



Liturgy—A Practical Science

1. *Why do we worship?*
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1. Why do we worship?

We worship God because God our Creator desires his creatures to worship him. In Exodus 3 the voice from the burning bush commissions Moses to return to Egypt and bring the people of Israel out of Egypt so that they may serve (i.e., worship) God on his holy mountain rather than serve Pharaoh (3:12). In John 4 Jesus tells the Samaritan woman at the well that the true worship of the true God will take place neither on Mt. Gerizim in Samaria nor in Jerusalem but “in spirit and in truth,” “for the Father seeks such as these to worship him” (4:23). In Revelation 4–5 the human creatures join the heavenly creatures in the eternal worship of God and the Lamb. The whole point of redemption is to glorify God. This eschatological goal of the human vocation is expressed in the opening question and answer of the Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647–48):

What is the chief end of man?

Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.

In Exodus 3:12 Israel's collective worship of their God is even the sign that it is Yahweh who sent Moses to deliver the people from slavery in Egypt. This seems like a strange sign since it is fulfilled only after the fact of Israel's deliverance. But we must understand that the reality of the gods in the world depends on having actual worshippers. Zeus is not a reality in our world today because Zeus has no worshippers. So, too, the God of Israel required worshippers to proclaim his reality in the world by glorifying him.

“Glory” (*kabod, doxa*) is a heavily charged word in the Bible. It has to do with God’s character and reputation. It is the sign of God’s actual presence in the world. God’s glory descended into the tabernacle when God was present and so filled the tent that even Moses could not enter it (Exod. 40:34-35). Moses’ own countenance was transfigured when he was in the presence of God and he had to put a veil over his face (Exod. 34:29-35). In the incarnation the eternal Word of God took on human flesh in Jesus and “we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). The apostle Paul held that believers are changed into God’s likeness from one degree of glory to another as they enjoy God’s presence and reflect his glory (2 Cor. 3:18). Three times in Ephesians 1:3-14 we are told that we are chosen and destined to “live to the praise of God’s glory” (vv. 6, 12, 14).

Up until the Age of Enlightenment in the eighteenth century in the West, it was commonly held that worship is rendered *solī Deo gloria*—“to the glory of God alone.” Since the Age of Enlightenment, it has been thought that the value of worship lies in the impact it has on worshipers. The concern is to effect the human response rather than to glorify God. But before worship can have an impact on worshipers, it must serve God. The English word *worship* literally means “worth-ship”: giving worth to something. In its older sense in English of worthiness or respect (Anglo-Saxon, *worthscripe*), worship may on occasion refer to an attitude toward someone of immensely elevated social status, such as a lord or a monarch, or, more loosely, toward an individual, such as a hero or one’s lover. Magistrates in England are still addressed “your worship.” In the old *Book of Common Prayer*, at the exchange of rings in the marriage service the groom said to his bride, “with my body I thee worship.” In this sense worship means “respect” or “serve.”

The Greek New Testament word for worship is *latreia*, “to serve.” Paul uses this word in Romans 9:4 to refer to the sacrificial rites instituted by God in the old covenant. Likewise, in Hebrews 9:1, 6, the term is applied to the official service of the priest in the temple.

But in Romans 12:1 *latreia* is expressed in the “living sacrifice” of their bodies with which Christians serve God. Thus Paul views the entire activity of Christians as service to God. In the vision of Revelation 7:15 and 22:3 the worship of God consists entirely of adoration (*proskynein*), in which the creatures fall down on their faces before God and the Lamb.

Worship cannot be done in the abstract; actual forms are needed to express our praise and adoration of God and by which we offer our prayer and thanksgiving. We can and must have a theology of worship so that we understand what, in faith, we are doing; but there must also be a practicable way of worshiping. In other words, the theory must have a corresponding praxis. Praxis is defined as a practical application of theory. Especially as applied to something that is done regularly, like worship, praxis is a habitual or established practice; it becomes a custom expressed by means of rites and ceremonies. The practice of worship in its communal and public mode, distinguished from purely personal and private expressions of worship, is called “liturgy.”

