

Robert E Webber's Legacy: Ancient Future Faith and Worship

By: Joan Huyser-Honig, Darrell Harris

The roots of the Charismatic Episcopal church of North America began with Randolph Adler , Robert Webber, Peter Gilchrist and a few other theologians getting together and forming what is now a pre-denominational communion of churches called "The International Communion of Charismatic Churches (ICCEC) which encompasses the CEC North America (CECNA) and hundreds of churches in Africa and Asia and other over seas areas. They came together for the reason to draw together the three streams of the CEC Christian church. The "Reformation" has pushed the Christian church (anti-biblical values) in the Christian church beyond its roots in scripture and worship into baal worship.

Ancient future worship is about rooting our worship as the early church did--in God's story--so we embody not our culture but God's mission. A feature story exploring ancient future faith and worship.

Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal and Nazarene churches following the liturgical calendar. Episcopalians rocking at a U2 Eucharist. Baptists draping the sanctuary cross in purple for Lent. Bible churches celebrating weekly communion. Young adults raised on praise bands now chanting the Psalms. Protestants becoming Orthodox in its teaching.

What's behind all this interest in worship from other traditions, especially the early church? The late Robert E. Webber defined it as tasting the "communion of the fullness of the body of Christ."

Always a step or three ahead of the church, Webber devoted his life to inviting believers to worship as "one body," joined through "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Ephesians 4:4-5).

Webber was an American theologian, author, Worship Leader columnist, and founder of what is now the Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies. His courses and 40-plus books were variations on the same themes.

Inventively, patiently, repeatedly, (and, to some, annoyingly) he stirred up worship renewal by focusing on "roots, connection and authenticity in a changing world." As he so often put it, "the road to the future runs through the past."

Common Roots

Webber immersed himself in many Christian traditions. Born to Baptist missionaries, he graduated from Bob Jones University, earned degrees at Anglican, Presbyterian, and Lutheran seminaries, and taught at Wheaton College and Northern Baptist Theological Seminary.

His book *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail: Why Evangelicals Are Attracted to the Liturgical Church* chronicled his journey from fundamentalist to Episcopal Church membership. And once inside, he invited fellow worshipers to re-embrace the evangelical core of Anglicanism.

Some Christians sample traditions in a “not this, not that, yuck, let’s move on” way. And in describing worship practices, Webber managed, at one time or another, to offend almost everyone. But he kept looking for what Christians have in common.

In the 1970s, Webber’s book *Common Roots* reminded Protestants that Christianity didn’t begin with the Reformation. That’s why he said it makes sense to study early church life, spirituality, witness, and worship—and see how it flowered from Jewish liturgical roots.

To help believers bridge biases that bruise Christ’s body, he joined the Convergence Movement. He persuaded evangelical leaders to jointly develop “The Chicago Call” (1977) and “A Call to an Ancient Evangelical Future” (AEF Call, 2006). Both documents make a case for reconnecting with historic Christianity.

Webber invented the terms “blended worship” and “ancient future worship.” In one version of *Worship Old and New* (he often re-issued or re-wrote books), Webber advised learning from “the entire worshiping community...liturgical worship, worship of the Reformers, the free church movement, Pentecostals, and charismatics.”

Pagans Then and Now

Webber used a paradigm to explain connections between our culture and the pagan Greco-Roman culture in which the early church took root. His paradigm looks at successive epochs of Christianity, each filtered through cultural principles dominant in a certain era.

“The story of Christianity moves from a focus on mystery in the classical period, to institution in the medieval era, to individualism in the Reformation era, to reason in the modern era, and, now, in the postmodern era, back to mystery,” he wrote in *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern*

Generation.

Christians often freeze-frame an epoch, “make it the standard of expression of faith, and then judge all other movements or periods of time by our standard.” Most Protestants, for example, root their faith understanding in a post-16th century movement, whether Reformers, pietism, revivalism, or fundamentalism.

