of the created order into this conversation: this is the mission of the Spirit.

All this provides a basis for understanding what worship can express: worship is the context in which the divine-human conversation finds specific focus and a particular expression. In worship, God's life of giving and receiving, in mutual relationship, which is the fundamental character of the world created by God finds expression. Worship is the self-expression of the world with God and of God with the world.

So does God desire our worship? I say, 'Yes', in the sense that God creates and woos us towards free, responsive, and genuine relationship with God: and the 'us' here is all God's creation. But notice that this worship God desires is not the one-way adoration of creatures who are humiliated or who cower before God. Rather, this worship involves us as 'free people', created to walk in dignity and worth, in harmony with our God.

The Christian idea of a Trinitarian life in and with the world, in which the Spirit draws us into awareness of God and of ourselves as engaged in mutual life and love, leading us towards a celebration of being together, in growth, struggle, suffering, and continuing relationship, loyalty and love: this vision of a shared life provides the basis of an idea of divine worship. As lovers offer their all to each other, God offers everything to the creation, and this in turn draws out from the creation an offering of its all to God. This worship is not a one-way process, but a mutual celebration. In this sense, I'd like to suggest, God not only receives our worship, God engages in worship.

It might be suggested that this idea is wrong from the beginning, since to worship involves to defer to another, to recognize that other as more worthy than oneself. While there is merit in this observation, it does not entirely fit our understandings of worship. Consider for example the older English form of marriage vows, which included the words, 'With my body, I thee worship.' This was a commitment to a mutuality of adoration and care. As I shall argue, the idea of mutuality between lovers is indeed one way of understanding worship which is more appropriate to the way God invites to relate to Godself than some other ideas of master-slave, or superior-inferior. This is not to say that we are equal to God. Rather it is to say that God invites us into such a
relationship and we celebrate and enjoy it because of God's gracious invitation and choice. In this same way, Jesus said to his disciples: 'I no longer call you servants, but friends' (John 15.14). To receive this invitation is a responsibility, one which perhaps we find difficult. Maybe we prefer to be servants and to relate to God and to others in hierarchical ways!

To allow our lives to be gathered into such worship, to bring who and what we are into such worship, to affirm and celebrate, to lament and confess, and to reach out in hope and missionary commitment towards such life, this is our reasonable service.

**The worship of each and all**

On the basis of the preceding argument, I now contend that the worship of the Christian community is the life of each Christian believer and of all the lives, gathered into one life. In the totality of gifts and lives which makes us God's creation, we all have a gift to offer and a life to live, our reasonable service to bring to the glory of God our creator and redeemer.

This totality, the life of each and the life of all, is the worship of all the believers; and it is this totality which is the full and complete meaning of the priesthood of all believers. Together, as one body made up of many members, each having a life to offer in service and worship of God, and all inter-dependent in the life of the body of Christ, all this is our worship.

This worship, the priestly offering of all the believers, needs to be understood in two distinct but inter-dependent ways. I call these *the gathered life* of the church and *the dispersed life* of the church. In both of these expressions, we offer the worship of each and all the believers.

What I call the gathered life of the church includes all its organisational expressions—all the groups and meetings and missions and administrative structures, and of course the worship services. The dispersed life includes all that the people do and are, at home and work, at leisure and in the wider community. It is vital to say that we are not the church only when we are gathered. Wherever we are, we are the church; and wherever we are we are offering our worship, the worship of all the believers.
This suggests to me a dynamic for understanding our worship and I believe for the renewal of our worship services. When we gather to worship, we are seeking to bring into articulation the whole story of our life with God: each of us and all of us as participants in the story of God's continuing life in and with and for the world.

**Our Gathered Worship: Articulating the Divine Conversation**

The word 'articulation' has two distinct applications in current usage. Most commonly we use it to refer to the activity of giving expression to something, so we say that a person articulates their question in a forum such as this. In another sense, we say that several things are articulated when they are joined together and function as a unity. Two trucks or two sections of a bus may form an articulated vehicle; the bones of a skeleton are said to be articulated; and an academic system may allow people to articulate distinct programs into a degree structure. I'd like to bring these two senses of the word articulation together, to suggest that in the gathered worship of the community of faith, the story of life with God comes to articulation.

