

# Isaiah in Christian Liturgy: Recovering Textual Contrasts and Correcting Theological Astigmatism<sup>1</sup>

*John D. Witoliet*

It is a simulating and instructive assignment as a student of Christian worship to be asked to reflect on a particular biblical book. Normally, in both the practice and study of worship, we approach the Bible as a goldmine of resources. We learn skills both to identify which biblical texts are most pastorally useful for a given occasion and to present these texts clearly and accessibly. We also learn skills for offering a balanced diet of scriptural themes over time, either by working with established lectionaries or by developing informal, unofficial lectionaries of our own. Often we are tempted to strip texts from their contexts in ways that also strip the texts themselves of key dimensions of their meaning or their rhetorical force. One strategy to overcome this temptation is to ask an atypical but important question: Have we as worship leaders been faithful stewards of a given part of Scripture (e.g., the book of Isaiah)? How can we more faithfully present and interpret a given part of Scripture in worship? What themes and strategies can we learn from the text to complement or chasten our most comfortable ways of working? In communities shaped by the conviction that God's Word is sharper than a two-edged sword, these questions should not be atypical. They should be staples of weekly worship planning meetings and worship committee agendas.

I am particularly grateful to be asked to reflect on such questions in a theme issue on preaching Isaiah. Far too often, preaching and worship are segregated entities—in publications, in seminary curricula, and in the practice of preparing for worship in local congregations. For centuries, however, preaching and worship have been inextricably intertwined. Preaching needs worship as its context, and worship needs preaching as its anchor. Not infrequently, preachers sense that a thoughtful worship service has actually helped “preach” the sermon, or has made up for a poor one. Musicians, artists, and worship leaders regularly observe that unless their contributions function as complementary forms of gospel proclamation to the sermon, they will end up feeling like sec-

---

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful for the assistance of Joyce Borger in conducting extensive background research for this article and to Ron Rienstra, Carrie Titcombe, and Carl J. Bosma for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

ond-rate liturgical interruptions rather than integral elements of Christian worship. Whatever liturgical style we adopt, preaching and liturgy need to be worked at together.

What follows, then, is a liturgist's approach to the book of Isaiah.<sup>2</sup> Because the task is impossibly large, what follows is an illustrative article that (1) isolates a main rhetorical device of the book (rhetorical contrast) and a main theological theme (idolatry), (2) develops the significance of these dimensions in conversation with some leading students of Isaiah, and then (3) proposes very practical strategies for leading worship in ways that are faithful to these aspects of the text. The goal is to connect scholarly work on the book of Isaiah with the week-in, week-out practice of worship, to demonstrate both that patient scholarly work can bear rich fruit in the practice of liturgy and that liturgy can be pastorally enriched by patient reflection.

## I. Recovering Textual Contrasts

### A. Like Rembrandt, Not Kinkade

Isaiah is a workhorse of Christian liturgy, ranking with the Psalms as the most frequently cited Old Testament book in worship.<sup>3</sup> The great *Sanctus* of Isaiah 6:3 is both the heartbeat of traditional eucharistic prayers and the inspiration of countless worship songs for churches that never use a traditional eucharistic prayer. The canticles of Isaiah 12 have been a staple of traditional daily and Sunday liturgies for centuries and the basis of several recently written scripture songs. In times of tragedy, Isaiah 43:1-7 and 44:6-8 are among the first texts to which pastors turn. Holy Week worship nearly always draws on Isaiah 50:4-9, 52:7-10, and 52:13-53:12. In addition, it is almost inconceivable to imagine planning Advent worship without Isaiah 7:14; 9:2-7; 11:1-9; 35:1-10; 40:1-11; 60:1-3; and 61:1-3.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Of the few essays that explore the relationship of Isaiah and worship, most address theology of worship but do not ask how our textual study might inform our work in leading worship. Representative examples include Christopher T. Begg, "The Peoples and the Worship of Yahweh in the Book of Isaiah," J. J. M. Roberts, "Contemporary Worship in the Light of Isaiah's Ancient Critique," and Roy F. Melugin, "Isaiah in the Worshipping Community." All three essays are found in *Worship and the Hebrew Bible: Essays in Honour of John T. Willis*, edited by M. Patrick Graham, Rick R. Marrs, and Steven L. McKenzie (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999). See also J. H. Eaton, *Vision in Worship: The Relation of Prophecy and Liturgy in the Old Testament* (London: SPCK, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> Craig A. Evans, "From Gospel to Gospel: The Function of Isaiah in the New Testament," in *Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah: Studies of an Interpretative Tradition*, ed. Craig G. Broyles and Craig A. Evans Supplement to *Vetus Testamentum* 70, Formation and Interpretation of Old Testament Literature, Volumes 1-2, (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 2:651.

<sup>4</sup> For other examples, see the historical survey offered in John F. A. Sawyer, *The Fifth Gospel: Isaiah in the History of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Christopher R. Seitz, "Isaiah in New Testament, Lectionary, Pulpit," in *Word Without End: The Old Testament as Abiding Theological Witness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); and William Holladay, *Unbound by Time: Isaiah Still Speaks* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 2002).

Indeed, the connection between Isaiah and Advent worship is particularly strong (thanks in no small measure to the legacy of Handel's *Messiah*). Imagine the first Sunday in Advent in just about any city in North America. Congregations that follow the lectionary hear readings from Isaiah 2 (Isa. 2:2-5) and 64:1-9. Other congregations likely hear parts of Isaiah 9:2-7, 11:1-19, or 40:1-11. In one congregation, a folk musician sings, "They shall mount up on wings like eagles." In another, the choir sings the old spirituals, "Hush, Hush, Someone's Calling My Name" and "We're Marching to Zion." In another, an operatic tenor sings, "Comfort, Comfort, My People," and the congregation responds, "Lo, how rose e'er blooming. . . Isaiah 'twas foretold it, the rose I have in mind. . . ." Indeed, Isaiah is the church's poet-of-the-month every December.

Now, notice the common disposition of these texts. All of them, even the ones that acknowledge pain and suffering, are the texts in Isaiah that feature the most rhapsodic poetry and boundless hope. With the exception of the servant song of Isaiah 52:12-53:12, they are the happy texts, the oasis points for anyone attempting to read Isaiah in a single sitting. Purely for the limited purposes of this article, I will group these texts into a very nontechnical category called, "The Pretty Texts of Isaiah."<sup>5</sup> Outside of conferences on Isaiah, it could well be that over 85 percent of all sermons and other liturgical texts based on Isaiah are from these texts.<sup>6</sup>

For anyone studying the book with attention to literary form and rhetorical technique (or for anyone simply reading through the book), they are not the whole story. They leave out vast stretches of prophetic judgment and warning and diatribes against all forms of disobedience, hypocrisy, superstition, and injustice. A more accurate view of the book of Isaiah might be to compare it to a Rembrandt painting where vast stretches of darkness, shadows, and judgment are dramatically punctuated by glorious shafts of light and grace.

