

## Introduction

# Worship as Ritual

### *Understanding and Claiming Ethical Christian Ritual*

*What can I do? My wife just had a miscarriage—it was to have been our first baby. She is disconsolate and we both feel so alone. I love her so much, and I would do anything to comfort her! Isn't there something I could do to help her? Doesn't the church have some kind of ritual to help me love her and comfort her in this terrible time?*

*Pastor, something has changed in me. I'm turning my life over—I'm going to give it to God in the church. I'm not sure what kind of ministry I'm called to, but whatever it is, that's what I'm going to do. Could we celebrate this in some way? I want my family of faith to know this, to witness my commitment, to pray for me.*

*I just don't understand it. The preacher says that Christianity is “a way of life” of loving all people, of justice and mercy, of reconciliation. We're to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. But when the folks in this church try to do that for real, we get little spiritual support. For instance, we do a bang-up job on weddings, but when the honeymoon is over, these new couples are left to fend for themselves, with the congregation doing nothing more to nurture and sustain them through their continuing milestones and struggles. The one thing churches ought to know how to do is celebrate what God is doing in our midst. Can't we do better than this?*

## What Is “Ritual”?

Christians care deeply about their worship, but many would be dismayed to hear that worship is an instance of the broadly human practice called “ritual,” because the word *ritual* has mixed connotations, some of which are infelicitous. For some, it implies meaningless, incomprehensible, or rote action: “empty” ritual. In psychology, it is associated with certain pathologically patterned behaviors, such as Lady MacBeth washing her hands repeatedly. It also functions as a technical liturgical term referring specifically to the words said (and not the actions done) when Christians gather for Sunday Mass. Anthropologists study an indigenous culture’s rituals in order to understand their beliefs, values, and kinship relations.

In 1972, however, anthropologist Ronald Grimes invited religious scholars to rethink what the study of ritual could reveal not only about other cultures’ religions but also about our own. Grimes opened up a new way to study Christian and Jewish worship by approaching it the way anthropologists have approached primitive cultures’ worship: in its enactment, seeking to learn what it might reveal about beliefs, values, and relationships. Grimes’ seminal work in the then-new field called “ritual studies” led Jews and Christians to view worship more humbly, as practices that are part of the broader human category of ritual.<sup>1</sup>

Grimes was interested not only in common rituals of various religions, but was aware of the numinous aspect of certain behaviors that may not be officially sanctioned by an authorized religious or denominational group. For example, “liturgy” implies a worship service with a repeated structure. Then what does one call a rite that may be done only once? If “worship” implies what Christians do together on Sundays, then what does one call a devotional gathering, perhaps in a home, perhaps on a Tuesday? What about rites that may not be public worship but, rather, private and confidential? Further, would there be ways to study Christian or Jewish worship with some ideological distance, just as one would study worship in, say, an indigenous Samoan setting? For this to happen, it became necessary to give up earlier prejudicial thinking that Christian worship is its own category, and instead, to study worship as an instance of something all human cultures do: ritual.

This book draws upon ritual studies, along with liturgical theology, to offer principles for the making of rites that could respond to the needs expressed in the opening anecdotes: rites of transition and healing that may be one-time events particular to a person, a congregation, or a

situation. To provide the ritual basis for these principles, I begin with a synopsis of some insights from ritual studies, to show not only how ritual works in general, but also why it is important that Christians learn principles of worship making, both for more insightful planning and leading of Sunday worship, and here especially for generating occasional and pastoral rituals when it will help the baptized toward healing or transition.

Before doing this, however, it is important to note two kinds of “bad ritual.” First, *rites can be death dealing*. Rite makers must be concerned about unethical ritual, that is, rituals that manifest an ethic which does not free or which fails to proclaim or mediate life to all. Ritual is powerful, both for good or for ill. Positively, it can gather the community in a structure strong enough to hold many people, conflicting points of view, and varied emotions together in unity. It can be engaged to empower and heal participants, and to release and redeem them from the stranglehold of emotional, psychological, or spiritual oppression. Life-giving ritual can create unity out of estrangement, support out of isolation, and hope out of fear or despair. But ritual power also can be engaged to oppress persons or to manipulate them toward that which violates their best interest or even the common good. One thinks of the rituals of the Third Reich in Germany, which turned moral people against fellow Germans who were Gypsies, Jews, homosexuals, or deemed mentally deficient. But dog-fighting rings or family rituals where dysfunction is perpetrated upon the vulnerable are other examples of unethical ritual. The ritual maker’s morality, intention, and competence are primary in assuring that rituals are freeing, life giving, and redemptive.