Webber offered his paradigm as a way to break free of a freeze-frame and “affirm the whole church in all its previous manifestations...as a dialogue and encounter that may inform and strengthen our Christian understanding in a different culture.”

The allure of mystery, he noted, is often paired, in the classical era and now, with cultural ambivalence about the idea of eternal truth. The classical era, like ours, was marked by political upheaval, competing world religions, moral breakdown, and huge gaps between rich and poor.

“Classical Christianity was not an accommodation to paganism but an alternative practice of life. Christians in a postmodern world will succeed, not by watering down the faith, but by being a countercultural community that invites people to be shaped by the story of Israel and Jesus,” he wrote.

Webber loved talking with people from different generations and perspectives. As those raised in rational Christianity questioned propositional approaches to faith, Webber charted generational differences among evangelicals.

To people buzzing about postmodernism, Webber reminded, “There’s no such thing as postmodern worship. There is only biblical worship.”

The Only Story that Matters

In *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches*, he wrote, “Rather than perpetuate the divisions that exist between the traditionalists, the pragmatists, and the emergents, the best we can all do is to join the conversation and learn from each other, affirming that we all stand in the historic faith as we seek to understand it and apply it to the new world in which we minister.”

For Webber, applying historic faith to the world in which we minister is the touchstone of authenticity. He found that story is a wonderful way to communicate authentic faith.

While fewer people today are eager to argue about religion, many “spiritual but not religious” people are nevertheless intrigued by the idea that every religion

has its own story. Conversations with all kinds of people helped Webber sum up these stories in *The Divine Embrace*:

Secularism: There is no god who has created, who has revealed himself, and has redeemed the world. Reason and common sense help us make a new world of peace and prosperity.

Eastern or New Age spirituality: We are all part of the problem, and we are all part of the solution.

Christianity: We are all part of the problem. Only one man is the solution, and his name is Jesus. He stretched out his arms on a hard wood cross so that all of us could enter God's divine embrace.

As Webber said on his *Ancient Future Worship* blog, "May the church not be formed by the world in which it lives, but by the narrative to which it belongs, the story of God." This spiritual formation happens, in the words of the AEF Call, in "public worship that sings, preaches and enacts God's story."

Ancient Future Worship

Darrell Harris sees a bewildering range in how ancient future worship concepts get applied from one church to another. It reminds him of his childhood dream to preach as well as Billy Graham.

"I'd step into a pulpit and try to do my best Billy Graham Carolinian accent. What I thought worked had to do with his style. But it had so much more to do with his core concepts. His accent was just his personality.

"As with almost everything we misunderstand, we get fascinated by external trappings. Churches want to do ancient future worship, so they look at other churches and think, 'Ah! It's the candles! And maybe we need a Celtic cross,'" says Harris, chaplain of Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies.

In 1976, Darrell Harris founded Star Song, a Christian music recording company. He marketed musicians such as Twila Paris, Newsboys, Bill Gaither Trio and Vocal Band, and Petra. Meanwhile, his friend Chuck Fromm was president and owner of Maranatha! Music and founded *Worship Leader* magazine

During decades-long friendships with the late Robert E. Webber, both say they received greatly expanded views of worship. Now Harris and Fromm encourage believers everywhere to worship Christ together in ancient patterns that help them own and embody the historic Christian faith.

Worship Christ Together

“I read Bob Webber’s *Worship Old and New* in the 1980s. He awoke me to the meaning of worship both biblically and in Christian history and tradition,” Fromm says. He and Webber became friends and colleagues when Webber’s in-laws retired to a home near Fromm. (Joanne Webber’s father was Harold Lindsell, former *Christianity Today* editor and Wheaton College president.)

Webber wrote a monthly column for every issue of *Worship Leader*, turning in the last just weeks before he died. “I can’t think of Bob without remembering his passion for worship to be a true public sharing of Jesus as *Christus Victor*.”