Indeed, much of the rhetorical force of the book is generated because of its textual contrasts. Nearly all the pretty texts of Isaiah are placed in juxtaposition with texts of prophetic warning and critique. For example, in the first major collection of Isaiah, Isaiah 1-12, the announcement, "the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light" (Isa. 9:2), erupts out of the "darkness, distress, and the gloom of anguish" of Isaiah 8:22. The shoot that goes out from the stump of Jesse (Isa. 11:1) appears after we see in video cliplike fashion that "the Sovereign, the LORD of hosts is about to lop the boughs with terrifying power"

---

<sup>5</sup> Consider working through the book to isolate the texts that function most regularly in worship and preaching. My own suggestion is that the vast majority of references are limited to about twenty texts: 1:18; 2:4; 6:1-8; 7:14; 9:2-7; 11:1-9; 12; 25:1-10; 35:1-10; 40:1-11; 42:1-9; 43:1-7; 52:7-10; 52:13-53:13; 55:1-13; 60:1-3; 61:1-4; 64: 8; 65:17-25; 66:12-14.

<sup>6</sup> For example, 86 percent of the sermons indexed in the Hekman Library Sermon Index at Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary come from these pretty texts. My goal for this article is to imagine ways of more faithfully using these texts. What is also needed is some thoughtful and creative work that explores how we can best use the sustained passages of darkness, the non-pretty texts, in faithful and pastoral ways.

(Isa. 10:33).<sup>7</sup> The very fact that our Advent texts of choice, Isaiah 7:14, 9:2-7, and 11:1-9, come from alternating chapters that are almost never read should be a clue that we are missing something.

In the second part of Isaiah, chapters 40-55, the contrast is equally stark. For example, Isaiah 42:1-4, with its rapturous opening lines “Here is my servant, whom I uphold,” gains clarity and urgency because of the end of Isaiah 41, with its stinging critique of idolatry (41:29). Similarly, Isaiah 49:1-6 emerges from chapter forty-eight’s indictment of Israel’s obstinate opposition to God.

In worship, however, we love to dwell in the light. We filter out the little poetic diamonds that work well as song lyrics and preaching texts and set aside their textual neighbors—a natural enough impulse for pastorally minded preachers and liturgists, but one that may be, in the end, dishonest and even counterproductive. Just as some source and form critics have often excised the servant songs from the context of Isaiah 40-55, so, too, liturgists are highly practiced at mining Isaiah’s textual diamonds without attention to context.

What is worrisome about this is the likelihood that most of the pretty texts of Isaiah end up functioning like mere truisms. We read and sing them in ways that communicate right and accurate things but with such familiarity that they are perceived to be routine. Often, after one of these pretty texts from Isaiah is read, preached, or sung, the collective response from worshippers is, in effect, “Tell us something new,” or, “So what?” In Advent, we hear, “He tends his flock like a shepherd,” with the same hermeneutic we use to read a Hallmark card. We sing, “Comfort, comfort, now my people,” while worrying about how long to cook our Christmas hams or about which gift to return to the shopping mall. Suspicions of this tendency are confirmed for preachers and worship leaders every time we know a given service or sermon is pregnant with gospel comfort, but all that worshippers want to talk about after the service is the weather. In these cases, Isaiah functions to reinforce rather than challenge the sentimental Christmas we so cherish.

Much of the problem here has to do with the mechanics of how worship is planned and led, how people are invited to sense the worship’s beauty and power, and how worshippers are invited to prepare for worship. At least a little part of the problem does have to do with how the text is handled, and thus the problem needs to be addressed not only in classes and books on worship but also in classes and books in Old Testament studies.

In short, there are three basic problems with how we often handle the text. First, we too narrowly limit our liturgical interests to the pretty texts. Second, we too easily lift these texts out of context. Third, we too often read or sing these texts as if we were reading a greeting card rather than as the soaring God-breathed poetry they are. In sum, our worship services, even when they are

---

<sup>7</sup> For this connection see in this issue of *CTJ* the article by Willem A.M. Beuken, “The Emergence of the Shoot of Jesse (Isaiah 11:1-16): An Eschatological or a Now Event,” 88-108.

filled with the best poetry Isaiah has to offer, are often more like the art of Thomas Kinkade than that of Rembrandt: all light, no shadows.<sup>8</sup>

There are many times, of course, when pastoral sensitivity demands that we dwell in the light. When Isaiah 65 is read at the funeral of a baby, when Isaiah 35 is read with confident hope in a worship service in a nursing home, or when we sing “How Firm a Foundation” in the middle of a war, the context of our lives provides the shadows that help us perceive the power and beauty of Isaiah’s light. In times like these, we do not take these words lightly. We cling to them.

Nevertheless, in the ebb and flow of our busy lives, on the first Sunday of Advent, in the middle of Christmas shopping season and the start-up of the basketball season, these same pretty texts wash over us. We hear them, and cannot remember what we have heard. Then, if we have heard them, we have often heard them and maybe even spoken them a little sentimentally, kind of a pious well wish to assure us of a comfortable life. The whole experience easily inoculates us from encountering the true force of the texts. Poetry becomes platitude.

The problem with all this is not just aesthetic. It is deeply pastoral. When these texts function only in a pretty, greeting-card way, we miss their tenacious life-giving force. Further, in greeting-card worship services in any style, we miss out on hearing, along with the pretty texts of Isaiah, the stinging indictments of superstition, idolatry, and disobedience that their contexts often present with such force. These indictments are not merely tiresome rants. They, too, are life-giving-life-giving warnings. They keep us from doing things we should not do for our own spiritual health. At stake is our ability to hear the most important spiritual remedies for the most persistent spiritual diseases we face.

## B. Critique of Idolatry in Isaiah 40-55

Of all the contrasts that Isaiah draws—the contrasts between light and darkness, obedience and disobedience, hope and despair, Israel’s exile and return—one of the most dramatic and memorable is the contrast between true and false gods in Isaiah 40-55.<sup>9</sup> Isaiah 40-55 works the contrast between idola-

---

<sup>8</sup> For more on Kinkade as the “painter of light,” see Randal Balmer, “Kinkade Crusade,” *Christianity Today*, 4 December, 2000, 49-55. The contrast between Rembrandt and Kinkade is worth further reflection in light of our approach to any of the prophets. As Balmer reports, Kinkade describes the missional goal behind his work: “I love to create beautiful worlds where light dances and peace reigns. I like to portray a world without the Fall” (51). He dismisses the critics who charge that his work is sentimental by arguing, “High culture is paranoid about sentiment, but human beings are intensely sentimental” (55). As Balmer gently concludes: “The art of Thomas Kinkade offers an oasis, a retreat from the assaults of modern life, a vision of a more perfect world. Who wouldn’t like to catch a glimpse of that world from time to time, to picture life before the Fall? But we live and move and have our being in a fallen world, and it is our lot as human beings to negotiate that world. Kinkade’s paintings furnish little guidance for that enterprise.” (55). The spirit behind Kinkade’s art and the use of Isaiah in worship (in many styles) strikes me as remarkably similar.