2. What is liturgy?

Liturgy is the vehicle by which the public worship of God is performed. It may refer to an elaborate formal ritual such as the Eastern Orthodox Divine Liturgy and Roman Catholic Mass or a Protestant service, but it is not a term limited to Christian use. It can also refer to the daily Muslim *salat* (prayers) and the Jewish *seder* (order). As a religious phenomenon, liturgy is a communal ritual response to the sacred through activity reflecting praise, thanksgiving, supplication, or repentance.

Rituals may be associated with life events such as birth, coming of age, vocation, marriage, sickness, and death. These rituals are not just human interactions; they often have a sacred character and reference. The rituals serve as the means of establishing a relationship with a divine agency, as well as with other participants in the liturgy. Repetitive formal rites, in some ways similar to liturgies, are natural and common in all human activities such as organized sports and civic celebrations.

The word *liturgy* is not strictly religious in origin. It comes from the classical Greek word *leitourgia*, meaning “public work.” In the Greek city-states, it had the sense of some public good that a wealthy citizen arranged at his own expense, either voluntarily or by law. A citizen might voluntarily build a road or erect a temple to a deity as his liturgy. At Athens, the citizen assembly (*ekklesia*) assigned liturgies to the wealthy, and there was a law by which any man who had been assigned a liturgy while a richer man had none could challenge him either to undertake the liturgy or to exchange property. Paul used the term *liturgy* in this way in 2 Corinthians 9:12 to designate his voluntary effort at gathering an offering from his congregations in Macedonia and Greece for the poor in Jerusalem. This was his public-works project. Since liturgy is a service rendered, the English word *service* can be an equivalent of “liturgy.”

In the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint), the word *leitourgia* was used to translate the service rendered by the priests in the temple. This use is seen also in the New Testament in terms of the priestly service rendered by Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist (Luke 1:23), and also the high priestly ministry of Jesus the Christ in the heavenly sanctuary (Heb. 8:6). In Acts 13:2 it applies specifically to the worship of the church.

Liturgy can thus refer to a public and well-defined ritual. It is often translated as “ministry” or “worship” in English-language Bibles. But there is a difference between “liturgy” and “worship” in that worship suggests the honor and praise accorded God communally or individually, in the public assembly or in worldly activity, whereas liturgy suggests something that is done communally and publicly, or is at least communal and public in derivation even if it is a ministration extended to those absent from the assembly.

Another reason for preferring the term *liturgy* to *worship* as a comprehensive name for this public and communal event is that it is also “divine liturgy” or “divine service.” That is, God works through these rites of word and sacrament, praise and prayer to make them means of grace. Liturgy is not only the assembly’s public work or service to

God (worship proper); it is also God's public work or service to the assembly. This will be discussed in question 5.

I should note that throughout this book I prefer the term *assembly* (*ekklesia* = called-out gathering) to "congregation" or "parish," because it more comprehensively describes the group gathered to do liturgy. "Congregation" is often understood to mean a corporate entity with membership. "Parish" is often understood to mean the people of a particular geographic location. We note that *ekklesia* is not any assembly or gathering, but a "called-out" one—an assembly called out of the world. In a sense the citizen assemblies of ancient Greece were "called out" of the ordinary business of the city (as all legislatures are) in order to do the work of the city in a way divested of personal interest. The legislatures are supposed to look after the interests of the whole city. So, too, Christians, coming together as a liturgical assembly, are to "leave all earthly care behind" and do the work of the city to which they are called, the city of God, the heavenly Jerusalem. When "earthly cares" are brought into assembly (as in preaching and prayer), it is in order to gain a different perspective on them than one has in the ordinary affairs of worldly life.