Second, *rites can be meaningless*, referring to nothing. Rite leaders must be concerned about rote, stodgy, or disconnected ritual that can actually impede worshipers’ connection with the holy. Many worship leaders as well as worshipers “go through the motions,” even on a Sunday morning, and never open themselves to the Spirit of God, notice other worshipers, allow the prayers and songs and Scripture to touch one’s own heart and soul, or make connections with real life. We have all experienced worship leaders whose bodies and words were present, but their minds and hearts somewhere else entirely. This is neither good worship nor good leadership.

This book is written for those who care about making ethical, life-giving rites that are alive with an integrity which connects mind and heart, body and spirit, people with each other, worshipers with the leader,

and congregations with God. I assume that those who claim the sacred trust to mediate rites of healing or transition understand that *how* they plan and lead is often as important as *what* they plan and lead, and that they surround their planning and their leading with prayer for the presence and guidance of God's Holy Spirit. One's own morality, ritual intention and competence, and care for siblings in the faith are essential.<sup>2</sup> The best way to assure one does not fall into leading or participating in either unethical or prosaic ritual is to learn its grammar and its poetry, which is what this book seeks to offer.

Further, ritual expresses a story. Here, our point of reference is the Christian story, which is fundamentally life giving, freeing, and redemptive and calls people to be selflessly loving. The six principles offered herein rely upon morality and life-giving intention to guide their use. This book assumes that persons with self-knowledge, who have grown to a level of maturity so as to distinguish between their own needs and opinions and those of the ones they serve, and who have a heart for the healing and growth of the people of God, will put these principles to use.

The particular focus of this book is *ritual competence*. By that I mean both intellectual understanding and reflective practice in planning and leading ritual that expresses and engenders Christian ethics, meaning, and structures, as well as in "reading" the meaning of rites as they are mediated to the worshipers. Ritual competence in a Christian context includes practice in and intention toward embodying Christian ethics, the Christian story, and Christian symbols.

## Four Attributes of Ritual Practice

A breakthrough in the field of ritual studies occurred in 1992 when Catherine Bell, a scholar of the history of religions, published her seminal book *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*,<sup>3</sup> in which she distinguished the study of theory from the study of practice, and thereby opened up the study of ritual by focusing on describing rather than defining ritual. According to Bell, ritual accomplishes that which cannot be accomplished in any other way.<sup>4</sup> Ritual is not a "thing" but, rather, a *way of doing* things. Bell identifies four attributes of ritual as practice that are profoundly helpful for understanding any ritual, including worship, liturgy, and particular rites of healing and transition: (1) ritual creates strategic contrast; (2) it

is contextual or situational; (3) it operates beneath the level of consciousness; and (4) it shifts and mediates power. Understanding these is the first step in developing ritual fluency and competence.

1. *Ritual creates strategic contrast*, which is to say that it is a strategy for distinguishing and thus privileging one event (the ritual event) from regular events in order to accomplish something. A birthday party may have the same family around the same table with the same pattern of food and dessert as any other meal. But for *this* dinner, Billy gets to pick the menu and eat off the special birthday plate, because it's *his birthday*. The napkins say "Happy Birthday," and the centerpiece is a cake with Billy's name on it and six candles. But after dinner, before the cake is cut, presents appear from nowhere. Billy enjoys unwrapping them and seeing what is given to him—just for being Billy, for being alive, for having lived six years. People know what to do: they smile, they are glad or enthusiastic, they appreciate the gifts along with Billy and on his behalf. Then, at last, the cake is moved to Billy's place, everyone stands, the lights are dimmed, the candles lit, and everyone sings "Happy Birthday to You" as his face radiates joy. He makes a wish, blows out the candles, everyone cheers. The cake is cut and served. And Billy does not have to help with dishes on this night. Thus, with a few strategic modifications, a family meal is turned into a celebration of Billy that he will never forget.