<sup>9</sup> See the contribution in this issue of *CTJ* by John N. Oswalt (“The Book of Isaiah: A Short Course on Biblical Theology,” 52-69, especially 57-64) on the bipolarities of Isaiah.

try<sup>10</sup> (aiming at the wrong target) and true worship (aiming at the right one), often with rhetoric that features biting sarcasm and mocking irony that is so derisive it almost feels irreligious.

Contrast is the primary rhetorical device for achieving this aim. As Hendrik Carel Spykerboer notes, the prophetic oracles in these chapters of Isaiah “fulfill a very special function in the book as they demonstrate by way of contrast the incomparability and uniqueness of Yahweh and serve to undergird [Second Isaiah’s] message that Yahweh, who is the only real God and holy one, can and will save his despondent and doubtful people.”<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Richard Clifford observes: “the lively sketches of people fashioning and worshipping their idols function to heighten contrasts in the preaching of Second Isaiah.”<sup>12</sup> Specifically, the chapters are built around the sturdy refrain, “I am the LORD, there is no other,” which is frequently offered in juxtaposition with stinging critiques of the lifelessness of the gods and the folly of the idol-fabricators.<sup>13</sup> Viewed as a whole, the chapters feature an alternation of sardonic warning and elevated poetry, a kind of “large-scale antithetic parallelism.”<sup>14</sup> The texts critique not only the false gods and idols but also give particular attention to the idol-fabricators, the sin of generating or making or creating idols. As Knut Holter observes: “Nowhere else in the Old Testament is idol-fabrication depicted in more gloomy colors, and nowhere else are its consequences pointed out more negatively.”<sup>15</sup> As a whole, these chapters constitute one of the most compelling commentaries on the first and second commandments in the Bible.

Importantly, Isaiah 40-55 offers not only prophetic critique against idolatry and idol-fabrication but also three specific resources to fight idolatry: positive assertions about God’s character or his powerful acts, songs of praise, and messianic images and metaphors that Christians have freely interpreted as clues to the identity and mission of Jesus Christ. These three resources are powerful tools for preaching and leading worship in ways that can invite congregations to fight contemporary idolatry.

---

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Isa. 40:18-26; 41:1-7; 41:21-29; 43:8-15; 44:6-20; 45:15-25; 46:1-13; and 48:5, 14.

<sup>11</sup> Hendrik Carel Spykerboer, *The Structure and Composition of Deutero-Isaiah, with Special Reference to the Polemics against Idolatry* (Meppel: Krips Repro, 1976), 185. Importantly in this context, Spykerboer warns, “the four polemics against idolatry (40:18-20, 41:7, 44:9-20, 46:5-7) . . . are intimately rooted in their context and cannot be separated from it.” (185).

<sup>12</sup> Richard J. Clifford, “The Function of Idol Passages in Second Isaiah,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 42 (1980): 464.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Isa. 41:4; 42:6, 8; 43:11, 15; 45:6, 7, and 8; 46:9.

<sup>14</sup> Richard J. Clifford, “Isaiah, Book of (Second Isaiah),” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 3:496.

<sup>15</sup> Knut Holter, *Second Isaiah’s Idol-Fabrication Passages*, Beiträge zur biblischen Exegese und Theologie (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1995), 16.

*1. Positive Assertions of Divine Character, Offered in Stark Rhetoric Contrast*

First, these chapters offer not only a frank dismissal of idols but also many positive assertions of God's character and actions. In the first polemic against the nations and their gods (40:18-26), for example, God is called "the Holy One" (40:25). Moreover, after this polemic and in response to Israel's complaint that the LORD has ignored its rights (40:27), Isaiah 40:28 asserts emphatically that the LORD is an everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth—the ultimate trump card in comparing the God of Israel with false gods and idols.

Most of these assertions are presented directly as straightforward declarations, rather than as narratives from which they need to be inferred. Often they are presented as divine speech, the first-person words of God. In the trial speech of 41:21-29, the LORD introduces himself as "Jacob's King" (41:21). Of particular interest is the use of the divine self-predication "I am the LORD," which, as we noted above, occurs frequently in connection with polemical statements against the gods. Consider, for example, Isaiah 42:8:

I am the LORD, that is my name;  
my glory I give to no other,  
nor my praise to idols.

Or listen to the powerful self-predication in 44:6 that introduces the longest polemic against the gods (44:6-20):

Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel,  
and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts:  
I am the first and I am the last;  
besides me there is no god.

Chapters 40-55 also contain many positive affirmations about God's actions. In the first polemic against the nations and the gods (40:18-26), for instance, we learn from 40:22-23 that it is God

<sup>22</sup> who sits above the circle of the earth . . .  
who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,  
and spreads them like a tent to live in;  
<sup>23</sup> who brings princes to naught (יְנַחֵם),  
and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing (כְּאֵין).

God's governance over the nations is also emphasized in the third polemic against the nations and their gods (41:21-20). According to 41:25, the LORD stirred up one from the north to tread "on the nations as if they were mortar" (cf. 10:6). Moreover, according to 41:27, the LORD gave to "Jerusalem a messenger of good tidings." Furthermore, in the fourth polemic (43:8-15), we hear the LORD's powerful claim that, unlike the gods, he has revealed, saved, and proclaimed (43:12). In addition, after the long polemic in 44:6-20, God calls Israel back to himself because he has made it, has swept its sins away and has redeemed it (40:23). Or in the scathing critique of the Babylonian gods (chap. 46) God emphasizes to those who are far from his righteousness (46:12) that he will bring about what he planned (46:11) and that he brought his righteousness and salvation near (46:13). Throughout the polemical speeches against the

gods, therefore, the reader encounters straightforward assertions about God's character and God's actions.

However, these chapters do not merely complain about idolatry. They also complement the complaint with similar compelling, positive assertions about God's character and actions in oracles of salvation (41:10, 14; 43:1-7; 44:1-5) and announcements of salvation (41:17-20). To think of Rembrandt, they not only portray the shadows but also depict the shaft of light that reveals nothing less than the true God, the maker of the universe. We need to see the same contrast in worship and preaching today.

