disconnect with the evangelical piety that Bebington's evangelical quadrilateral outlines, which includes conversionism, activism, Biblicism, and crucicentrism. Evangelicals who prioritize the sacrificial and atoning aspects of Christ's work may find Webber's theology insufficiently reflective of their faith experience, thus limiting the broader applicability and acceptance of his liturgical framework within the evangelical community. This critical oversight demonstrates a need for a more nuanced and balanced integration of Christological themes to truly resonate with and serve the diverse expressions of contemporary evangelical worship.

Additionally, Webber's liturgical model, which is steeped in historical and sacramental practices, might be perceived as insufficiently addressing the evangelical focus on personal salvation and individual relationship with Christ. Evangelicals often prioritize direct, emotive expressions of faith and spontaneous worship experiences, which they might find constrained by Webber's structured and historical liturgical forms.[783] This difference in worship style could lead to skepticism about the relevance and authenticity of Webber's approach, as it may seem to downplay the importance of personal conversion and the immediacy of the Holy Spirit's work in the believer's life.

Furthermore, Webber's critiques of contemporary evangelical worship could be seen as dismissive of the genuine spiritual experiences and growth that many evangelicals find within their current practices. By advocating for a return to more traditional liturgical forms, Webber risks alienating those who feel that their contemporary worship expressions are already deeply meaningful and effective. Consequently, his theology might be perceived as not only theologically divergent but also culturally disconnected from the lived experiences and spiritual needs of many evangelicals, thus limiting its practical applicability and acceptance within the broader evangelical community.

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[782] Melanie Ross, *Evangelical Versus Liturgical?*, 3, 5.
[783] Ibid., 12-19; Cf. Jones, *A Historical Approach to Evangelical Worship*, 264-273.

4.2 Revivalist traditions

Webber's critiques of revivalist traditions further illustrate the limitations of his approach. He often critiques the American evangelical revival movement for its focus on subjective experience and personal decision, failing to recognize the positive aspects of revivalism, such as fostering deep personal and collective religious experiences. Consequently, his theology is not useful for understanding the commitments of the revival tradition and does not answer well the place revivals do and should have within American evangelicalism. This omission suggests that Webber's theology may not fully resonate with congregations that find spiritual vitality in revivalist practices, thus limiting its applicability in certain evangelical contexts. Those accustomed to a revivalist form of worship, for instance, exemplified by elements like the altar call, could contend that such methods manifest an immediate and active experience of Christ during worship.[784] Consequently, Webber's critiques of human-centric practices in worship might not resonate with this demographic. They could posit that, although their worship modalities differ in practice and structure, the essence and orientation toward Christ remains intact, challenging Webber's assertions. Moreover, although Webber critiques sermon-centric worship and evangelistic approaches to worship, he doesn't offer a thorough theology of preaching within his writings, nor did he ever write anything specifically on preaching and how to guide preaching in light of his worship theology. Given the prominent role preaching plays in evangelical worship, more on preaching would have been helpful from Webber.

The lack of a comprehensive theology of preaching creates a notable gap in Webber's framework. Preaching, as a central element of evangelical worship, shapes the theological and spiritual formation of congregants. It serves not only as a medium for teaching and edification but also as a moment of encountering God's Word in a transformative manner. Without specific guidance on preaching, those who follow Webber's worship theology may struggle to align their sermonic practices with his broader liturgical vision. A more robust theological treatment of preaching could have bridged the gap between Webber's historical and participatory worship principles and the practical realities of sermon delivery in evangelical settings. This oversight is particularly significant given how many evangelical churches rely heavily on preaching to convey theological truths, provide spiritual direction, and inspire personal and

[784] For an example of a defense of revivalism as a Christological act of worship, see Mark Nysewander, *Revival Rising: Preparing for the Next Great Wave of Awakening* (Nashville: Seedbed, 2016), 33-38. Cf. Webber, *The Divine Embrace*, 94.

communal growth. A theology of preaching that harmonizes with Webber's emphasis on historical rootedness, narrative, and participation could enrich the worship experience, ensuring that sermons contribute to the holistic and transformative nature of worship that Webber advocates. By not addressing this aspect, Webber's work leaves a critical component of worship somewhat underdeveloped, potentially limiting the full realization of his worship theology in practice.