“Worship is too often conceived as a performance that must satisfy the human audience,” Fromm says, explaining it’s yet another mistake for worship leaders to view worshipers as “audience.” That’s why his magazine’s mission statement says that God is the audience of our worship and Jesus is the church’s one true worship leader.

Darrell Harris began *Star Song* with “a personal, experiential, and mechanistic view of worship. As evangelicals and charismatic, we make a lot of the verse in Psalm 22 that God inhabits the praises of his people. So we start praising and expect him to become enthroned on those praises.

“For me, that view has been expanded or trumped by being exposed to Bob Webber’s teaching, which approaches Scripture through the early church fathers. They were the first to be handed the concepts from the apostles.

“A central concept of ancient future worship is that God is not the object of our worship. Worship is going on all the time in the heavenlies. Now a resurrected human being in the flesh—Jesus—enables us to participate in worship that’s much bigger than we are. We get to do our part. But he’s the initiator, not us,” Harris explains.

Follow the Ancient Patterns

Besides being corporate and Christo-centric, the ancient pattern of worship handed from the apostles to the early church was Trinitarian and liturgical.

“Being liturgical doesn’t mean we need to have our noses in a prayer book or memorize many complicated things. But liturgical worship is something we do together, and it’s dialogical, not performance oriented,” Harris says.

He suggests that worshipers in any church, anywhere, can learn to do “simple

things together to remind ourselves we worship a God who's Three in One." These include reciting, chanting, or singing the Gloria Patri or ending a prayer, psalm, or simplified chant with the invocation "In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen."

Harris likes to imagine how Christ's body would unify if every congregation around the world used this ancient phrase: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. "We can all learn it in 30 seconds. It's Christocentric and proclaims the essence of the gospel," he says.

He and Fromm remember that while sharing meals, Bob Webber would often remind them how hosting guests for a meal is a lot like ancient future worship. Both require a spirit of hospitality and follow a fourfold pattern:

Gathering. You warmly welcome people at the door. "Even my four-year-old twin granddaughters can say, 'The Lord be with you' or respond 'And also with you,'" Harris says.

Word. Conversation flows to more serious topics. Harris cautions that worship is diminished when shaped by consumer culture—trends, buzz topics, top worship song lists—rather than scriptural content.

Table. You share a meal. "Bob's voice always centered our worship on the Table of the Lord," Fromm says.

Sending. Whether with hugs at home or a benediction in church, "you clarify and focus thoughts of your discussion as you depart," Fromm says.

Own and Embody the Faith

The hospitality that inspires the four fold pattern of ancient future worship flows from what Webber called "the divine embrace" and "the embodiment of God's narrative." It's the kind of hospitality that inspires worship committees to look at beloved liturgical elements and ask whether they're too complicated for people to connect with.

"Do whatever you can do to simplify liturgy so you make ancient things accessible in our cultural context. Then lead people to take ownership. Maybe you could do a simple Taize song instead of a really difficult Gregorian chant," Harris suggests.

He quotes an ancient Chinese proverb to explain what happens in hospitable liturgies: "That art is best which to the soul's range gives no bound; something beside the form, something beyond the sound."

Harris explains, “The church—the body of Christ and its head, our Lord Jesus Christ—is the sacrament of God’s grace in the world. If we embody him and that which he represents, then the world will see something beyond the form and hear something beyond the sound of our worship.”

People will see beyond worship’s form and sound especially when the church’s embodied life in the world is counter-cultural, according to “A Call to an Ancient Evangelical Future.” Christ’s voice, through the church, calls people to live the pattern of God’s story. That includes taking care of creation, being champions with people who are poor and marginalized, and standing prophetically against “violence and the culture of death.”

Application of Ancient Future Concepts

Ancient future faith. Ancient future time. What’s it all about and how might it apply to your church?