We should note that in Christianity a distinction is sometimes made between "liturgical" and "nonliturgical" churches based on the elaborateness and/or antiquity of their public worship. But to the extent that a group follows a ritual, a pattern of activities or behavior, that group has a liturgy. Thus even the open or waiting worship of Quakers is liturgical, since the waiting itself until the Spirit moves individuals to speak is a prescribed form of Quaker worship, sometimes referred to as "the liturgy of silence." Typically in Christianity, however, the term *the liturgy* refers to a standardized order of a religious service, be it a service of word and sacrament or a service of public prayer. The term *free church* historically meant free of the prayer book, specifically the Anglican Prayer Book, not a free-for-all. Even Pentecostal worship has certain elements that will always be found in its practice, although Pentecostalism is the least slavish tradition when it comes to following an order.

In recent liturgical renewal, what is included in "the liturgy" is more comprehensive than just the script in the worship book. It includes the activities of gathering for worship (e.g., receiving worship materials in the narthex, pre-service music), the interactions that may not be prescribed in the worship book (e.g., announcements, special music), and the activities of exiting (e.g., ministers and worshipers greeting one another, post-service music). In other words, everything that the assembly does when it comes together to do its public work before God and the world is its liturgy. Since liturgy is done in the context of "coming together," the Greek word *synaxis* (the same root as in "synagogue") has been used to name the ritual being performed.

3. What does it mean to do liturgy "decently and in order"?

Many liturgical reformers want to go back to the worship of the early church, even the New Testament church. This is not to be recommended. On the basis of what we read in the New Testament, worship in early Christian communities was not always

being done “decently and in order” (1 Cor. 14:40). The earliest written description of Christian worship, Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians, bespeaks an assembly whose public work lacked theological integrity and was spiritually chaotic. Their communion practices fractured instead of unifying the community (1 Corinthians 11) and their use of spiritual gifts failed to edify (1 Corinthians 14). The congregation wasn’t presenting itself very well to the rest of the city either. Remember that a congregation of perhaps several dozen people gathered in someone’s home in a crowded urban neighborhood was sure to attract the attention of the neighbors. What kind of a witness was this worshipping community making? Their gathering for the Lord’s Supper had to be socially revolutionary, including slaves and masters, patrons and clients, at the same table eating and drinking the same fare, as befits their common baptism into the one body of Christ. Waiting for one another was a practical application of “celebrating the Lord’s death,” who put down his own prerogatives for us (Phil. 2:5ff.). Their speaking had to be intelligible: prophesying was preferred to speaking in tongues because it was a proclamation of a word of God intended for all rather than just the edification of the individual.

To do liturgy decently in the light of the concerns Paul expressed in 1 Corinthians means that liturgy must be theologically grounded and communally sensitive. Our public work before God and the world expresses meaning. Done in the name of God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), liturgy says something about the God who is the object of our worship. What are we communicating about God in the way we do our liturgy? Paul was saying that the Corinthians were not proclaiming Christ crucified in their meal practice and in their exercise of spiritual gifts. The tradition of the eucharistic institution text (1 Cor. 11:23–26) and the great hymn to love (1 Corinthians 13) were brought to bear as critical correctives of Corinthian practice. Note that the institution narrative certainly predated Paul’s apostolic mission and the love hymn may also have predated Paul. In other words, the great tradition was brought to bear on local practice to correct abuses.

Paul did not tell the Corinthians to no longer gather for the Lord’s Supper or to cease practicing the gifts (*charismata*) because these practices had been abused. Nor, in the sixteenth century, did Martin Luther throw out the Mass and start over with a new order of service. There was already theological integrity in the practices; the abuses simply had to give way to proper use. Liturgical practices, rightly used, communicate something right about God (orthodoxy comes from *orthodoxia*, “right praise”). Christ gives his body and blood, broken and shed for us for forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. The Spirit gives gifts that build up the community. These correct beliefs are also communicated in the historic liturgy and all its local uses. The continuing proper use of this liturgy builds up a community of faith in Jesus Christ crucified and risen again. This is what is at stake in doing liturgy decently: doing liturgy with theological integrity and with concern for building up the faith of the assembly.