Similarly, a church might strategically modify its regular Sunday service to send people off as they move to a new town. The family may be called before the congregation during the prayer time; the change is announced; the congregation sings a blessing song; prayer is offered on their behalf. Following the service, there may even be a reception for them. This is a simple strategic variation on the normal rite by which something important is accomplished: a celebration and thanksgiving for this family and sending them off with love and blessing.

Good rituals have the right balance of continuity with the ordinary (such as a family dinner, Sunday worship) and contrast from the ordinary (for example, birthday cake and gifts, farewell prayers and blessings). Without enough "symbolic rupture"<sup>5</sup> or contrast, ritual will not hold enough power to effect change. With too much contrast or symbolic rupture, the particular worshipers will not be able to relate to or understand the event. To make holy, one sets apart. Ritual is a way of using strategies to set apart, to alter the every day to make one moment, one instance of an event,

special, singled out, and holy, so that it matters and is memorable. Ritual, then, strategically establishes a contrast that privileges one moment over other similar moments, making it special, meaningful, and holy.<sup>6</sup>

2. *Ritual is situational.* Besides its strategic aspect, ritual has a “grass-roots” aspect. It is not an unchangeable “thing” that a person could carry or give to others, the way one might take a box of chocolates or a bouquet of flowers to the houses of dinner hosts over the years. Instead, ritual is a practice that arises out of a situation. Jesus, for example, used the occasion of the Passover meal (according to Matthew, Mark, and Luke) to communicate something important to his disciples about what was going to happen to him, and how they could be with him as often as they would “do this, in remembrance” of him. In one house blessing, it was an important symbol to light a fire in the fireplace, both as warmth of the hearth and hospitality of the home, but also for the owner to truly claim the house that had felt borrowed, since in eight years of residing there, the fireplace had never been lit.

In another example, a pastoral colleague began meeting regularly with a gentleman in long-term care who had cancer. He loved to smoke cigars, and since she did, too, they smoked together on each visit. It was a bonding time of communion between them as they smoked and talked, and she listened to stories of his life. One day she sensed that he was approaching death, and he offered her one of his very expensive Cuban cigars. She asked if she could not smoke it that day. Instead, they talked and prayed about this life and the next, and completed all that needed to be done. At the man’s funeral, the pastor got up to preach the sermon, lit the Cuban cigar, and proceeded to tell his story while she smoked, shared their relationship, and made the connection with the Holy Spirit who fills and connects, abundantly. While she knew that smoking a cigar from the pulpit would usually be utterly inappropriate, here it signified this man’s loves (smoking, friendship) and reinforced the sermon message, which focused on the unexpected ways in which God makes communion among us in extravagant and holy ways. There were tears at the funeral that day because the sermon made real the truth of this beloved man’s particular quirky individuality and the way he connected to people. Ritual arises out of and fits a particular situation.

3. *Ritual operates below the level of conscious awareness.* Paul Tillich notes that a symbol “opens up levels of reality which otherwise are closed for us” and also “opens up hidden depths of our own being.”<sup>7</sup> But when a

person recognizes how a symbol is operating, its effectiveness ceases. Bell borrows the term *misrecognition*<sup>8</sup> to express the fact that ritual works as long as its working is not recognized. Rituals are effective inasmuch as people can enter into their energy and movement and be carried along by the flow. But if ritual calls attention to itself, the flow is broken, and so is the power. Watching a ballet where fairies seem to fly through the air is mesmerizing, but if attention should follow the wires lifting them to a red-faced, sweating pulley operator above the stage, the light-hearted effect of flying on stage is now lost. Or if the whole congregation is very present to the Holy Spirit who is palpably among them, and the preacher inserts a five-minute explanation of the worship or tells a joke or otherwise draws attention to herself, suddenly attention will be wrested from the Holy Spirit.