The late Robert E. Webber popularized the ancient future worship concept through his Ancient Future book series, which includes *The Divine Embrace* (2006) and *Ancient Future Worship* (Baker Books, 2008).

“Ancient future worship is the convergence, in one act of worship, of historic and contemporary streams of worship. It usually builds on the default worship stream of the particular worshipping community,” says David Peacock, head of music and worship at London School of Theology.

Define Your Default

Peacock explains that drawing on the early church to enrich your church’s worship will depend on which ancient practices you already include, such as the church year or Celtic expressions.

Some people interested in ancient future worship become Episcopal, Catholic, or Orthodox. Liturgical churches look for ways to freshen traditions. Non-liturgical churches begin celebrating the Eucharist more often. Others experiment with observing Lent or multisensory worship elements.

As you read how churches and scholars are applying ancient future worship concepts, don’t mistake stylistic issues for core ones. “Ancient future worship goes deeper than historic practices to issues such as Trinitarian worship,” Peacock says.

Ancient future worship goes to the core of the biblical narrative. It’s not a wordy

head trip. If your church's worship default is to emphasize soul talk and private relationships, then you'll notice how ancient future faith is different.

The ancient future perspective affirms—using all the senses God gives—that God's divine embrace is for all people and all of creation. We sing, preach, and enact, as physical people, the story of God and our baptism into the life of Christ and his body.

Multisensory Roots Still Relevant

Early Christian art doesn't appear till 200 A.D. and isn't accompanied by text, yet “judging from the art, meals in common played an important role in the early church. Patristic evidence seems to confirm this,” says Ken Bratt, classics professor at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

There were agape or fellowship meals and funerary meals, held in catacombs to symbolically include the Christian dead. Many catacomb frescoes picture Eucharistic meals, embodying a reenactment of Christ's supper. “In Protestantism, the practice of the Eucharist as being sporadic, rather than a constant element of worship, is a major shift,” Bratt says.

Early church art reveals that ancient Christians worshiped across a wide range of ethnic and social classes. “These were atypical gatherings in the context of the ancient world,” Bratt says.

Art in catacombs, early house churches, and Byzantine basilicas show a common visual language tracing Old and New Testament salvation history. Adam and Eve, David and Goliath, the Good Shepherd, fish, and women at the empty tomb appear in paintings and mosaics. Images covered the whole interior of some basilicas.

“Calvin and other reformers reacted and threw out too much. We Protestants in the West lost something of the richness of image, word, smell, sound, taste—engaging all senses in worship—and went to a more dogmatic, word-focused worship style,” Bratt says.

In *A New Song for an Old World: Musical Thought in the Early Church*, Calvin Stapert says that our society is marked by the same greed, lust, and selfishness as Roman culture was. Just as congregations do now, early church fathers debated how to adapt music in ways that reached non-believers but did not “shape human character in pernicious ways.”

Many ancient Christian musical choices still make sense today, Stapert says:

“We’d do well to heed their praise of the psalms...making them central to our music...not just snippets...but complete psalms, indeed the whole Psalter with its full-orbed expression.”

We can enrich our singing with the best of ancient hymns “as models of texts that address God communally with language that is simple yet dignified, poetically excellent, and redolent with scriptural vocabulary, stories, sentiment, and imagery.”

“Remember that response, not stimulation, is the fundamental role of worship music...There would be a marked difference in the church’s music if Christians truly recognized to whom and with whom they are singing.”

“The ‘new song’ expresses a basic truth most beautifully: God is a God of order and harmony...the Creator who made the universe not only useful and mechanically efficient but who also made it beautiful.” He sees this principle in Francis of Assisi’s hymn, “All Creatures of Our God and King,” in which singers invite the burning sun, rushing wind, fruits, and flowers to sing along.

Worship as Action

In *Worship is a Verb*, Robert E. Webber wrote that worship is not “something done to us or for us, but by us.” Note the us. The early church fathers preached that being baptized into Christ’s body obliges worshipers to treat all as family.