4.3 Historical nostalgia

Another critique revolves around an underlying tone of historical nostalgia within Webber's methodology. In his fervent commitment to anchor worship in ancient traditions, Webber might neglect the needs of a diverse congregation, especially one that does not resonate with Western culture or European history. His practical worship theology risks potential estrangement of believers who do not identify with or find relevance in ancient liturgical practices, as well as the inadvertent marginalization of subsequent church traditions, which undeniably offer pertinent insights for the modern church. This may be especially true for evangelicals who are suspicious of liturgical practices not found in Scripture or that do not align with their ecclesial tradition.[785] Although Webber's writings testify to his experiences of Christ through historic liturgy, he does not explicitly talk about the affective dimension of recapitulation through the liturgy. This may leave some skeptical because they do not share his affective experience. Additionally, Webber's seemingly rose-tinted view of the early church omits its various challenges and disputes, leaving room for some to doubt its appropriateness as an exemplary blueprint for current worship practices.

4.4 Theological and sacramental considerations

On a theological note, Webber's practical worship theology, characterized by its pronounced Christological emphasis, evokes critical reflections from a broader Trinitarian perspective. His marked focus on Christology inadvertently restricts multifaceted dimensions of worship in other traditions, particularly among Pentecostal and charismatic congregations and theologians who accentuate the integral role of the Holy Spirit in worship practices.[786] Placing the Christological aspects of worship at the forefront obscures or diminishes wider Trinitarian activity, where the roles of the

[785] For example, see David Cloud's rant against Webber in David Cloud, "A Warning About the Emerging Church and Robert Webber" in *Way of Life Literature*, July 2, 2008, accessed June 30, 2023, https://www.wayoflife.org/database/robertwebber.html.

[786] See Alvarez, *Pentecostal Orthodoxy*, 27.

Father and the Holy Spirit are paramount. Consequently, while Webber's theological orientation offers depth in Christ-centered worship, it poses questions about the balance and integration of the full Trinitarian spectrum in contemporary worship experiences.

From a sacramental perspective, Webber's sacramental framework, particularly his sacramental Christology, needs careful examination. His pronounced emphasis on the mystery and objectivity of Christ's presence drifts towards a perception of the sacraments as possessing an almost magical quality. In such an understanding, the mere performance of the sacrament could be seen as a guarantee of Christ's involvement and activity. His inclination towards an *ex opere operato* understanding of the sacraments sidelines the role of personal faith and the ethical agency of the believer within the worship context, which is problematic for many evangelicals.[787] Specifically, Webber adopts an *ex opere operato* understanding of the Eucharist in his way of encouraging people to flee to the Eucharist for emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual healing.[788] He views the Eucharist as the presence of the risen Christ (over and against the crucified Christ) restoring all things. In Webber's perspective, the presence of Christ at the table has the power to restore a person in multifaceted ways. Therefore, while Webber's practical worship theology offers a Christological framework for sacramental practice, it concurrently prompts considerations about how he understands the nuanced balance between sacramental actions and personal faith.

For those from more evangelical or Reformed backgrounds who emphasize the necessity of personal faith and the moral integrity of the believer in the efficacy of religious practices, the concept of *ex opere operato* is particularly troubling. The sacraments, while important in these traditions, are outward signs that must correspond to an inward reality of faith and repentance. The sacraments thus are effective not

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[787] *Ex opere operato* is a Latin term that translates to "from the work performed." In theological context, especially within Roman Catholic sacramental theology, it refers to the belief that the efficacy of the sacraments does not depend on the personal holiness of the minister administering them, but rather on the validity of the sacrament itself and the intention of doing what the Church does. This concept asserts that the sacraments confer grace by the very fact of the action being performed, provided the proper elements and form are used and the recipient has the proper disposition. For example, in the sacrament of baptism, if water is used and the Trinitarian formula "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" is recited, the sacrament is considered valid and efficacious regardless of the personal sanctity of the priest or minister performing it. The principle of *ex opere operato* contrasts with *ex opere operantis*, which means "from the work of the doer" and emphasizes the importance of the minister's or recipient's personal faith and moral condition for the sacrament's efficacy. The Roman Catholic Church upholds *ex opere operato* to ensure that the sacraments are reliable means of grace, independent of human failings. See "*Ex opere operato*," in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Gale, 2003), 631-633.