## 2. *Songs of Praise*

Second, consider the psalmlike songs of praise that occur throughout these chapters.<sup>16</sup> According to Claus Westermann, these songs of praise are generally the end of a section and they call for a decision.<sup>17</sup> A clear example is the summons to praise in Isaiah 42:10-13:

- <sup>10</sup> Sing to the LORD a new song,  
his praise from the end of the earth!  
Let the sea roar and all that fills it,  
the coastlands and their inhabitants.
- <sup>11</sup> Let the desert and its towns lift up their voice,  
the villages that Kedar inhabits;  
let the inhabitants of Sela sing for joy,  
let them shout from the tops of the mountains.
- <sup>12</sup> Let them give glory to the LORD,  
and declare his praise in the coastlands.
- <sup>13</sup> The LORD goes forth like a soldier,  
like a warrior he stirs up his fury;  
he cries out, he shouts aloud,  
he shows himself mighty against his foes.”

This powerful summons invites everyone to give glory to the LORD (42:12), the one who refuses to give his glory to idols (42:8).

Significantly, the context of the prophetic critique of idolatry helps us sense what to emphasize as we hear them—and as we sing them ourselves. Often we naturally approach a song of praise with a kind of blank-slate reading. We express our praise songs as “*Sing to the LORD a new song*” (as opposed to simply speaking our praise) or “*Sing to the LORD a new song.*” (as opposed to singing some old songs). However appropriate those interpretations might be in other contexts, here the force of context conveys, rather, “*Sing to the LORD a new song*” (as opposed to singing to idols or false gods). These are hymns offered as polemic statements; they are offered against the gods even as they

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Isa. 42:10-13; 44:23; 48:20-21; 49:13; 52:9-10; and 54:1.

<sup>17</sup> Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66: A Commentary*, OTL, trans. David M. G. Stalker (Philadelphia: Westminster), 19.



are sung to YHWH. When we sing “Praise God from whom all blessings flow,” we are also saying “Down with the gods from whom no blessings flow.”

The polemic function of praise has been memorably described by Walter Brueggemann: “The affirmation of Yahweh always contains a polemic against someone else. . . . It may be that the [exiles] will sing such innocuous-sounding phrases as ‘Glory to God in the highest,’ or ‘Praise God from whom all blessings flow.’ Even those familiar phrases are polemical, however, and stake out new territory for the God now about to be aroused to new caring.”<sup>18</sup> When we sing our pretty songs of praise, it is as if we are singing “take that you false gods (!).”

Brueggemann’s insight helps awaken a latent dimension of our doxology. At root, what he is probing is the experience of ordinary worshippers and their own interior conversation during the worship. Commenting on Psalm 146, Brueggemann suggests, “In naming the Name [of Yahweh, vs. 7b-9], the psalm under its breath debunks and dismisses every other name: The LORD [not Baal] sets the prisoners free; the LORD [not Saddam Hussein] opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD [not the free-market system or Western government] lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD [not the church organization] loves the righteous. The LORD [not my favorite political persuasion] watches over the strangers, upholds the orphan and the widow.”<sup>19</sup> Recognizing that our interior fleeting thoughts are elusive at best, when we sing in a doxological mode, our interior conversation may often go something like this (interior conversation in parentheses):

“Praise God from whom all blessings flow (yes, the stock market really has done well this week).

Praise Him all creatures here below (though, come to think of it, we could be singing a little better if our praise team or organist would only go a little faster today).

Praise Him above ye heavenly hosts (though it is difficult to maintain belief in angels in our secular culture).

Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost (what a nice symmetrical way to end a song of praise). Amen.”

What we need to recover is the experience of songs of praise—regardless of musical style—that function more like this:

---

<sup>18</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching Among the Exiles* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 128. For more on this theme, see Brueggemann, *Israel’s Praise: Doxology Against Idolatry and Ideology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988). The polemic function of praise songs is nothing new in Christian tradition. The body of Christian hymnody that is most polemic may well be the trinitarian hymns of the fourth century, such as the *Te Deum* (“Holy God, We Praise Your Name”) or “Of the Father’s Love Begotten,” all of which were weapons against Arianism.

<sup>19</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 127, see also 118.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow (and not any lifeless idol, like the stock market or shopping mall).

Praise Him all creatures here below (because this God is far better than anything we could create from our own imaginations).

Praise Him above all ye heavenly hosts (because even in heaven there is only one worthy of praise).

Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost (because it is the Triune God that both promises and effects life-giving redemption). Amen.

### 3. *Messianic Illumination*

Third, this section of the book of Isaiah offers images that help us understand Christ. The ultimate antidote to idolatry in the Christian faith is Jesus Christ: the exact representation of God's being, the true icon of divine glory. The Christian doctrine of revelation begins with creation, God's general revelation; is focused through special revelation, the gift of Scripture; and is most acutely attentive to the person and work of Jesus Christ, as illuminated by both the Old and New Testaments. Isaiah, in giving us picturesque language to understand Jesus Christ, provides some of Bible's most forceful idolatry-fighting resources. Specifically, these chapters give us a compelling vision of Christ's identity as one who expresses power in weakness. They confirm that Christ's mission includes not only redemption from sin but also the extension of justice and righteousness.<sup>20</sup>

The messianic dimensions to these chapters are especially important because of their frequent Christian liturgical use in festivals of the liturgical year: Christmas, Holy Week, Easter, and even Pentecost. These celebrations, as they invite us to meditate on Christ's character, are some of the best idolatry-fighting occasions we have available to us. They challenge poorly conceived views of divine character and hone our theological imaginations.

In sum, the recipe for fighting idolatry in Isaiah's day and in ours is fourfold: (1) name the sin and its consequences; (2) present a compelling alternative to idol worship with a splendid image of God as given by Scripture; (3) praise this God with determined and intentional songs of praise; and (4) constantly challenge and refine our theological imaginations by focusing on the person of Christ as illuminated by both the Old and New Testaments. Here are four worthy goals for any worship service and four worthy criteria for worship worth reviewing at any Monday worship committee review session.

---

<sup>20</sup> Thus, Richard Beaton argues that Matthew's quotation of Isaiah 42:1-4 "was employed by Matthew to validate a particular view of Jesus as royal messiah, namely, that he was the Spirit-endowed, compassionate servant of the LORD whose words and deeds evince the justice anticipated with the advent of the messiah and the inauguration of the Kingdom of God" (*Isaiah's Christ in Matthew's Gospel*, [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992], 192).

## II. Correcting Theological Astigmatism as an Antidote to Idolatry

### A. The Contemporary Distaste for Talk of Idolatry

The problem, of course, is that we do not have much interest in hearing about idolatry in contemporary culture or even in contemporary church culture. Despite the fact that idolatry is the most obvious form of false worship, there are very few sessions at most worship conferences entitled, “How to Avoid Idolatry in Your Church.” Part of the problem is that we assume that the kind of idolatry that plagued Ancient Near Eastern culture simply does not apply to us; we do not seem to have physical idols in the way that Ancient Near Eastern culture did. Part of the reason we avoid the topic is that we prefer not to dwell on sin at all. Part of our lack of interest is that we remember worship services that focused on idolatry as being guilt-inducing, works-righteousness-promoting, and altogether depressing.