In contrast, it is also possible to intentionally hold focus on the ritual action unfolding and avoid distraction. For example, *Godly Play*, a children's curriculum based upon the Montessori method of children's education, teaches a particular way to tell stories that enables the children to keep focused. Teachers are taught that when they tell a story with the children in a circle around them, they should keep their minds *and their eyes* on the story props, and the children always follow suit. During the story telling, the teachers never look at or address the children nor ask questions until after the story is told. Rather, by keeping their own total focus on the story, the children are able to be single-minded in their attention, which is never broken. There is no distraction that would draw attention to the storyteller or the room or the hour or how each other is responding. In this way, they enter the story and become part of it.<sup>9</sup> The same approach is suggested for lectors and others who proclaim the Scripture story in worship.<sup>10</sup>

What is effective about symbols and rituals is that they invoke a higher reality or "world" into which participants are invited. This aspect of ritual is liberating, because participants are freed to enter a realm greater than themselves. They can "lose themselves" and are enabled to surrender to and be part of something over which they are not in charge. At the same time, this aspect of ritual places a responsibility on the ritual maker to be trustworthy, to hold the bounds of the container or "world," and thus not to be too casual about the rite. There is a sacred trust in inviting persons into a ritual setting in which they are free to be vulnerable without being afraid. For participants to receive and engage the

ritual action unself-consciously, ritual leaders need the ritual ethics, fluency, and competence to focus completely on the present moment and on the ritual event as it unfolds.

4. *Ritual shifts and mediates power.* Ritual exercises what Bell calls *redemptive hegemony*: it rearranges power and authority in redemptive, healing, life-giving ways.<sup>11</sup> In ritual, power can be moved, increased, or decreased. Thus those who have been victims and felt powerless can come away from a ritual literally empowered. Hierarchical power understood at the beginning of a ritual can, depending upon how ritual factors are engaged (for example, community, metaphor and symbol, honesty, sacrifice), be strengthened, lessened, or rearranged.

The goal of honest and ethical ritual makers is to engender rituals that will mediate God's power redemptively. To enable God's power requires avoiding ego power. This is helped by attending to Christian theology, committing to Christian ethics, practicing one's own prayer, self-purification, and self-care, and desiring care of the person the ritual is for, called the "focal person."<sup>12</sup> Rite makers seek to match their intention with God's intention for the focal person: hope, truth, freedom, mercy, justice, love—abundant life. While any honest ritual maker will want these things "in general," this is not enough: one must be vigilant and intentional before the rite about imagining and removing any barriers to mediating the full life Christ would want for the participants.

For example, a woman who has been victimized by her family may feel and believe she is utterly powerless, and may renege on making any decisions for her own well-being. One hopes she will find her way to psychotherapy to learn the causes and symptoms of disempowerment and patterns of reempowerment. Understanding may be the first step so that her will to change may be engaged and the healing process started. But understanding alone may be inadequate to enable her actually to change the patterns that lead her to seek disempowering relationships. For this, a ritual is often most effective, for in ritual action, power shifts. Power can be gained and given. Knowing this, paying attention to how power is shifted redemptively in rituals, and practicing with others ways of enabling proper empowerment to happen in ritual is the work of the churches and the work of any competent ritual maker. Because rituals well done are so potent, it behooves us as ritual designers and leaders to be aware of our power. It is a sacred trust to mediate the mystery of God's power through this form of worship.



These four attributes are basic to all ritual, extremely helpful in understanding how worship works, and valuable for persons seeking ritual fluency and competence. Understanding them can help worship leaders and pastors make worship more effective, life giving, empowering, and healing, as well as avoid inadvertent flaws that could render the worship they lead ineffective at best, or harmful at worst. Building on these four descriptions of how ritual works, then, it is possible to understand why churches ought to intentionally offer caring ritual.

## Reasons to Create Caring Liturgies

Arising out of Catherine Bell's seminal insights, there are five reasons the churches ought to invest in making rituals for all the baptized for their growth into God and the fulfillment of their ministries.

1. *Rituals are needed to enable human growth and maturity.* Many churches have not put a priority on intentionally calling and enabling their people to mature—spiritually, psychologically, socially, and intellectually—for the sake of their identity in Christ and their service to the world. Many churches want to grow in numbers of attendees, but are less concerned with those persons' growth in commitment. They too often fail to consider how their programs enable parishioners to mature fully as persons, following Jesus in becoming fully human. Calling the churches to draw upon their liturgical traditions to make rituals for the sake of Christian growth and maturity is a call for intentional energy to be spent on enabling the baptized to grow in Christ.