In the fourth century, John Chrysostom preached often about caring for those in need. So did the Cappadocian Fathers, known for their Trinitarian doctrine, philanthropy, and justice work.

Chrysostom’s liturgies include prayers such as “Be mindful, O Lord...of those who travel by land or by water, of the sick, of those who suffer, of captives and of their salvation.” He had worshipers pray these words together, so they’d be moved to action, according to Cheryl Brandsen, a Calvin College sociology professor who has studied early church practices to see where love and justice intersect.

“The Cappadocian Fathers had an incredible grasp of the canon. They wove Scriptures to confront worshipers with extremes between rich and poor. People on the way to worship would pass by beggars, lepers, strangers that we’d today call refugees. But because these unfortunate people weren’t connected to a kin group, it wasn’t on worshipers’ radars to notice or help them,” she says.

Brandsen says Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa drew worshipers into generosity “by establishing the poor as family members, as kinsmen. They preached, ‘The poor are made in the image of God, made of dust and clay, just

as you are.’ ”

They challenged worshipers who had large churches, countless vehicles, golden bridles, gorgeous homes, closets full of shoes—while others were hungry, naked, ill, and homeless. “You could change the examples just a bit and you’d have modern sermons,” she says.

Basil preached that feeding the hungry and righting injustice restores created order. He inspired wealthy believers to build magnificent churches that also fed, sheltered, and offered job training for people who were poor, homeless strangers, orphans, lepers, or elderly. Basil himself changed the dressings on lepers’ wounds.

Start Where You Are

Even small steps can help churches embody oneness in life and worship. First Evangelical Free Church in Wichita, Kansas, pairs fine and folk art by church artists with Scripture readings to “draw people into the scripture narrative,” says Steve Blasdel, pastor of worship and music and Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies student.

Blasdel says the “ultimate point of all ministries” is “God in Christ reconciling the world to himself,” and a recent Good Friday service embodied that reconciliation through image, music, word, movement, and taste.

An artist painted while the congregation read responsively, sang, and listened to the choir sing from the musical “He’s Alive Forever.” Blasdel says, “The artist started with a cloudy day, added three crosses, and merged that into a painting of Jesus’ face. Her painting brought home a fresh realization of what the cross meant and means.

“We usually serve communion to people where they are seated but that evening asked them to come forward. Some came to receive communion with tears, others with quiet joy.

“It was stunning—and unifying—to see different nationalities, sizes, shapes, and colors of people coming forward as the body of Christ.”

Christ Has Risen, Alleluia

Growing up Korean and Presbyterian, Young Kim is familiar with fasting and gathering for daily prayer, two practices prevalent in the early church.

“Many Koreans meet at church early each morning for prayer. At my church we do daily prayer just during Holy Week,” says Kim, who teaches early church history at Calvin College.

“Koreans value self-discipline, so often prepare physically for worship by having no Saturday supper or Sunday breakfast. Breaking the fast at communion is a way to remember what Christ has done. If my parents have a pressing issue that they want to bathe in prayer, they often fast. But I don’t know if they have a conscious sense that that’s what the early church did,” he says.

Specializing in Latin American liberation theology has given Calvin College religion professor Matthew Lundberg a unique insight into how churches preserve traditions...or not.

Lundberg says many Catholic churches never stopped keeping the Eucharist central or “structuring public worship according to the rhythms of God’s story—especially the incarnate Christ’s path to the cross.

“Fasting, of course, was an integral component of Lent in the ancient Christian church. In wealthy areas, fasting could be a relevant yet countercultural way of living out ancient wisdom in a culture of abundant consumption. Experiencing hunger during worship can remind us of our spiritual needs as well as the physical needs of brothers and sisters in Christ around the world,” he says.

Lundberg explains that fasting helped early Christians experience the Eucharist as a feast, focused on cosmic and personal redemption ushered into history through Christ’s resurrection.