Of course, the warning against idolatry is life giving. It is a form of wisdom. As with all true wisdom, we neglect it to our peril. For anyone working at planning and leading worship, idolatry needs to be a regular matter of concern. Even when our culture (and church culture) protests—even when it seems to be saying, “Do not prophesy to us what is right; speak to us smooth things, prophesy illusions, . . . let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel” (Isa. 30:10-11)—the first item in the job description of any preacher, worship leader, musician, and anyone who would lead God’s people in worship ought to be to work diligently against the sin of idolatry and to work for its opposite, a deeply nuanced understanding of the beauty of God and subsequent loving devotion to this God.

### B. Theological Astigmatism as a Type of Idolatry

Part of what can help us approach this faithfully, I would argue, is to consider the multiple forms of idolatry and to discern which forms are particularly vexing in contemporary life. The obvious form of idolatry is, as the Heidelberg Catechism concludes, “having or inventing something in which one trusts in place of or alongside of the only true God” (QA 95). Thus, money, sex, and power are appropriately the usual targets in many sermons on idolatry.

There is another form of idolatry, however, that needs our attention; one that Isaiah is very well suited to address: the idolatry of false or distorted concept about God. This idolatry might be thought of as a kind of theological astigmatism or misapprehension, in which we misperceive God’s character, even when our worship is drenched in orthodox theological language.

This type of idolatry was described by Zacharius Ursinus. In his exposition on the Heidelberg Catechism, Q94, Ursinus distinguishes seven forms of obedience that the first commandment enjoins. Then, for the first form of that obedience (“the knowledge of God”) he goes on in a moment of scholastic zeal to articulate seven corresponding types of disobedience. Of these, the second is simply clinging to “errors or false notions of God,” including the sin of

those—that is, of all of us—”who profess that they know the true God; but yet depart from him and worship instead of him, an idol which they make for themselves, because they imagine the true God other than he has made himself known in his word.”<sup>21</sup> In his commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism, Karl Barth is even more explicit about contrasting idolatry with the worship of the triune God: “Every conception and every presentation of a God who is not this three-in-one God, however beautiful and profound it may be, can only set up an idol, a false image of God.”<sup>22</sup> Otto Weber argued against any religious devotion to God apart from Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit, referring dramatically to “the struggle against the idolization of Yahweh himself.”<sup>23</sup> More recently, Herbert Schlossberg warns: “Since ours is not so much a pagan (which is to say pre-Christian) society as it is a post-Christian one, the dangers are all the more serious. The forces of idolatry do not urge us to worship Zeus but rather use the language that for many centuries has been associated with the Christian church.”<sup>24</sup> This is the type of idolatry that Charles Spurgeon worried about in his concern that too many churchgoers “are merely stolid, unthinking, slumbering worshippers of an unknown God.”<sup>25</sup> This is theological astigmatism, in which we find ourselves attending to the God of Scripture but in a blurry, ill-formed, and distorted way.

Among the particularly vexing forms of contemporary theological astigmatism are the sentimentalization of the gospel on the one hand and certain forms of triumphalism on the other. The first, the privatization or sentimentalization of the gospel, ignores God’s longing for justice. How often have we heard the pretty texts of Isaiah (“Comfort, comfort now my people,” “Here is your God,” “I will be with you when you go through the waters”), and almost never heard along with them the divine concern for righteousness and justice that comes along with them? This is why Leslie Hoppe defines idolatry as “forgetting that the God whom Israel worshipped was a God who takes the side of the oppressed, demands justice for the poor and liberates slaves” and why

---

<sup>21</sup> Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. G. W. Williard (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 509.

<sup>22</sup> Karl Barth, *Heidelberg Catechism Today* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1964), 57.

<sup>23</sup> Otto Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, vol. 1, trans. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 358-59. Similarly, John Barton argues, “a tendency to treat merely human ideas of divine reality as though they were God himself. The recognition that idolatry really consists in making gods for ourselves and putting our trust in them is the great breakthrough in Israel’s thinking about the matter, and I have suggested that it may be to Isaiah that we owe it” (“The Work of Human Hands’ (Psalm 115:4): Idolatry in the Old Testament,” *Ex Auditu* 15 [1999]: 71). For similar concern, see James M. Houston, *The Heart’s Desire: Satisfying the Hunger of the Soul* (Vancouver: Regent College, 2001), 30-53.

<sup>24</sup> Herbert Schlossberg, *Idols For Destruction: Christian Faith and Its Confrontation with American Society* (Nashville: Nelson, 1983), 322-23.

<sup>25</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, v. 11, sermon no. 648 “Degrees of Power Attending the Gospel” (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1866), 496.

Thomas L. Leclerc argues, “In the context of the prophet’s polemic against justice, it [the ‘path of justice’] serves as a distinguishing and distinctive feature of YHWH’s identity.”<sup>26</sup> Isaiah can correct our theological astigmatism by making sure that justice attaches to our vision of divine character.

Second, Isaiah’s positive theological vision and critique of idolatry challenges a kind of triumphalism that pictures God as a God of raw-fisted power, a kind of divine Rambo.<sup>27</sup> As classical Christian theology consistently asserts (based in part on Isaiah), God is an omnipotent creator, but God exercises power in particular ways and toward particular ends. God’s power and love are in no way in opposition. In Isaiah, the image of God as divine warrior is strikingly juxtaposed with the image of God’s suffering servant—challenging our interpretation of each. Isaiah gives us a beautiful and compelling vision of God as a being of power-expressed-in-redemptive-love. It is a vision that constantly challenges our preconceived, culturally shaped views. Paraphrasing a long-standing claim of traditional theological prolegomena, Stephen Evans has observed with understated eloquence, “our intuitions about what is perfect may not be altogether trustworthy.”<sup>28</sup> We need the biblical text to constantly hone our idea of God and strip away both our implicit and our carefully cultivated little idols. Isaiah is particularly well suited to the task—correcting theological astigmatism of all types.

This theological corrective lens should not be thought of as a luxury, reserved only for people with time and interest to attend conferences on Isaiah or to read the *Calvin Theological Journal*. It is deeply needed by all sorts of modern worshippers, from long-time worshippers (and leaders) whose faith has grown tired in part because they carry with them distorted theological ideas to religious seekers. It is also deeply needed by all those who may be staying away from church because they want to avoid a God that they misconstrue and misconceive. Part of what the church can give to a longing culture is a fully balanced biblical view of God, one that is so luminous that it challenges and critiques the implicit idolatry in our own culture.