To return to the situation in ancient Corinth addressed by Paul, there was also to be order in the assembly. In the cultural context of ancient Greek and Roman religious practice, women could prophesy in the assembly (see 1 Corinthians 9—women were oracles in ancient Greece and Rome), but they shouldn’t disrupt the service with their questions

(1 Corinthians 14). The masters and patrons (the leisure class) had to wait for the slaves and clients (the working class) to get off work before beginning the meal; otherwise they would be eating their own supper, not the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:17-22). If speaking in tongues ("glossolalia") was practiced, there should be interpretation so that others would be edified. Glossolalia should be restricted to two or three at most and only two or three prophets should speak—one at a time (1 Cor. 14:27). These admonitions from the apostle give some indication of how disorderly the assembly could be in Corinth.

Doing liturgy "in order" means at least two things; each point is equally important. First, "in order" means that *there is an order to be followed, a progression of activities that gives shape to the liturgy*. The Reformed tradition was correct to see elements of order in the New Testament. These are not laid out in such detail that we can get an order of service from the New Testament. But, for example, Acts 2 indicates that apologetic and evangelistic preaching leads to repentance and baptism; baptism brings the newly baptized into an assembly gathered for the apostles' teaching, the breaking of bread (Eucharist), fellowship, and the prayers; this assembly maintained a common chest to take care of the needs of its members. It is said that this description of the early church and its order in the book of Acts is an idealistic picture. For our purposes that is even better than an actual picture (if there was really a difference). It means that there is something normative about it for the subsequent life of the church. The church has an *ordo* (order) that it follows. The normative *ordo* seen in Acts 2 and as it developed in the next few centuries is:

- evangelical outreach (this developed later on into informational talks, such as Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine*)
- acts of repentance (this developed later into the catechumenate)
- baptism (washing with water and the gift of the Holy Spirit)
- apostolic teaching (regular Scripture reading and preaching in the assembly)
- the breaking of bread (celebration of the Eucharist)
- fellowship (this was expressed later in the love feast)
- the prayers (this developed later into common prayer offices)
- sharing in common (offerings for the poor, diaconal ministry to those in need)

When we read on in Acts, we see in chapter 6 that there was a charge of unequal distribution of goods and services to the Jewish and Hellenistic widows in the community. The apostles could not be distracted from preaching and prayer to look after the administration of social services. So they directed the community to elect seven men of good repute to take care of this ministry. (In a case of affirmative action men with Greek names were chosen who might look after the needs of the Hellenistic widows, who felt that they were being discriminated against.) Whether these seven men were deacons in the sense of the developed office, they were certainly exercising a diaconal ministry as they assisted the apostles in the apostolic oversight of the church. By the time of the *Didache*, a church manual written at the end of the first century, and the letters of Ignatius of Antioch early in the second century, the apostles and prophets no longer existed in

the church, but bishops (overseers) and deacons (servants) were elected by the local community, to which Ignatius adds presbyters (elders) who provide counsel to the bishop.

So the other thing that “in order” means is that *ministers are chosen by the local assembly to exercise leadership roles*. To make a long and complicated story simplistically short, there emerged in the church orders of ministers who had liturgical functions. *Bishops* were the chief pastors of the local church who had primary responsibility for preaching, teaching, and administration of the sacraments and presided at the liturgy as they were able. *Presbyters* (later called priests, but this is misleading because *presbyteros* and *hiereus* are not the same) took charge of portions of the bishop’s flock not able to gather around the bishop because they were geographically distant (the parishes). *Deacons* assisted in the bishop’s liturgy by reading the Gospel, leading the intercessions, administering the cup in Holy Communion, and taking the sacrament to the absent. In the description of Sunday worship in Justin Martyr’s *Apology* 67, there were also readers and the people (*laos*) constituted a baptized priesthood who always assented to the prayers with their “Amens.” In the travel diary she kept on her pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the late fourth century, the Spanish nun Egeria noted that the deacons sang litanies and that the people responded “Kyrie eleison”—“Lord, have mercy.”