Theologian William Bouwsma has shown two models of adulthood that exist side by side in the Christian tradition. One asserts that growth is essential to the Christian life (adulthood). The other assumes that stability is better than change so that growth is not so important (manhood). In other words, churches that have failed to support growth among all the baptized may have followed the second without realizing that the first is also part of the tradition. And in centuries when Christianity was the dominant religion, maturity only for the clergy was emphasized. But now, it is imperative among post-Christendom Christian leaders to reexamine the importance of investing in mature personhood among the baptized, and therefore making rituals for them.<sup>13</sup>

The idea that churches should intentionally engage in developing sound, sensitive, and competent rituals to enable the baptized to grow

into Christ arises out of the understanding that humans are called to fulfill the potential God has given them. Growth and becoming are foundationally biblical. Growth—sanctification—is an antidote to sin. The apostles said to Jesus, “Increase our faith” (Luke 17:5). It is the churches’ work to help enable people to mature in faith,<sup>14</sup> especially those who are covenanted to Christ in baptism. At whatever age people are baptized, baptism into Christ is not the culmination of their faith life, but a new beginning. If the church has an interest in growing Christians, then the church is not finished once they’ve emerged from the baptismal waters. Rather, the baptized, united with Christ in his death and resurrection and now part of his body, are committed to growing into the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:5), to be like him (Phil. 3:10), becoming a holy nation (1 Pet. 2:9), going on to perfection or maturity (Heb. 6:1). Baptism initiates into participation in the divine life (2 Pet. 1:4), being changed into the likeness of Christ (2 Cor. 3:17-18), growing from being children of God (Irenaeus) to being adults of God to becoming God-like.<sup>15</sup> Once baptized, Christians are compelled to grow and mature in Christ. Alongside congregational worship, personal Christian ritual is an important part of any Christian growth, ongoing conversion, and change, and is a primary gift the churches have to offer.

2. *Rituals are needed to help people through many and particular times of suffering and times of transition.* Every mammal changes. It’s built right into our biogenetic make-up: birth, puberty, reproduction, death. But for humans, biologic changes are interpreted by cultural meanings through rites of passage at these four stages. Church culture has superimposed its own meanings, commonly experienced at marriages and funerals, but also at other significant passages beyond the four biogenetic ones; for instance, profession to monastic life, sending forth on a pilgrimage, ordination, or enthroning a Christian monarch.

Now is the era for extending the availability of church rites of healing and passage beyond exceptional Christians to all the baptized, and for pastorally acknowledging life crises when members of Christ’s body encounter dire moments on their journey toward closer Christ-likeness. At such moments of dangerous opportunity, persons are vulnerable. They need help.

Coping with life crises is like walking a path and suddenly coming to a lake or river with no way across or finding your way blocked by a long wall or fence. To keep going, you need help. At the lake, you need a

boat to carry you across. At the fence, you need some way to climb over. Ritual can be the ferry, the ladder, or stile carrying you from the stuck or stranded place to newness of life. Rituals are needed to carry the baptized over transitions and to place them back on the path to healing.

In times of suffering, healing rituals can be the boat to carry someone who is languishing on his or her own to the other shore of wholeness. In some cases, a person may just need insight and perspective on his or her situation, enabling her or him to act, change, move forward, or start anew. But other times, persons need someone else to take the initiative to act as an adult on their behalf. Frequently, persons realize they are at a loss but cannot imagine vitality and have no faith or hope of living differently. They may seek a new life, but are unable to find it on their own. Thus sometimes people need rescuing by a caring person who can navigate a boat over to them, help them on, and row them to the other side. Rituals of healing are like being ferried across the water.

Healing is a large category. Experiences that call for rites of healing include giving birth to a stillborn child, being abused by a relative or another trusted person, death anniversaries, losing a job, family estrangement, undeserved ostracism or public ridicule, slander, bullying, torture, or any physical or spiritual discomfort that keeps people from being whole and fully alive.

Healing, which was Jesus' work, is the work of the church. Churches have offered *prayer* (including laying on of hands and/or anointing with oil) for the sick and those in spiritual pain; *exorcism* for those not able to be themselves (with strong and experienced leadership only); and *healing of memories*<sup>16</sup> (among others) for those suffering with fear and resentment. Churches have offered *confession*—penance, reconciliation, absolution—for those in spiritual dis-ease, including people who are ill, who feel impure or tainted, or who feel guilty and need to forgive or receive forgiveness. Churches have offered rites for physical healing, for example, as a person enters into a long process of treatment for a chronic or tenacious disease, and rites of thanksgiving following cure. Rites around the end of life also fall into the healing category, as do anniversary rituals.