---

<sup>26</sup>Lesslie Hoppe, “Isaiah 58:1-12, Fasting and Idolatry,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 13 (April 1983): 44-47, and Thomas L. Leclerc, *Yahweh Is Exalted in Justice: Solidarity and Conflict in Isaiah* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 129. See also: W. A. M. Beuken, “Mišpaṭ: The First Servant Song and Its Context,” *Vetus Testamentum* 22 (1972): 1-30.

<sup>27</sup> See Millard Lind, “Monotheism, Power and Justice: A Study in Isaiah 40-55,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 46 (1984): 432-46.

<sup>28</sup> Stephen Evans, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith: The Incarnational Narrative as History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 134.

### III. Practical Strategies for Subverting Idolatry in Preaching and Leading Worship

#### A. Worship as An Arena for Fighting Idolatry

All of this becomes pressing when we realize that public worship is one of the most important arenas for seeking to obey the first and second commandments. Part of the deep purpose of common worship is to fit us for the spectacles of Scripture, to work at correcting persistent theological astigmatism. Seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day, we live in a culture (and sometimes even a churchly culture) that tempts us to think of divine life as sentimental love or raw-fisted power, or a thousand other subtle heresies. Worship is a place that says to the world, missionally, “You who are weary from chasing these false gods, come away. Come away to the One who will give you rest.”

Here is where pretty words fail us. Here is where we need to draw rhetorical contrasts in ways that point to the compelling beauty of God’s character. Yet, we often proceed with platitudes. We sing three pleasant songs, skip the confession of sin, hear a nice solo, make sure the sermon is packed with delightful anecdotes, and eagerly move toward coffee time. In the process, the praise songs lose their polemic. Grace and truth lose their beauty and the evangelistic magnetism of worship loses some of its pull. Like my old television, the contrast knob does not seem to work, and all those vivid colors of Isaiah become pastels.

#### B. Anti-Idolatry Strategies in Worship

So now, practically, how do we use the resources of Isaiah 40-55—their critique of sin, positive theological assertions, polemic doxology, and Christological focus—to fight both explicit idolatry and this kind of theological astigmatism? For starters, we work the contrasts that these texts teach us, contrasts that help us perceive the life-giving beauty of the gospel according to Isaiah. Contrast is nothing new to thoughtful worship planning, of course. The majority of historic Sunday liturgies began with the contrast between the plaintive cry of “Kyrie eleison” and the exuberant acclamation “Gloria in Excelsis Deo”—a contrast only somewhat captured in the movement from confession to assurance.<sup>29</sup> Consider how more effectively rhetorical contrasts might be achieved in some routine aspects of worship planning.

##### 1. *Choosing and Delimiting Texts*

First, consider which verses we choose to read and present in worship. Courses in both lectionary and nonlectionary homiletics teach us to limit the text by its literary unit. We want one tree in the forest. However, dealing strictly

---

<sup>29</sup> Many of our favorite musical examples also operate this way. In *Messiah*, Handel set up the glory of the Hallelujah Chorus with the biting words, “Thou shalt break them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.” After that dour declamation, the great Hallelujah Chorus is exhilarating.

with literary units often means that we miss textual contrasts. Whenever possible, read the preceding paragraph or pericope before the chosen text. If that is not possible, develop a simple one-sentence introduction that is either printed or spoken right before the reading. Before hearing the life-giving words of Isaiah 40, a reader might say, “The word of the LORD from Isaiah 40: In contrast to false gods, the true Creator God gives strength and hope. Hear now the word of the LORD.” In worship that is less formal, a reader or preacher might say, “Think for a moment of the darkest moment in your life. When Israel heard the words you’re about to hear, life was darker still. Now hear the word of the LORD.” This is not to suggest that worship (even Scripture reading) should be overly didactic (a two-sentence limit is a wise guideline in many cultural contexts). The practice helps people hear the text accomplish what it does in its literary context.

Consider the following suggestions for introductions and reading delimitations.

Text	Lectionary assignment (note: these same texts are the most-preached texts for nonlectionary users)	One line introduction (printed or spoken)	Expansion of reading to signal literary context (particularly if it is the preaching text)
40:1-11	Advent 2 (B)	“The prophet is called to speak comfort to people in exile”	
40:21-31	Epiphany 5 (B)	“In contrast to false gods, the true, creator God gives strength and hope.”	expand to Isaiah 40:18-31 to include a warning against idolatry
42:1-9	Monday of Holy Week, Baptism of Our LORD (A)	“In contrast to false gods, God’s servant brings justice, healing, and peace.”	expand to include 41:21-29 (if this is the preaching text), else vv. 28-29 as part of the introduction
43:1-7	Baptism of Our LORD (C)	“In contrast to false gods, the Holy One of Israel promises to be with us”	expand to include 42:18-25 (if this is the preaching text)
44:6-8	Proper 11 (A)	“The incomparable greatness of God”	Expand at least—vs. 11
49:1-7	Epiph 2 (A), Tues. Holy Week	Read 48:22 as part of the introduction to the reading	
52:7-10	Christmas	“In contrast to false gods, the God of Israel reigns and shows forth salvation”	Expand to include vv. 4-6 when preached, to draw contrast between blasphemy and gospel; Or read 51:17-23, then 52:1-12 as a contrast
52:13-53:12	Good Friday, Proper 24 (A)	“God’s servant as a sign of glory in suffering, power in weakness”	

2. *Faithful Public Reading of Scripture*

Second, we must read our chosen texts faithfully, working the contrast of the text itself. Every reading of Scripture is an act of interpretation. Remarkably, even though we have sophisticated literary and theological analyses of every biblical book as well as model sermons artfully constructed to reflect them, we often read the Bible as if we were reading a phonebook. In general, most churches today—of whatever liturgical style—need more of the positive vision for Scripture reading as an independent act of worship that is articulated so powerfully in the Westminster Directory of Worship of 1644. That landmark document called for Scripture readings to be an independent act of worship, read out of the best-allowed translation, read distinctly, and read so that all might hear and understand.

Part of what we need is simply to recover the idea that reading of Scripture is itself a powerful act of worship. Rather than thinking of Scripture reading in worship as a short preface to the sermon, try thinking of the sermon as an extended footnote to the reading of Scripture (a robust one, to be sure, that may take fifteen hours to prepare). For this to happen, one of the best things that pastors can do in preparing to preach Isaiah is to coach whoever will be reading the text to give it the same interpretation that the sermon will give it. One congregation went so far as to institute a Scripture reading team that met each Wednesday night adjacent to the traditional church choir practice. If Scripture is important to our faith, we should give it every bit of attention and care.