In the worship event, the gathered community of faith locates itself within, and in response to, the continuing life and activity of God. We have heard the rumour of God, we have experienced God's presence and call, and we have entered into the salvation of our God. Thus we come singing and telling the story of God and the world, and our stories. We come together and affirm 'the mighty acts of him who called [us] out of darkness into his marvellous light'.

It seems to me crucial to say that this is not simply a past-directed telling. We are not just saying what God has done in the past, especially if we mean by that the long distant past. The theology of divine conversation, which I mentioned earlier, suggests that in the continuous present we are invited to converse with the living God. In the worship event, we tell the story of the people of God, in the continuous story of God's promises to and presence with Israel and with the 'grafted on' people of God, the ecclesia of faith in Christ. In worship, we read the Hebrew scriptures, the Epistles and the Gospel stories—and in so doing, we affirm that this is the story of our God, the God who has called us too, so this is our story.
As we read the scriptures together, and locate ourselves within their perspectives, we find ourselves drawn into the divine conversation: God addresses us as Word of invitation, confrontation, consolation, challenge and choice. As I have argued, God does not only command and declare; God also questions, provokes and invites: what do we have to say? For instance, today as the people of God gather in many places (in this place!), God places before us Jesus’ question, ‘Do you have any food?’ (Mark 6.38) What do you have for the hungry, what resources will you share with those in desperate need?

In the gathered worship of the church, we bring to articulation the questions God asks us and the issues and possibilities that the Spirit evokes for us in the present, in our lives in the world. There are needs and possibilities in the Christian family—everything from the Mrs Brown’s tests for cancer last week to the desperate plight of the Palestinian Christians. There are many issues and possibilities which arise for Christians in their places of work. Equally, the gathered people come with stories of home and community life, in kindergarten or football club or the day care centre, political parties and social groups. All these things are part of the life of the community which is engaged with the story of God in the world. As the Spirit breathes in all creation, God is seeking to embody peace and healing, truth and justice in every such place. All this involvement, all this possibility of life with God, is gatherable and may be articulated as our worship.

It becomes a serious question, then, just whose stories and whose perspectives receive spoken attention in the worship service and how these things are to be expressed. Who gets a mention? This I think is a difficult challenge for all who lead the worship events. There is I suggest a real opportunity here to encourage segments in the services when individuals tell brief stories or share the challenges they are facing as Christians in society, at home, at work, etc., as a basis for prayer and also as a basis for articulating our life with God. This has the great benefit of saving us from a pastor-centred view of what is happening, and from a church-organization centred view of our life as a faith community. If we are the priesthood of all believers, then our articulation of our life with God must mention (at least representatively) all of our life and activities, with God and in the context of God’s purposes in the world, not just in the gathered church.
The gathered worship of all believers can also be the spring-board from which each and all go into daily lives of service, as priests in a royal priesthood, a community which together offers itself to God. The worship of all believers is thus the inspiration and direction of church life, but by this I do not mean only what we are when we gather. I mean also what we are in everything we do and are as followers of Jesus.

The six things I suggested were elements in the various biblical ideas of priesthood now become elements of the life of the gathered and dispersed worship of all believers — directions or themes through which we and our people can see the priesthood of all believers lived out in conversation with the living God.

The Christian priesthood of all believers first of all knows itself to be called and appointed by God. For Baptists, this means that we are all called to the community of the baptised: called to name Jesus Christ as Lord, as personal saviour, as the one whose life is our life. This baptismal event is our ordination for ministry in the priesthood of all believers. The laying on of hands, with baptism, is a wonderful way to express this.

As we have been immersed by water, we are also called to be immersed in the life of God. The priests of Israel were called to be people associated with God, knowing God. So too, the worship of all Christians calls us to be people who know God. Here today there is a great challenge to move from a paradigm of knowledge as information to knowledge as relationship and communion. This suggests the need to curb our activism and to include much more specific elements of contemplation and spiritual focus in our lives.

If, as followers of Jesus, we engage with God’s way and God’s mission in both these expressions, we will all too soon know intimately the need of the people and their sin. We will know the injustice, the pride and greed, which causes so much suffering. But we will not know this only as other people’s sin. We will know this as our sin too. As the priesthood of all believers, we come asking forgiveness for our own sin and our participation in the injustices we lament, as well as begging God’s grace for the hungry ones and those imprisoned by the machinations of human evil.