Such situations may signal to a sensitive, caring, pastoral person that spiritual ritual intervention may be helpful. When people have done all they can do and they have reached the end of the road, hopelessness can set in. Since a person is rarely able to engender one's own wholeness, it is especially valuable to have a ritually competent, compassionate mediator

with the vision to see what is needed and to offer the care of the church. A healing liturgy can be a gift, an act of grace (*charis*): someone(s) to share the burden, awaken their faith, and enable them to express their hope and trust in God through action: through ritual action.

And it is not just in times of pain and suffering that persons may need effective ritual. In times of transition, a life-passage ritual can be a stile over the fence to greener pasture. Indeed, “building stiles over the fences of life” is an apt metaphor for both the normalcy and the difficulty of passing from one terrain of life to another. The normal human life, helpfully compared to a journey, leads us through rocky paths, open trails, steep climbs. We make our way with singing or lamenting, alone or together, smoothly or laboriously. But sometimes, we come to a fence, a wall, a barrier that we cannot pass through on our own. This is a critical moment. Sometimes we just stay put, setting up camp by the fence, creating little villages—even deciding that this was where we were going all along. Sometimes we exhaust ourselves, railing at our fate, hands curled around what seem our prison bars. Sometimes we wait. Sometimes we struggle, climbing and falling, bandaging our wounds and struggling again. Reflecting on the waiting or the struggling may shift our perspective, even prepare us for the next stage of the journey. Friends or strangers may wait or struggle with us, perhaps suggesting techniques for vaulting or sources of poles. But sometimes, to get over the barrier, we need a climbing structure. We need a stile. We need a ritual.

Life-passage rites, then, can serve as support ladders over potentially difficult obstacles in life. Christians are familiar with baptism, house blessing, or confessing a spiritual burden to a trusted other. But there are other critical occasions when the church has typically not been involved. For example, being adopted into a new family is a major life shift, for which the legal paperwork does not express the tremendous loss and gain for both the child and the family. Retirement is a huge ending, yet without a rite that also shows it to be a beginning, persons can feel empty or useless, and can even die within the first year. But how would someone conduct a retirement rite? Where would we begin to think about an adoption rite? Just having some basic principles as guidelines could enable someone with ritual sensitivity, theological understanding, and empathic compassion to reach out to a vulnerable person, to offer a caring liturgy.

Some rites serve both purposes: healing and passage. Sometimes a passage cannot occur without attention to the pain that makes the person

fearful of climbing the stile. Examples of such situations include finding a birth place, divorce, release from prison, returning from war and trying to fit in again to an utterly different world while making peace with memories and injuries. My goal is to enable leaders to recognize persons facing such dead-ends who, without a rite to help them over the fence, may stop, their growth stunted.

3. *The role of the churches is to learn, teach, and practice the conducting of such rites.* When I first started working on this topic in the 1980s, I noticed that the first books out about ritualization were not Christian. For some Christians, the word *ritual* connotes “impersonal” or “inauthentic” or even “pagan.” Once I had a student who always thought of ritual as empty. Baffled after my lecture, he puzzled, “What you said made it seem as if there could be *good* ritual.”

His perspective startled me. He had learned something, and so had I. There is indeed empty ritual, dead ritual, pro forma ritual. Grimes has a whole chapter in his book *Ritual Criticism* on ritual failure,<sup>17</sup> and since then, I’ve found additions to his taxonomy. Worse than the meaningless events my student rightly feared, rituals can also actively be death dealing. One thinks of satanic rituals, ritual killings from the Roman arenas to the French Revolution to current ritual beheadings by terrorists. Less obvious are rituals that name half-truths and are thus dishonest, careless, or ignorant: ritual leadership that attends to the family mourners, for example, but leaves no space for other griever’s loss, rituals where symbols are misused, rituals that inadvertently proclaim the culture but not the gospel. Ritual is powerful and works beneath the level of consciousness, as Bell has shown. Its strength is that people can enter fully into the event and let their “observer” mind rest. But this strength can be distorted, and people can be manipulated. There is a necessary ethic attached to any leading of worship.