Think, for example, about how we often read a given prophecy from Isaiah in kind of a singsong way. “He will *feed* his *flock* like a *shepherd*.” True enough, but the text is meant to call attention to the great contrast between the Holy One of Israel and the false gods. This suggests reading it in a different way, a way that calls attention to the one about whom we say these words. “*He* will feed his flock like a shepherd. *He* will gather his lambs in his arms and carry them in his bosom and gently lead the mother sheep.” Consider several other examples as well:

	Instead of:	Consider . . .
40:9	“say to the cities of <i>Judah</i> , “Here is your God!”” [implying a contrast between <i>Judah</i> and the nations]	“say to the cities of <i>Judah</i> , “ <i>Here</i> is your God!”” [implying ‘not over there, with the false gods’]
42:1	“Here is my <i>servant</i> , whom I uphold” [implying a contrast between servant and something else]	“[No,] <i>Here</i> is my servant, whom I uphold . . . I have put my Spirit on <i>him</i> .” [implying that the contrast is between the servant and the “empty wind” (41:29) of the false gods]
44:24	Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb: I am the LORD, [implying I am LORD as opposed to something else]	“Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, who forms you in the womb: I am the LORD, [and in contrast to the idols, I am the one who] who makes all things, who <i>alone</i> stretches out the heavens, who <i>by myself</i> spreads out the earth.



52:7	"your God <i>reigns</i> ."	"How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces <i>peace</i> , who brings <i>good</i> news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, " <i>Your</i> God reigns." [The relevant contrast is not "your God <i>reigns</i> , as opposed to merely is interested in you," but rather is " <i>Your</i> God reigns" as opposed to the other gods.]
57:13-16		For thus says the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I [in contrast to those measly gods] dwell in the high and holy place, <i>and also</i> [here is a surprise] with those who are contrite and humble in spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite. For I will not continually accuse, nor will I always be angry; for then the spirits would grow faint before me, even the souls that I have made.

Indeed, what we need is an Old Testament scholar to prepare a "reading commentary" of Isaiah—a guide to helping us understand which words need to be emphasized so that our reading of the book matches our exegesis of the text. Until we have such a resource, may every exegete of the text think about ways not only of developing a sermon outline but also of reading the text with loving care.

### 3. *Contrastive Rhetoric in Preaching*

The contrasts between light and dark, folly and wisdom, the gods and God that are so dramatically depicted in the alternating rhetoric of the middle chapters of Isaiah naturally suggest the same kind of rhetoric for preaching today. We need preaching rhetoric that works the principle of contrast. Consider, for example, Fleming Rutledge's memorable Advent sermon, "Advent Begins in the Dark" or Gardner Taylor's "Shadow and Light."<sup>30</sup> The titles themselves convey the contrast. More important is the rhetoric of the body of the sermon. Imagine a sermon that works up quite a bit of rhetorical force in piling up dramatic contrasts:

The world loves to worship the stuff it has made, but the church proclaims a God who made us. The world lives to worship ideas it has thought up, but the church points to a vision of God far greater than we could ever imagine on

<sup>30</sup> Fleming Rutledge, *The Bible and the New York Times* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 25-30; Edward Taylor, ed., *The Words of Gardner Taylor*, vol. 1, NBC Radio Sermons (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1999), 116-19.

our own. The world says that God's power is simply raw-fisted power, but we proclaim a God who redeems through suffering love. The world advises you to take glory for yourself, but the church says to give away the glory of God—to show it to the nations for the purpose of God's mission in the world.

The musicality and rhythmic flow of the rhetoric will inevitably work in some cultures better than in others. However the sentence structure develops, the principle of contrast is worth considering. In general, the rhetoric of sermons is lacking when true claims are made but without a sense of what bad things the good message displaces.

This is especially important when we think of the evangelistic opportunities that we find in nearly all preaching and worship contexts. Worship and preaching are so significant because they give us opportunities to correct misapprehensions of God's character that prevent people from joyful worship and abundant Christian living. It is a worthy exercise for nearly every sermon and service plan to imagine the most effective pastoral kind of astigmatism correction that worship can provide. Consider a few rough drafts of sermon introductions on the themes of this article (designed here more to convey the idea than the wording that would best convey it):

- “There are those you say that the Christian faith has little to do with the conditions and relationships that people live with every day? Well, the problem here is not with the Bible but with the way people misuse the Bible. The God we worship today loves justice. Listen!”
- “Have you stayed away from church because you are tired of hypocritical religious people? It turns out that the God we worship today hates hypocrisy too.”
- “Were you ever taught to be afraid of God, like a kid of a thunderstorm? Well, the God of the Bible is big enough to make a thunderstorm, but this God tells us not to be afraid. Listen!”
- “Are you exhausted as you arrive here today, living as if life is a hamster's treadmill? The God we worship today doesn't call us to spiritual life on an endless treadmill, chasing after things that won't satisfy. The God we worship today invites us to a way of life that truly satisfies.”

Every one of these moves would need to be reworked for any particular sermon, but they suggest the kinds of contrast that can help sermons and the services that surround them move beyond truism.

#### *4. The Elements of Worship*

Just as important as these homiletical moves are the moves that give shape to the liturgy that surrounds the sermon. Contrastive rhetoric, in ways that address theological misapprehension, can be prominent throughout worship. Consider the following examples for several elements of worship.

<p>Call to Worship</p>	<p>Introductory sentences:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “If you come to worship today, exhausted from chasing after the world’s gods, hear this invitation of Jesus: “Come to <i>me</i>, all you who are weary, for <i>I</i> will give you rest.”</li> <li>• (Christmas): “All year long, our world has told us that things get done with power and money. Today, in striking contrast, the Christian church looks at the baby Jesus and hears the words of Isaiah: “Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; . . . do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, “Behold, <i>here</i> is your God!” O come, let us adore him.”</li> </ul> <p>Scripture texts: e.g., Psalm 96, Psalm 115</p>
<p>Songs and Hymns of Praise</p>	<p>Introduction lines:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Every song of praise we sing to God is a song against everything else we would make into a god.”</li> <li>• “In church, we don’t waste our breath praising a false god. We worship the One who made us, who loves us, who has redeemed us in Christ. Come, let us worship God.”</li> </ul> <p>Scripture text: Psalm 95:1-7</p> <p>Songs that Draw Contrast/Name Idolatry</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Cast Every Idol From Its Throne; the LORD is God, and he alone: to God all praise and glory” (<i>Sing Praise to God who Reigns Above</i>, J.J. Schutz)</li> <li>• “We bow our hearts, we bend our knees; O Spirit, come make us humble. We turn our eyes from evil things; Oh LORD, we cast down our idols. Give us clean hands, give us pure hearts; let us not lift our souls to another. And O God, let us be a generation that seeks Your face, O God of Jacob.” (<i>Give Us Clean Hands</i>, Charlie Hall)<sup>31</sup></li> </ul>
<p>Confession and Assurance</p>	<p>Imagine a restoration of the BCP practice of placing the prayer of confession after the sermon, and before the LORD’s Supper. In this case, the reading and preaching of Scripture helps inform the prayer of confession.</p> <p><i>Sample confession</i></p> <p>“God of grace, we confess that we have elevated the things of this world above you. We have made idols of possessions and people and used your name for causes that are not consistent with you and your purposes. We have permitted our schedules to come first and have not taken the time to worship you. We have not always honored those who guided us in life. We have participated in systems that take life instead of give it. We have been unfaithful in our covenant relationships. We have yearned for, and sometimes taken, that which is not ours, and we have misrepresented others’ intentions. Forgive us, O God, for the many ways we fall short of your glory. Help us to learn to live together according to your ways.”<sup>32</sup></p>

<sup>31</sup> Charlie Hall, “Give Us Clean Hands,” in *I Could Sing of Your Love Forever 2: 25 Modern Worship Songs for a New Generation* (n.p.: Jesse Reeves Publishing, 2000).