“Later in church history, the Eucharist was associated more with Christ’s crucifixion. Perhaps today’s church can better balance these aspects by playing up the ancient emphasis of the Lord’s Supper as a celebration of Christ’s resurrection and a feast of the firstfruits of new creation,” he says.

Boston Square Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, recently celebrated communion on Easter morning rather than on Good Friday. “It gave the Lord’s Supper a much different ‘feel’ that I found spiritually and theologically refreshing.

“The very early church apparently often celebrated the Eucharist as part of a whole meal...together. Rejuvenating this would require most congregations to rethink the role and place of worship. But it could also remind us that we worship the triune God as a community, as a family of sorts,” Lundberg says.

Learn More

Listen to brief mp3 audio interview excerpts. The Darrell Harris interview happened on April 24, 2007, three days before Bob Webber died.

Darrell Harris on how Robert Webber expanded his view of worship, 5:34

Darrell Harris on Robert Webber's personal legacy, 6:21

Darrell Harris on how Robert Webber taught about dying, 5:40

Darrell Harris on Robert Webber's favorite worship experience, 4:42

Cheryl Brandsen on how Christian philanthropy developed, 2:41

Download audios and other worship resources from The Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies. Read how Webber described generational shifts in the relationship between Christianity and culture. Learn how he dealt with cancer. Browse articles he wrote for Reformed Worship magazine.

Read the joint document "A Call to an Ancient Evangelical Future." Gather a group to discuss one or more of Webber's Ancient Future books, which include *The Divine Embrace* (2006) and *Ancient Future Worship* (Baker Books, 2008).

Learn more about early Christian art, church fathers, justice and philanthropy, music, and worship:

Art. *Understanding Early Christian Art* by Robin M. Jensen; *The Invisible God: The Earliest Christians on Art* by Paul Corby Finney; *Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* by Rodney Stark.

Church fathers. Christian Classics Ethereal Library has many early church fathers resources and publishes a newsletter.

Justice and philanthropy. Read fascinating translated sermons from the Cappadocian fathers in Susan R. Holman's *The Hungry Are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia*.

Music. Listen to Calvin Stapert's lecture on what early Christians can teach us about music. Read his book *A New Song for an Old World*.

Worship. David Rylaarsdam reveals early Christian worship practices that "were strikingly different but perhaps more biblical than ours today."

Study excellent essays on the differences between low church and high church liturgies and contemporary Northern hemisphere and Southern hemisphere Christianity.

Join online discussions among ancient future Catholics. Listen to Ancient Faith Radio, an internet radio station that streams Orthodox music all day, every day.

Browse related stories about communion, congregational singing, letting story form your worship, reciting ancient creeds, and Trinitarian worship music.

Start a Discussion

Talk about how to apply ancient future worship concepts.

Where would your congregation fit on a scale of we-follow-received-worship-tradition to our-worship-is-culturally-relevant? Would you like to shift the balance in any way?

Discuss the difference between worship style and core worship concepts as it applies to your congregation...and, perhaps, to your religious denomination or tradition.

Which of Robert Webber's ancient future worship concepts ring most true (or problematic) for you?

Which early church practices would you like to learn more about or like to make relevant in your church context? How might these practices shape your congregation in line with God's story and redemptive mission?

Share Your Wisdom

What is the best way you've found to use historic worship practices in culturally relevant ways?

Did you find a conference, workshop, book, multimedia series, or other resources that helped you learn how to apply ancient future worship concepts?

Did you create a worship or education series to help people experience worship using more of their senses? Which new worship ideas have most engaged your congregation? Which show the most promise for spiritual formation?

Have you developed a grid to help you identify your church's default worship system, compare it to historic Christian practice, and find ways to fill gaps or right imbalances?

Which methods have worked best to move your congregation toward a greater sense of "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" unity? This could apply to your church worship, life, or relationship to culture or your local community.