It is the role of the churches to apply ritual ethics to the conducting of weekly worship. Ritual is a human phenomenon of which Christian worship is a part. The churches have a stake in learning to do rites to help the baptized grow and mature. But this is based on a prior stake in doing worship well, for regular Sunday worship is the sustaining food for every life crisis. And as startling a realization as it would have been to my student, worship *is* ritual. Ritual is a universal human phenomenon carried out in such specific ways that persons may not be aware that when they attend Sunday worship they are engaged in ritual. But they are. And

not just any ritual; they are engaged in the specific kind of ritual called Christian worship—the wondrous Sunday gathering that makes palpable Christians’ identity as the ones covenanted to Christ who gather week by week on the day of his resurrection.

Because the churches’ primary converse week after week is worship, the churches in fact have implicit ritual knowledge,<sup>18</sup> which aside from the content of worship (preaching, praying, singing), is itself a gift the churches could make to the world. Christians live week by week in relationship to their worship, which is celebrated in relationship to their lives. Christians have a liturgical way of life that is its own kind of expertise, of which most Christians and many pastors are unconscious. Many have never thought about the ongoing relationship of worship to life as a kind of expertise, a knowledge, a practice that can be a gift to others. It is the churches’ specific role to engage this knowledge to create caring liturgies for its members.

4. *The church has a tradition of creating rites as part of a process of conversion in faith and growth in Christ.* The early church provided a model for enabling spiritual and behavioral conversion and Christian maturing through a series of rites in preparing persons for baptism. Called the catechumenate, this three- to five-year process<sup>19</sup> was an effective rhythm of learning punctuated by rituals. In the first three centuries, this catechumenal rhythm engaged would-be Christians in a pattern and path of spiritual growth in community, ethics, belief, and understanding, a journey on which progress was marked by means of rites leading up to baptism. These were the rites of initiation.

My primary basis for inviting the churches to bring their ritual knowledge to consciousness in order to engage it responsibly for the good of their people lies in this early church ritual practice related to the making of new Christians. While I cannot detail the process here, what is most important is that the early church understood its role to be enabling seekers to grow in such a way that they were utterly changed more and more into the likeness of Christ. Their progress on this path was punctuated by rites: admission to the order of catechumens, enrollment, and baptism. The first two rites, though not considered sacraments per se, were holy, pastoral, and functional. The rites connected the individuals’ journeys to the community’s journey. They were conducted as the person was ready to be carried to the next phase.

There is no reason not to continue this pattern after baptism. Creating liturgies to mark healing and transition on the Christian conversionary journey is a foundational practice that should now also be appropriated for postbaptismal catechesis, for the journey leading all the way to Christians' second baptism at death. The "awe-inspiring"<sup>20</sup> rites of our conversion should not end, but begin again, at baptism. It is the role of the churches to cultivate, teach, and practice rites of transition and healing for the postbaptismal progress of every Christian into maturity in Christ.

5. *Christian ritual makers are responsible to cultivate competence in order to create holy rituals that are liberating and life giving.* Like the rites of initiation, all of which are part of the initiation process culminating in baptism, rites after baptism are part of the baptismal process of life in Christ by the Spirit until this life is complete. Again, all churches are familiar with the ritual care that happens (or not) at weddings and funerals and the difficulties posed in offering such care. In addition to weddings and funerals, Roman and Anglican churches are familiar with the seven rites that twelfth-century Scholastic bishop Peter Lombard identified as sacraments, of which four are rites of passage (baptism, confirmation, marriage, ordination), two are healing rites (anointing the sick, confession), and the seventh, of course, is Holy Communion. So natural and familiar are these rites that caring church folk may engage in prayer with laying on of hands without thinking of it as a ritual action or making it a ritual event. Beyond the familiar rites, however, are other rituals and symbolic actions that give life and freedom. For example, when someone places a cross, flowers, and a teddy bear by the side of the road where a fatal accident occurred, the truth of the person's lament is ritualized, contributing to the grief process toward restored inner freedom and life.

Unfortunately, however, sometimes it is easier to recognize competently led, life-giving ritual in contrast with ritual that is not. Rites that go bad are what Grimes calls "ritual infelicity."<sup>21</sup> Rites with unbalanced symbolic rupture (with inadequate strategic contrast), or that are out of context (not situational), or draw attention to themselves (are so self-conscious that effectiveness leaks away), or are death dealing (mediating power that is nonredemptive) because they ignore the focal person or misuse symbol or otherwise fall short of honoring all the participants or bearing the focal person across the stile or the lake—at least all these rites are failed ritual.