<sup>32</sup> *Belonging to God: Catechism Resources for Worship* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2003), 12.

<p>Assurance of Pardon</p>	<p><i>Sample Assurance of Pardon</i></p> <p><sup>21</sup> Remember these things, O Jacob, and Israel, for you are my servant; I formed you, you are my servant; O Israel, you will not be forgotten by me.</p> <p><sup>22</sup> I have swept away your transgressions like a cloud, and your sins like mist; return to me, for I have redeemed you” (Isa. 44:21-22)</p> <p>“I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses; and from your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, And a new spirit I will put within you; And I will remove from you body the heart of stone And give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you. (Ezek. 36:25-27a)</p>
<p>Misc. Anthem, Song on a Pretty Text</p>	<p>Introduction line (spoken or written):</p> <p>“The beautiful music we are about to hear is more than pretty. The words were written to a homesick people in exile. Along with these words came a warning to worship God alone. But when God alone is worshiped, this is the comfort that God promises.” (Perhaps followed by a song on Isaiah 12:1-2 or 44:23)</p>
<p>Creed</p>	<p>Creeds are often introduced, and rightly so, as an act of churchly unity. The Creed, however, is also an anti-idolatry statement. To highlight this, consider the following:</p> <p><i>Sample Introduction Line</i></p> <p>“The creed is a way of saying ‘yes’ and ‘no.’ With these words, we are affirming our common trust in the God revealed in Scripture. We are also confessing that we do not trust in the gods of money, sex, and power. Let us confess our faith with the church of all ages.”</p>
<p>Lord’s Supper—Prayer of Thanksgiving</p>	<p>Traditional eucharistic prayers are creedlike doxological summaries of the faith that have a natural (if latent) anti-idolatry dimension. Very simply textual adaptations can highlight this dimension.</p> <p>“It is truly right to glorify you, Father, and to give you thanks, <i>for you alone are God</i>, living and true, dwelling in light inaccessible from before time and forever. Fountain of all life and source of all goodness, <i>you alone</i> made all things and fill them with your blessing; you created them to rejoice in the splendor of your radiance. Countless throngs of angels stand before you, <i>and you alone</i>, to serve you night and day, and, beholding the glory of your presence, they offer you unceasing praise. Joining with them, and giving voice to every creature under heaven, we glorify your name and lift our voices in joyful praise: Holy, holy, holy LORD, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD. Hosanna in the highest. We acclaim you, holy God, glorious in power; your mighty works reveal your wisdom and love. <i>You</i> formed us in your own image, giving the whole world into our care, so that, in obedience to you, our creator, we might rule and serve all your creatures. When our disobedience took us far from you, <i>in search of other gods</i>, you did not abandon us to the power of death. In your mercy you came to our help, so that in seeking you we might find you. Again and again you called us into covenant with you, and through</p>

	the prophets you taught us to hope for salvation. Almighty God, you loved the world so much that in the fullness of time you sent your only Son to be our Savior. Incarnate by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, he lived as one of us, yet without sin. To the poor he proclaimed the good news of salvation; to prisoners, freedom; to the sorrowful, joy. <i>In him we see your true nature.</i> To fulfill your purpose he gave himself up to death; and, rising from the grave, destroyed death and made the whole creation new. And that we might live no longer for ourselves but for him who died and rose for us, God sent the Holy Spirit, your first gift for those who believe, to complete your work in the world, and to bring to fulfillment the sanctification of all who believe.” <sup>33</sup>
Hymns of Dedication	Sample Text: “The dearest idol I have known, whate’er that idol be, help me to tear it from thy throne, and worship only thee.” ( <i>Oh, for a Closer Walk with God</i> , William Cowper)
Benediction	Optional introductory sentence: “When you leave this place, thousands of gods will compete for your allegiance. Resist them. As you do, be confident, however, that the true God, the one who created you, is with you. Hear now, God’s blessing.” <sup>34</sup>

### 5. Moments of Contrast in the Unfolding Christian Calendar

The genius of the traditional liturgical year is achieved, in part, through dramatic contrasts: Four weeks of Advent waiting are followed by twelve days of celebration framed by Christmas and Epiphany; six weeks of Lenten repentance is followed by seven of Easter celebration. Interestingly, in many North American congregations, we typically minimize or ignore the celebration seasons (not many congregations make much of Christmas’ twelve days or Eastertide’s fifty), and at the same time we tend to soften the darkness of Advent and Lent by making them more celebrative. The combined result of this is that the emotional range of worship tends to be quite flat and without much contrast. It is tempting for worship in nearly every season to fall into a pattern of benign pleasantness.

Every Sunday is, of course, a little Easter, on which it should be perfectly natural to sing, “Christ the LORD Is Risen Today.” Over the fifty-two weeks of the year, there is much that congregations can do to restore contrasts, to live into the multiple experiences of faith conveyed, for example, by the range of emotions reflected in the biblical Psalter. Perhaps the most likely strategy for North American Christians is the restoration of the extended Christmastide and Eastertide. Once that is completed, congregations may be more willing to linger more deeply in Advent longing and Lenten repentance.

<sup>33</sup> This text is freely adapted from a fourth-century liturgy used in the city of Alexandria, as found in the *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 146-47.

<sup>34</sup> I am grateful to Paul Detterman for this phrase.

In sum, among its many prevailing themes, Isaiah's trenchant anti-idolatry campaign is among the most pastorally significant for contemporary ministry. Worship is a key arena for rehabilitating practices that correct idolatries of all kinds. When we prepare sermons and the worship services that surround them, we would do well to learn not only from the themes of a given part of Scripture (e.g., Isaiah's anti-idolatry campaign) but also from the strategies they employ (e.g., rhetorical contrast between idolatry and true worship, luminous assertions of divine character, and songs of praise that are experienced as polemic against false gods). The point of giving renewed attention to this theme is not to make worship more dour or depressing. Just the opposite: The point is to help worshippers perceive the resplendent and luminous beauty of the God revealed in Scripture and to offer worship in spirit and truth.