Other ancient descriptions of liturgy indicate the development of cantors to lead the singing of psalms and hymns of praise sung by the people. The people also offered their gifts in procession for the needs of the community and its liturgy (e.g., bread and wine for the Eucharist, candles, olive oil). By the fourth century choirs were developed to sing psalms and hymns during processions, and acolytes were appointed to perform a variety of tasks. It is not a matter of good liturgical order for one minister to do everything. Liturgy done “in order” requires a variety of roles; this is what gives it a communal character. Liturgy done “in order” also requires that each role is respected. Pastors do not usurp the roles of other ministers; nor do other ministers usurp the pastor’s role to preside. A division of roles in the assembly would be as follows:

- processions—acolytes carrying cross, tapers, banners, incense
- psalms, hymns, spiritual songs—the people led by cantors and choirs
- collects—the presiding minister
- readings—readers
- Gospel—a deacon or the preacher
- sermon—a bishop or presbyter (pastor)
- intercessions—deacon or assisting minister
- offering—gathered from the people by ushers
- Great Thanksgiving—presiding minister (bishop or pastor)
- Holy Communion—presiding minister assisted by deacon, assisting minister, and additional communion ministers as needed
- post-communion prayer—traditionally offered by the presiding minister; may be offered by a deacon, an assisting minister, or by the congregation
- blessing—the presiding minister; a bishop if present

4. How do we discern meaning in liturgy?

Liturgy is a symbolic activity. The word *symbol* comes from the Greek *symballein*, “to throw together.” In symbols, meanings are thrown together, and often accumulate. Religions are complex symbol systems, and Christianity is no exception. Symbols are complex because, unlike signs, symbols seldom mean only one thing; meanings accrue from sacred texts and historical experience. When people are confronted with symbols or symbolic activities, they usually don’t get every meaning at once. In fact, it is questionable whether symbolic meanings can be exhausted, especially because meanings are interrelated in a symbolic system. The term *symbolic system* is preferred to the word *symbolism* in the fields of anthropology, sociology, and psychology when referring to a system of interconnected symbolic meanings. The term *symbolism* denotes the symbolic meaning of a single cultural phenomenon, as in the symbolism of the Advent wreath. Liturgy is a whole symbolic system.

Meanings of symbols and symbolic systems are best derived from the text, object, or activity itself rather than being imposed on them from something else. For all its richness, this is the danger of allegory. Allegory can assign meanings to an action, object, or text from outside the action, object, or text in a way that fails to take account of its historical context or literal meaning. On the other hand, allegorical interpretation is a time-honored approach to meaning and there is a kind of allegory that derives meaning from within the symbolic system. In this case the meaning assigned to certain actions, objects, and texts is not just a free-floating association of ideas. This can be seen in the allegorical interpretation of the church fathers of antiquity, especially those associated with the Alexandrian and Antiochean schools, which they applied to the Bible and also to the liturgy.

These fathers did not ignore the historical meaning of the Scriptures, but they believed that the Bible is not just historical; it also conveys a spiritual meaning. Classical exegesis of biblical texts divided meaning into four classifications:

- the literal-historical meaning—what the text says and what actual events it reports
- the allegorical meaning—how it refers to the mystery of Christ and the church
- the tropological or moral meaning—how the text is related to personal life
- the anagogical or eschatological meaning—how the text relates us to the kingdom of God yet to come

In other words, when the literal text or historical event is contemplated in faith, it relates us to Christ, it has application for the practical life of faith, and it is a sign that points us to the life of the world to come.