Fourthly, the worship of all believers as a collective priesthood calls us to make sacrifices and offerings. These offerings, as I suggested earlier,
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do not seek to persuade God to be gracious to us or others. Rather, these are sacrifices of thanksgiving and service, as acts which seek to make real in the world our commitment to God's way. In all kinds of deeds and activities, churchly and social, individual and corporate, we are called to be the leaven in the loaf, and a light on the hill. These offerings, which may indeed cause blood, sweat and tears, are not oblations for sin but are acts of service to God and God's way and will in the world.

As a result of all these preceding points, the priestly community of all Christians is to be intimately associated with God's gift of salvation. The priority here is very important. Christians do not have a mission to save the world. Only God can do that; but we are called to be intimately involved with God's wish and will to bring salvation to all. In all we do and are, we are to be people of the Good News and people who are good news. Our offering of a collective priesthood, a communal service in worship must indeed be the outworking of an intimate involvement in God's purposes. So we must be forgiving and not just forgiven people. The church must be committed to freedom and justice, not just as a political agenda but as the very life of the church, because we are representatives and agents of the God who is freedom and justice. We must model this freedom and always strive for this justice. We must bring healing, even as we seek God's healing. These are but a few elements of what it means for the priestly worship of all believers to be intimately associated with God's gift of salvation.

None of this is possible for us alone. The final, but indeed the most fundamental, characteristic of the priestly calling is that it is enabled by the Spirit of God. It is for this continuing priestly life, as the body directed by its head, that Jesus promised and gave his Spirit. He who is our great High Priest enables us to participate in his continuing mission through the presence and power of the Spirit. The Spirit makes us to be one community, a priesthood of all believers not just a priesthood of each believer.

The Spirit also inspires the community, enabling those who cannot see a way forward to believe and trust that God can part the waters of resistance, that God can move the mountains of injustice, that God can lift up broken spirits to live again. The Spirit gives life and hope, energy and also guidance. The body of believers will need deep spiritual insight
if it is not to cast its pearls before swine, if it is not to waste time and energy and gifting. The Spirit will lead us into all truth, our Lord promised (John 16. 13). So then, the priesthood which is to be offered in lives of service, gathered and dispersed, must seek God’s perspective on all that is happening, that we may be wisely committed in action and in service. It is the Spirit who will make real for us the divine conversation. In the Spirit, we can know the story past to be our story and we can also sense the questions God asks the church today; and by that same Spirit we can be guided into truthful answers, proposals, explorations, ventures, missions, protests, prayers and commitments—as together with all God’s people we offer our reasonable, spiritual service, the worship of all believers.

1 This paper is the edited text of a paper presented to the Baptist World Alliance Commission on Doctrine and Inter-church Cooperation, meeting in Rio de Janeiro, in July 2003.

2 James White has made a useful distinction between ‘passive’ and ‘active’ participation, in James F White, Protestant Worship: Traditions in Transition, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1989, pp.17-18. Clearly the idea of ‘passive participation’ is one that is not widely understood or appreciated.


6 Hans Küng has developed his ideas about priesthood and the priesthood of all believers in several works; see especially Hans Küng, Why Priests?, (English translation by John Cumming), London: Collins, 1972, chap.2, and Hans Küng, The Church, (English translation by Ray and Rosaleen Ockenden), Tunbridge Wells: Search Press, 1968, Especially Section E, Chap.1, ‘The Priesthood of all believers’.


8 Timothy George, Theology of the Reformers, Nashville: Broadman

9 Jürgen Moltmann, Theology of Hope: On the ground and implications of a Christian Eschatology (English translation by James W. Leitch), London: SCM, 1967, p.329f. In a later work, God in Creation: an ecological doctrine of creation, (English translation by Margaret Kohl), London: SCM, 1985, p. 228, Moltmann speaks of human beings as priestly by nature, called to stand before God on behalf of the world, and before the world on behalf of God. Here the priesthood of all believers is now extended to, or grounded in, a priestly understanding of humankind as made in and for the image of God. This image, however, is not an attribute so much as a vocation. Colin Gunton makes a similar argument, in his Christ and Creation, Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1992, pp.119 - 121.