[788] Howard D. Vanderwell, "Flee to the Eucharist: The Lord's Supper as Soul-Care," *Reformed Worship* 88 (June 2008), Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, https://www.reformedworship.org/article/june-2008/flee-eucharist (accessed July 3, 2024). Cf. Webber: *Ancient-Future Worship*, 134-140; *Signs of Wonder* 121-129; *Worship is a Verb*, 77-78.

merely because they are performed correctly, but because the individual participates in them with genuine faith and understanding. Webber's view can be seen to minimalize the importance of the individual's faith response, suggesting that the sacrament's power lies almost entirely in its correct execution. It also leads to concerns about a perceived mechanical or ritualistic approach to the sacraments, where the transformative and relational aspects of faith are overshadowed. For evangelicals and Reformed believers, such a perspective could foster complacency where individuals rely on sacramental acts without engaging their hearts and lives in genuine faith and discipleship.

While Webber's approach enriches the understanding of Christ's presence in the sacraments, it also raises important questions about the balance between the objective and subjective dimensions of worship. His theology challenges evangelical and Reformed views, as it appears to emphasize the objective aspects of sacramental actions at the potential expense of personal faith and ethical responsibility.

4.5 Implementation

Implementing Webber's practical worship theology presents challenges. Merging historical traditions with contemporary expressions requires worship leaders to be knowledgeable about both. Proper training is essential to ensure that the integration is meaningful and contextually appropriate. Without this, Webber's insights might not be widely accepted or applied effectively.

Moreover, Webber's blended approach to worship risks diluting the core strengths of both traditional and contemporary worship. While aiming to bridge these expressions, there is a potential to misrepresent or lack integrity in either tradition.[789] Hastily incorporating contemporary elements without deep reflection can result in a superficial representation of the Gospel, and without a Christological foundation, his practices risk becoming mere historical replications rather than transformative acts of devotion.[790]

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[789] A critique can be made of James K.A. Smith's work here. Although he values liturgy and advocates for the reclamation of liturgy in worship in his books, *Desiring the Kingdom* and *You Are What You Love*, he fails to connect liturgical practices to Christological participation, which Webber would say separates them from their true purpose. Smith exemplifies his lack of a clear Christological vision for the liturgy in worship in the final section of his book *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism*. Smith outlines a worship service that is eclectic in its application of liturgical material and ultimately comes up incoherent as a model for worship that seeks participation in the person and work of Jesus Christ. See James K.A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?: Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 143-146. Cf. Smith: *Desiring the Kingdom*, 26, 48, 55-62, 80-85; *You Are What You Love*, 4-7, 11-19, 32-38, 68-69.

[790] For example, in his book, *Ever-Ancient, Ever-New*, Winfield Bevins details a movement of young evangelical adults in twenty-first century who have begun to embrace liturgical forms of worship. The book provides interviews and survey data that shows the increased value. While Bevins observes the

4.6 Music in worship

Webber's treatment of music within his practical worship theology tends to be superficial. While he recognizes the participatory nature of music, his critiques often focus on stylistic preferences rather than engaging with the deeper theological and liturgical functions of music. In contemporary churches today, music plays a key role in worship, serving as a primary means through which congregations experience and express their faith. Therefore, there is a pressing need for a robust theology of music in worship that aligns with Webber's principles of historic rootedness, narrative quality, participatory engagement, and evangelical experience.

A comprehensive theology of music in worship should address its purpose and content, providing valuable guidance for music leaders and pastors. Music in worship is not merely a matter of style but a profound theological expression that shapes and reflects the beliefs and emotions of the congregation. It has the power to convey the narrative of salvation history, drawing worshippers into a deeper understanding and experience of God's redemptive work. By integrating music that reflects the historic traditions of the church, worship can connect contemporary believers with the rich heritage of Christian faith, fostering a sense of continuity and rootedness.

Furthermore, music's narrative quality can enhance the storytelling aspect of worship, making the liturgical actions more memorable and impactful. Songs that tell the story of Christ's life, death, and resurrection, or that echo the themes of Scripture, can help worshippers internalize these truths in a powerful and lasting way. This narrative dimension of music supports Webber's emphasis on the historic and theological depth of worship.

Participatory engagement is another crucial aspect where music plays a vital role. Congregational singing fosters a sense of community and shared faith experience, allowing individuals to actively participate in worship rather than remain passive observers. Webber's principles highlight the importance of involvement in worship, and music provides an accessible and unifying medium for this engagement. Encouraging full participation in singing can help bridge the gap between personal faith and communal expression, making worship a more inclusive and dynamic experience.