One of the best theological interpreters of the liturgy was Theodore of Mopsuestia (350–428). Since the allegorical interpretation of the Bible meant finding Christ in all of the Scriptures (both Old and New Testaments), he also looked for Christ in the liturgy. The aspect of Christ that Theodore thought most related to liturgy is his role

as high priest. Christ exercises that role in the heavenly sanctuary, as the letter to the Hebrews proclaims. But he performs his priestly mediation on behalf of his brothers and sisters before the Father's throne because he accomplished our salvation as a human being in human family, as Hebrews also proclaims. So just as the liturgy images Christ's priestly offering and intercession in heaven, so it images Christ's redemptive activity on earth. In proclaiming Christ in the liturgy, Theodore synchronized the individual acts of the liturgy with the stages of Christ's life. Thus, in his mystagogical homilies (homilies on the mysteries or sacraments), Theodore suggested that the offertory procession images Christ being led to his passion; the spreading of the linen on the altar images the liturgical work of Joseph of Arimathea in preparing the body of Jesus for burial; the epiclesis, at which the celebrant steps back from the table and bows, images the resurrection of Christ. As Hans-Joachim Schulz points out, these theological interpretations of Theodore became standard explanations of the liturgy in the Byzantine tradition.¹

A similar kind of allegorical interpretation developed in the expositions of the Mass in the medieval West, of which one of the earliest is from Amalarius of Metz (born at Metz, in the last quarter of the eighth century; d. c. 850). It is noteworthy that Amalarius, bishop of Trier, once served as an envoy to Constantinople. In the medieval Western commentaries the whole Mass was seen as a dramatic imaging of the passion of Christ, even to the point of embroidering large crosses on the chasubles worn by the celebrants who served *in personal Christi* (in the role of Christ). In fact, there was a great deal of interest in allegorical meanings of the various vestments the priest wore. Allegorical interpretation not only explained the meaning of what was going on in the liturgy, it also contributed to liturgical practice.

A tighter form of spiritual interpretation is typology. In the Bible itself types of God's actions in creation and redemption are replicated in later actions. Thus, Deutero-Isaiah proclaims the return of the exiles from Babylon as a type of the exodus. Jesus is presented in the Gospels variously as a new type of Moses or David or Elijah. Not surprisingly, the church fathers saw baptism as a type of salvation through water, as seen in the creation of the world from the formless water, the rescue of Noah and his family in the flood, the exodus of Israel through the Red Sea, the crossing over into the promised land under Joshua, and identification with the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan by John the Baptist.² As Robert Taft points out, the Antiochene fathers were more prone to employ a typological interpretation of the liturgy than the Alexandrians, since they employed it in their interpretation of Scripture. What was prefigured in the Old Testament has been fulfilled in Christ and has passed over into the sacraments in expectation of its personal and eschatological application.³ Typology figures strongly in the development of lectionary readings (especially in relating Old Testament readings to the Gospel readings), but also in prayers of blessing such as those over the paschal candle at the Easter Vigil and over the water of the font at Holy Baptism.

After two centuries of rigorous historical-critical reading of the Bible and a century of historical-critical explanations of the liturgy, we do not retrieve spiritual exegesis very easily. Allegorical explanations have especially been harshly criticized and largely

put aside by liturgical scholars. But what we see in the theological interpretation of the liturgy in the church fathers is an attempt to relate what is happening in the liturgy to the knowledge of God in Christ that has been revealed to us in the Scriptures. We may be uncertain about the application of the allegorical and typological methods today, but as we look at what actually happens in liturgy we need to ask what meanings are suggested on the basis of our knowledge and experience of the Christ event. Liturgy is not done decently if its theological dimension is ignored. I do not mean that liturgy should be controlled by a dogmatic system, but that the liturgy itself suggests meanings. Look at the following bits of liturgical data and consider the meanings these data suggest.