Death-dealing rituals, like those of social scapegoating and bullying, or ritual suicides in cults such as Jonestown in Guyana in 1978 or Heaven's Gate in San Diego in 1997, are rituals on the extreme end of the spectrum. However, there are many ways to fail in ritual action that are not all the way over on the death end. Like so many human shortfalls that come from simply not seeing—inner blindness—many ritual shortfalls are inadvertent, even done with good intention. When the results are not good, however, sometimes the ritual maker never finds out.

In an ecclesial example, one pastor decided to change the pattern of invitation for communion one Sunday, hoping to add meaning to the rite, and invited persons to come up as family groups to receive together. As it happened, however, a long-time member of the congregation who had recently been widowed and was in the thick of grief had finally managed to attend worship that Sunday after an extended absence. When it was her turn, the horror hit her: she'd have to walk up all alone, a public demonstration of the loss of her husband. She just couldn't face it; it was too soon. So she stayed in her seat. The thing she needed most—communion, with God and her brothers and sisters in her faith family, when she was facing lack of communion at her dining table—was suddenly made contingent on having a nuclear family with whom to receive. It was months before she came back to worship. The pastor never knew.

The pastor's intent was good: the desire to make a link between the intimacy of family and intimacy with God. However, it was not thought through theologically. Paul's theology of adoption points to a new community, the body of Christ, a family that puts us with people we wouldn't normally choose, the ones "called out" (*ec + clesia*) into ministry, the "beloved community," as Martin Luther King Jr. most famously called it. We are each adopted into this family by baptism. God has thus given us a family, so that we are never bereft, whether single, or far away, or experiencing loss and grief. God is closer to us than our breath, but has also given us a flesh-and-blood family in the church. Pastorally, this woman very much needed to be reminded of and embraced by her new family in Christ at the time when her husband, her primary human source of intimacy, had died. And if she couldn't turn to her church family, where could she go? Without ritual ethics and competence, ritual can fail to be true, and can fail to give life.

But there is another ritual failure that is also a concern: *rituals that are needed but never conducted*. These are the ones that the churches could do,



but don't. While there is risk in developing occasional rituals for persons suffering or in transition, there is also risk in not doing so. This book is filled with principles and stories so as to increase skill and confidence in generating spiritual pastoral liturgies to carry the baptized along their life journeys into the mystery of full humanity and divinity in Christ. Readers will reduce the risk of this last error: "no ritual when needed," or "ritual absence."

The conducting of life-giving worship, and indeed, of any kind of ritual action, requires *ritual competence*<sup>22</sup> to know when and how to ask for, plan, lead, or support rituals that mediate healing, transition, and life. I encourage you to practice ritual resourcefulness, but only with ritual competence. And practice this ritual competence with a ritual ethic, bringing to bear your own maturity and morality and the best practices of ministry,<sup>23</sup> always beginning with prayer and engaging the intention to follow the Spirit in serving truth, freedom, the common good, and the best interest of all the participants toward healing and redemption.

This book, then, argues that *rituals are desperately needed to enable human growing and maturing, both through times of suffering and through times of transition*—not just at the four life-cycle stages biologists have identified,<sup>24</sup> but at numerous other moments as well. *It is the role of the churches, which have a stake in the maturing of every baptized Christian, to learn, teach, and practice the conducting of such rites with life-giving competence.*

What follows are six chapters to enable pastors and others to evoke the mystery of God's care through holy ritual for the sake of healing and transition for members of the body of Christ. "Creative Rites" explains *what* we seek, and "Ritual Midwives" describes *who*. "Metaphors and Symbols," "Ritual Honesty," and "Holy Sacrifice" are *how*. "The Paschal Mystery" is *why* those with ritual fluency and spiritual competence would offer caring liturgies. These principles are offered for rituals on behalf of those persons who specifically live the Christian story, for rituals are attached to a story and an ethic.<sup>25</sup> Readers from other traditions would have to test and develop caring ritual principles for persons who live a different story and ethic.

It is my hope that the six principles, explained and illustrated with stories, will help Christians discern whether and what kind of worshipful ritual action may be of loving spiritual assistance to another. May these principles help pastors shape the processes by which personal ecclesial ritual can be created to give life, enable growth, and strengthen ministry.