Finally, in the context of evangelical experience, music in worship has the potential to facilitate deep emotional and spiritual encounters with God. Worship music

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appeal to higher liturgical forms amongst these younger evangelicals, he makes no mention of a Christological commitment or vision in relation to the movement. See Bevins, *Ever-Ancient, Ever New*, 27-30, 33-42.

can create an atmosphere where worshippers sense the presence of the Holy Spirit, leading to moments of personal transformation and corporate renewal. By developing a theology of music that embraces the evangelical emphasis on personal experience while also grounding it in historical and theological richness, church leaders can craft worship experiences that are both deeply meaningful and theologically sound.

Overall, a more comprehensive theology of music in worship, noting its strengths and potential to serve a liturgical role in worship, would enhance Webber's practical-theological framework. Since he does not offer a detailed framework for understanding the theological implications of music, Webber misses an opportunity to influence the musical landscape of evangelical worship. Integrating principles of historic rootedness, narrative quality, participatory engagement, and evangelical experience into a theology of worship music would provide a richer, more holistic approach to worship that resonates with contemporary congregations while staying true to the traditions of the Christian faith.

4.7 Selective use of church history

While Webber's theological framework draws from a deep appreciation of church history, particularly the formative years of early Christianity, there remains a notable tension between his historical sources and the liturgical expressions he advocates. Webber relies on pre-Nicene theologians to develop his liturgical theology, which is evident in his references to figures like Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Hippolytus who emphasized the formative power of worship in shaping Christian identity and doctrine. Despite his reliance on early theological sources, Webber's practical envisioning of worship aligns more with post-Nicene, particularly Anglican, forms of worship; an alignment the liturgical renewal movements of the late twentieth century influenced. The result is that Webber's liturgical vision tends to befit primarily white, American, middle-class contexts.

Compounding this issue is Webber's emphasis on the *Christus Victor* motif, a theological perspective that portrays Christ's death and resurrection as the ultimate victory over sin, death, and the powers of evil. While this motif offers a powerful lens through which to understand the redemptive work of Christ, Webber's hyper-focus leads to a selective reading of history. In his writings Webber prioritizes aspects of early Christian thought that align with the *Christus Victor* narrative, which leads him to downplay or overlook other significant theological developments and liturgical practices that don't fit neatly within the framework. This selective historical approach

risks simplifying the rich diversity of early Christian theology and practice, shaping a vision of worship that, while compelling, does not capture the complexity of the early traditions from which it draws.

In general, Webber's historical approach prioritizes finding early church support for his views rather than evaluating liturgical developments within their specific contexts. His selective use of history serves his rhetorical aims but oversimplifies complex historical realities. Webber may have adopted this approach to focus on practical concerns or to make theological ideas more accessible to an evangelical audience less engaged with history; regardless, his method reduces the credibility and depth of his theological constructs.

Consequently, Webber's writings do not reflect a genuine attempt to examine liturgical developments in their own historical and theological context. His approach is problematic, therefore, since it risks presenting an incomplete and overly favorable view of certain liturgical practices without considering their original contexts or the diverse theological debates that shaped them. Although Webber may have understood these contexts and conducted his research with diligence, a nuanced historical understanding does not come through in his published works. His approach can mislead those who use his framework, leading them to view it as genuinely rooted in history rather than as an interpretation based on selected principles and patterns. A more comprehensive engagement with figures and contexts would enhance the reliability of his work and offer richer insights for contemporary worship challenges.

Webber's theological framework should be appreciated for its ability to highlight significant liturgical principles that resonate with contemporary worship needs; however, it also requires careful consideration and critical engagement to avoid oversimplified or overly romanticized views of church history. Balancing a nuanced understanding of historical context with a comprehensive integration of diverse Christological themes is essential for a more inclusive and applicable worship theology in American evangelicalism.

4.8 Engagement with global perspectives and minority voices

Webber's lack of engagement with global perspectives and minority voices is a significant oversight in his practical worship theology. His approach, while insightful in many respects, remains predominantly centered on Western, particularly American evangelical, contexts. This narrow focus limits the applicability and relevance of his work to the broader, diverse global Christian community. Even though Webber offers

valuable insights on context and accessibility, his practical worship theology falls short of providing a thorough vision for matters of ethnodoxology—the study of how different cultures express their worship of God. Ethnodoxology seeks to understand and appreciate the diverse ways in which different cultural groups worship, recognizing that each culture brings unique gifts and perspectives to the global church. Since Webber does not engage extensively with ethnodoxological principles, he misses an opportunity to advocate for a worship theology that is both rooted in tradition and responsive to cultural diversity.