- The “fixed day” of Christian worship is Sunday, the first day of the week, to honor the resurrection of Christ. Church fathers even called Sunday “the eighth day,” suggesting its eschatological character as the day beyond the weekly sabbath.⁴
- The principal Sunday liturgy has been the liturgy of word and meal, or the Eucharist. This suggests that there is a relationship between the Lord’s Day and the Lord’s Supper.
- Texts of the liturgy, such as the canticles or songs of praise, indicate that God the Holy Trinity is the object of worship.
- The terminations of prayers indicate that Christ is the mediator of prayer, since we pray “through Jesus Christ our Lord.”
- Christ “the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” is also the subject of Christian worship. The high point of the liturgy of the word is the reading of the Gospel in which we hear of the words and deeds of Christ himself. The high point of the liturgy of the meal is receiving Holy Communion in the body and blood of Christ.
- There are two distinct parts of the principal liturgy: one that focuses on the word and the other that focuses on the meal. Traditionally, everyone is welcome to hear the reading of Scripture and preaching, and it has been called the liturgy of the catechumens. But only the baptized (and sometimes only a portion of the baptized) are welcome to receive the sacramental signs of the Eucharist. The liturgy of the sacrament has been called the liturgy of the faithful. The implication is that something is received in Holy Baptism that is needed in order to receive Holy Communion, that the gift of communion is a strengthening of the baptismal life.
- There is a diversity of roles in the liturgical assembly, so that one person isn’t doing everything. The church as the body of Christ is a community with a diversity of gifts of the Holy Spirit. The church is created by the Spirit in the image of the Holy Trinity who is a community of persons.
- There are other gatherings during the week, especially for prayer, that sanctify the times of the world in which we live. But the Sunday gathering for word and sacrament remains the principal one, which reflects the priority of the paschal mystery for Christian liturgy: “Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.”

Deriving meaning from this kind of data is what liturgical theology purports to do. It does not ask, What is the meaning of liturgy or of worship? It asks, rather, What meanings are conveyed in the texts and actions, and even the *ordo*, of the liturgy?⁵

There has been much discussion in liturgical theology about the relationship between what the church fathers called the *lex orandi* (the law of prayer) and the *lex credendi* (the law of belief). Prosper of Aquitaine, a disciple of Augustine, wrote in the heat of the Semi-Pelagian controversy, “let the law of prayer [*lex supplicandi*] establish [*statuat*] the law of belief [*lex credendi*]” (he was appealing to prayers that show we are totally dependent on God’s grace). The discussion of the relationship between worship and belief has sometimes devolved into a debate between the priority of liturgy on theology or of theology on liturgy in terms of which has influenced which. This is an important discussion, but I decline to engage in it in this book because it belongs more to theory than to practice. It is enough to take seriously the axiom that “praying shapes believing,” that those who pray routinely in a certain way will be formed in faith.⁶ Precisely because liturgy is a symbolic activity people apprehend meanings in it. Aidan Kavanagh suggests that because people experience God in liturgical acts it is an act of primary theology which provides grist for the secondary theology that reflects on this experience of encounter.⁷ Precisely because it is an experience of encounter with God in Christ through the Holy Spirit, it has theological meanings—meanings about God. Liturgy is not only the people’s work; God is at work in, with, and through the liturgy.

5. How is the people’s work the work of God?

Liturgy is essentially a service that is rendered for the public good. We saw that both individuals and groups may undertake a service project for the good of their community. Using this basic definition, liturgy is also a service that God undertakes for the good of his creation, especially his human creatures.

In the Old Testament God gave to his people both the word for their instruction (*torah*) and the sacrificial cult by means of which the people would have access to God. “Torah” can mean specifically the Ten Commandments or the whole five books of Moses that lead up to and explicate this set of divine instructions. The divine instruction also includes the sacrificial cult. The animal offerings were required because “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Heb. 9:22). When Adam and Eve sinned against God and each other, animals were killed by God to provide clothing for them (Gen. 3:21). Cain and Abel brought sacrifices to the Lord. Cain’s was unacceptable because he brought fruit, while Abel’s was acceptable because it was the “firstborn of his flock” (Gen. 4:4-5). After the flood receded, Noah sacrificed animals to God (Gen. 8:20-21). God commanded the nation of Israel to perform numerous sacrifices according to certain procedures God had prescribed. First, the animal had to be spotless. Second, the person offering the sacrifice had to identify with the animal. Third, the person offering the animal had to inflict death upon it. When done in faith, this sacrifice

