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## Worship as a Formative Practice

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## SUMMARY

This dissertation examines the worship practices of three evangelical groups that pioneered Spanish-language services in emerging Protestantism in Argentina (1867-1930)—Methodists, Baptists, and Free (Plymouth) Brethren—and the theology and ethics embodied in and shaped by those worship practices, with attention to their formative power.

Most scholarly works on Protestantism in Argentina have tended to focus on the history of its institutions and main characters but, noticeably, little attention has been given to unveiling the history of the primary communal practice Christians do together: worship. Two major reasons may explain this omission. First, most Protestants in Argentina belong to non-liturgical churches; and second, Protestant liturgical studies is still a developing academic field.

Framed by a Christian practice approach and formative worship theory, this dissertation seeks to describe the worship practices of Methodist, Baptists, and Free Brethren in a particular social and historical context that favored the emergence of Protestantism in Argentina (1867-1930), and to analyze the theology and ethics embodied and shaped by those worship practices, with attention to their formative power in that specific context. To this end this dissertation is organized into six chapters, as follows.

Chapter 1 introduces the theoretical framework that guides this dissertation. The Christian practice approach and formative worship theory sustain that worship is intrinsically formative, both theologically and ethically. Social practices are deep enough to shape the identity and character of individuals and communities, and among all of them, the communal practice of worship is the Christian practice par excellence and therefore the most powerful formative experience. Worship practices are informed and shaped by doctrine, and reciprocally they embody and express particular theological beliefs. Likewise, they form a community and its

members in a unique self-understanding, in certain values, affections, and particular views of the world and the Christian life that inform and model their ethical praxis. This ethical dimension of worship forms individuals and communities as citizens and hence, public worship is political worship.

Chapter 2 recounts the history of Protestant emergence in Argentina, which was intrinsically linked to the demographic strategy ideated by the Liberal ruling elite to advance their modernizing project: the active promotion of European immigration. The latter brought millions of Europeans to Argentina, and with them arrived the first Protestant churches as well as the missionaries and mission organizations. Firstly, the Methodists, followed by the Baptists and the Free Brethren alongside other “conversionist” groups emerged in this context and very soon their proselytizing zeal and Protestant ethics elicited confrontation with Roman Catholic traditional order. This chapter also outlines a brief history of the beginnings of the Methodist, Baptist, and Free Brethren work in Argentina and their main characters and features.

Through a phenomenological approach and the usage of non-traditional primary sources that reflect different people’s worship experiences and beliefs, chapters 3, 4, and 5 offer respectively a comprehensive description of the worship practices of Methodists, Baptists, and Free Brethren (1867-1930).

In chapter 3, the study of the Methodist worship in Argentina demonstrates pervasive continuities with nineteenth century American Methodism. Yet, in contrast with other Protestant churches that remained as refuges of ethnic identities, in 1867 the Methodist church became the first Christian church in Argentina regularly worshipping in the vernacular. This proved the importance they gave to the intelligibility of the gospel message; a feature compatible with modern religious sensibilities that highly valued both rationality and individual freedom of

conscious. This trait is easily observable in their pattern of worship centered in the sermon, accompanied by Scripture reading, prayer, and hymn singing. Concerning the latter, faithful to their Wesleyan tradition, Methodists forerun Spanish-language hymnody in Argentina, though not by fostering local composers or using native tunes but translating hymns from Europe and North America.

The core feature that shaped Methodist worship practices was conversionism, which in this tradition was considered an individual experience intrinsically related to Christian perfection. Unlike American Methodism, its local expression was marked by a vivid anti-Catholicism primarily evidenced in the controversial language used in preaching.

Chapter 4 explores the worship practices of the Baptists in their emergence in Argentina. In spite of their heterogeneous origins, Baptist worship embodied the typical Baptists features: the centrality of individuals' experience of conversion, the normative character of the Bible as the rule of faith and practice, the rejection of Roman Catholicism, adult baptism by immersion, defense of religious freedom, and democratic congregationalism. In regard to the worship pattern it was similar to the Methodist's and influenced by Revivalism: preliminaries (prayer and song), Bible-based preaching, and harvest. Being the sermon the most prominent component in public worship, the prompt promoting of a generation of native leaders primarily resulted in a more culturally relevant preaching.

Chapter 5 describes the worship practices of Free (Plymouth) Brethren in Argentina, the most unique of the three groups studied in this dissertation. These practices expressed an outstanding continuity with their British background, with the exception of the use of the Spanish language. Like the Plymouth Brethren in Britain, the Free Brethren held three different and separated worship services, each one with a different purpose: adoration (centered in the

Lord's Supper), ministry (for believers' edification), and gospel (for evangelism). The most important of the three services was the Breaking of Bread, a weekly Sunday meeting for the celebration of the Lord's Supper in a totally impromptu service. Services for edification may have prearranged or spontaneous preaching, while gospel meetings held the Revival pattern of worship: preliminaries, sermon, and harvest. In any case, and with strong anti-Catholic sentiments, Brethren worship conveyed their unique theological tenets: primitivist biblicism, premillennial dispensationalism, and radical separation from the world.

Finally, chapter 6 offers an interpretative analysis of the theology and ethics embodied in the worship practices described in previous chapters. Throughout the entire analysis emerges the pervasiveness of a formative liturgy robustly shaped by conversionism and by a profound rejection of Catholic practices and sensibilities. The theology embodied and shaped by these worship practices demonstrates the strong imprint of evangelicalism, featured by a rigid biblicism, a dominant soterological Christology, and a strong emphasis in eternal life and afterlife recompense. Ethical formation through worship was primarily oriented to individual morality; strict ascetics and anti-worldliness impregnated evangelical liturgies in general, but were uniquely pervasive among the Free Brethren. Conversionist worship also shaped the three groups' social ethics: individuals' regeneration and sanctification was seen as the main tool for social transformation. Consequently, evangelical *activism* was primarily oriented towards evangelization, which deeply shaped Protestant liturgical practices. The compelling usage of military images in worship became a main formative strategy for such a minority group striving to find its own place in a broader Catholic society.