A critical analysis of Webber's practical worship theology reveals several areas where deeper engagement with global worship practices and advancements would have been beneficial. For instance, the vibrant and varied worship traditions found in African, Asian, Latin American, and other non-Western contexts offer rich insights into communal worship, the use of indigenous music and art forms, and the integration of cultural practices into Christian liturgy. Webber's theology often fails to address questions and challenges posed by worship practices in global contexts, particularly those shaped by non-American evangelical approaches. In many parts of the world, worship is deeply intertwined with local cultural expressions and communal life, reflecting a holistic view of spirituality that encompasses social justice, communal solidarity, and a strong sense of the sacred in everyday life. Webber's work, however, tends to emphasize liturgical forms and historical continuity without fully exploring how these elements can be contextualized and enriched in global settings. By incorporating these diverse voices and experiences, Webber could have presented a more inclusive theology that resonates with the global Christian community, addressing the multifaceted nature of worship across different cultures.

The absence of significant figures from charismatic movements, such as William J. Seymour, further highlights this limitation in Webber's work. Seymour, a central figure in the Azusa Street Revival, played a pivotal role in the development of Pentecostalism, a movement that has profoundly influenced global Christianity with its emphasis on the Holy Spirit, vibrant worship, and inclusivity across racial and social lines. Webber's practical worship theology, however, does not offer a comprehensive framework for understanding or incorporating charismatic worship. He neither provides a practical theology of charismatic worship nor offers a thorough critique of it. Instead, Webber primarily helps charismatics appreciate liturgical forms of worship, which, while valuable for some, may leave others feeling that their standard ways of practice are seen as lesser or unfitting.

Although Webber exhibits value for charismatic traditions in some of his books and seeks to give them a place within his broader liturgical framework, this inclusion often seems more like an afterthought than an integral component of his practical worship theology. It is also missing in many of his later books.[791] Charismatic worship, with its dynamic expressions, emphasis on spiritual gifts, and spontaneous elements, poses unique theological and practical questions that Webber does not fully address. By not engaging deeply with these aspects, Webber misses an opportunity to explore how charismatic practices can be meaningfully integrated with liturgical traditions.

Incorporating insights from charismatic and Pentecostal traditions would have enriched Webber's theological discourse on worship, offering a wider range of perspectives and addressing the experiential and dynamic aspects of worship that are central to these movements. This integration could have provided a more holistic understanding of worship that celebrates the diversity of expressions within the global Christian community. Furthermore, a more thorough engagement with charismatic worship could have offered valuable critiques and enhancements to both liturgical and charismatic practices, fostering a more inclusive and vibrant worship experience.

In summary, Webber's practical worship theology could significantly benefit from a more extensive engagement with global perspectives and minority voices. By integrating diverse worship practices, cultural expressions, and theological insights from around the world, Webber could present a more inclusive and robust theology of worship. This would not only enhance the relevance and applicability of his work to the global Christian community but also provide a richer, more comprehensive vision for worship that honors and celebrates the diversity of the body of Christ.

5. Conclusion

This thesis is a critical examination of Robert E. Webber's practical worship theology. Studying Webber's work is essential for understanding his role in American evangelical reform during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It also provides valuable insights for developing a practical theology of worship in the church today. As contemporary churches navigate their own liturgical paths, it is helpful to

[791] For example, although Webber mentions the value of charismatic approaches to worship in *Signs of Wonder* and *Worship is a Verb*, he does not give substantive treatment to charismatic worship in either and uses it more as an external conversation partner. Moreover, he does not mention anything about charismatic forms or practices in his *Ancient-Future* series. See Webber: *Signs of Wonder*, 5-9, 20-28, 52-56, 62-70, 73-82, 90-97, 121-129; *Worship is a Verb*, 117-126.

engage with Webber's ideas, recognizing both the limitations and the opportunities they offer for enriching evangelical worship.

Developing a Webber-inspired theology of worship requires a methodical, practical-theological approach to ensure that worship remains both theologically sound and contextually relevant, with a focus on Christological proclamation and participation, as well as congregational transformation. The initial step involves a thorough assessment of the church's current worship practices, including the styles, theological emphases, and elements such as liturgy, music, preaching, sacraments, and congregational participation. This assessment must consider the cultural and social context in which the church operates, recognizing how these factors shape worship practices. Webber's concept of "liturgical recapitulation" underscores the importance of evaluating contemporary worship in light of historic Christian traditions, ensuring that current practices are connected to the broader narrative of God's redemptive work. This exploration should involve studying these traditions not only for their relevance to contemporary worship but also within their own cultural and historical contexts, without restricting the study to traditions that conform to pre-existing norms.

After describing the current practices, the church must ask why these practices are in place, which involves interpreting the underlying theological beliefs, historical influences, and cultural factors that have shaped the church's worship. Webber's work suggests that many contemporary worship practices in evangelicalism may have evolved in response to cultural shifts or as reactions to past movements, such as revivalism or modernity. This interpretive task thus seeks to uncover whether the current worship practices adequately reflect the church's theological commitments, particularly its Christocentric focus, as Webber advocated. Are the practices fostering a deep engagement with the story of Jesus Christ, or have they become merely functional or stylistic preferences?

Informed by the descriptive and interpretive tasks, the church must then ask what normative principles should guide its worship. This involves returning to theological foundations, particularly those that emphasize Christological content and active congregational participation. Webber's practical worship theology suggests that worship should be both rooted in the historical traditions of the church and contextually relevant. Normatively, worship ought to center on the proclamation of Christ's life, death, and resurrection, integrating traditional liturgical elements in a way that is accessible and meaningful to contemporary congregants. This normative task involves

discerning which elements of the church's current practices should be retained, adapted, or discarded to align more with the church's theological commitments.

To develop a comprehensive evangelical practical theology of worship, it is essential to incorporate additional normative principles not addressed in Webber's framework. A key element is the emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit in worship, particularly in preaching and sung worship, which are central to evangelical piety. The Holy Spirit's work in illuminating Scripture, inspiring adoration, and facilitating communal worship must be intentionally integrated to foster the renewal and empowerment of the congregation. Moreover, a comprehensive evangelical theology of worship must include the voices and practices of global and minority communities, acknowledging that Webber's Western-influenced liturgical focus does not adequately reflect the diversity of the global Church. Integrating these perspectives can enrich worship, promoting unity and solidarity among believers from various cultural backgrounds. Additionally, while Webber emphasizes the *Christus Victor* motif, it is crucial to maintain a crucicentric focus in worship. Balancing these aspects ensures that worship recognizes both the triumph of Christ's victory and the profound reality of his sacrifice. Engaging with these themes of atonement and suffering allows worship to become a space for repentance, humility, and grace, reflecting the paradox of the Christian life where the cross leads to resurrection and where suffering and glory coexist.

Moving to the last step in the practical-theological process, the pragmatic task addresses the practical application of the insights gained from the previous tasks. How can the church implement changes to its worship practices that are theologically sound and contextually appropriate? This step involves creating a strategic plan for worship renewal, drawing on Webber's model of "ancient-future" worship that blends historic liturgical practices with contemporary forms. For instance, a church might introduce elements such as the liturgical calendar, the Eucharist, or creedal affirmations in ways that resonate with the congregation's cultural context. The goal is to foster a worship environment that is participatory, where the congregation actively engages in the worship of God, embodying the theological truths they profess. Likewise, a church should be dedicated to leadership training, helping pastors and worship leaders understand the theological, historical, and evangelical foundations of worship. Regular conversation with the congregation can also help understand questions and struggles within the community. Additionally, gradual introduction of new practices can allow the congregation to adapt and embrace changes made in worship.

In conclusion, Robert E. Webber's practical worship theology offers churches a compelling framework for deepening and enriching their worship practices. His emphasis on historical rootedness, narrative richness, participatory engagement, and evangelical experience lays a solid foundation for churches aiming to evaluate and elevate their worship, ensuring it is both theologically sound and contextually relevant. As churches engage in their own practical theological work, they have the opportunity not only to adapt but also to expand upon Webber's insights, crafting worship services that are participatory and anchored in enduring theological principles. By doing so, they can cultivate a worship culture that not only honors tradition but also inspires and transforms their congregations, equipping them to live out their faith with renewed vigor and purpose.

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