provided forgiveness of sins. Another sacrifice called for on the Day of Atonement, described in Leviticus 16, demonstrates forgiveness and the removal of sin. The high priest was to take two male goats for a sin offering. One of the goats was sacrificed as a sin offering for the people of Israel (Lev. 16:15), while the other goat was released into the wilderness (Lev. 16:20-22). The sin offering provided forgiveness, while the other goat provided the removal of sin. It undoubtedly seems strange to us that animals were the sacrificial victims, because they did no wrong. But that is the point. Since the animals were sinless, they died in place of the sinner performing the sacrifice. Thus animal sacrifices were commanded by God so that the individual and the nation could receive the gift of forgiveness of sin and so that individuals and the nation could offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving for the gifts God gave.

John the Baptist recognized this when he saw Jesus coming to be baptized and said, "Look, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). The apostolic proclamation (*kerygma*) is that Jesus Christ who rendered perfect obedience to the Father, and therefore was without sin, willingly gave himself to die for the sins of humankind (1 Tim. 2:6). As 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, "For our sake God made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." We are justified by faith (trust) in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, by which we are reconciled with God and receive the gift of forgiveness. The sacrifice of Christ fulfills and thus replaces the sacrificial cult of Israel. But it is impossible to understand the theology of the sacrifice of Christ without reference to the Old Testament cult.⁸

As in the Old Testament, so under the New Testament there must be means, a ministry, by which reconciliation with God is accomplished and forgiveness of sins experienced. As in the Old Testament there is a divine instruction, so in the New Testament there is the gospel (*evangelion*) or good news, which is the proclamation of this reconciliation and forgiveness on account of the sacrifice of Christ. As in the Old Testament the *torah* was expanded into Scripture, so the *evangelion* is heard in Scripture. As in emerging Judaism the Scripture was read and commented on in the synagogue, so in the church the Scripture is read and preached. As in the synagogue the Torah reading received pride of place, so in the Christian assembly the Gospel reading receives pride of place. As in the synagogue other readings of Scripture (*Haftorah*) supported the Torah reading, so in the Christian assembly other readings (Old Testament, New Testament epistles) support the Gospel reading. As in the synagogue preaching was an explication and application of the readings (as we see in Jesus' response to the reading of Isaiah in his hometown synagogue in Luke 4), so in the Christian assembly preaching grows out of the words of Scripture that have been gratefully heard and received by the faithful as the word of God.

This gospel word of forgiveness and reconciliation is also applied in words of absolution and blessing. The word of forgiveness pronounced to the individual or the assembly by the minister who stands in the role of Christ (*in persona Christi*) is the word of God himself to sinners who have sincerely repented and confessed their sins. Benedictions or blessings are also words of God proclaiming his favor on his people. The Scriptures

show that the Lord alone is to be blessed since God alone is the source of every blessing (Luke 1:68; Rom. 1:25; 9:5; 2 Cor. 11:31; Eph. 1:3; 1 Pet. 1:3). All blessings come from God; they are conveyed by God's words that create, protect, and foster life. The word of God is effective and conveys the gift that it proclaims. The paradigmatic benediction is the one proclaimed by Aaron the priest in Numbers 6:24-26): "The Lord bless you and keep you..." This was the blessing God authorized the priests to place on the people who assembled in his presence (Num. 5:23). Martin Luther may have been the first exegete to emphasize this. In his commentary on Genesis he compares the speaking of blessings to the declaration of an absolution and describes blessing as "God's works through our ministry."⁹

There are not only spoken words of God in the liturgy; there are also the "visible words" of the sacraments. *Sacramentum* in Roman usage referred to sacred signs, such as the standards carried by the legions. Augustine of Hippo defined sacrament as a visible sign of an invisible grace. The term *sacrament* came to be applied to what the Greek church called the saving "mysteries" of Christ: Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. The term *grace* comes from the Greek *charis*, which means "gift." These sacramental rites instituted by Christ (Matt. 28:18-20—go and baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; 1 Cor. 11:23-26—do this meal for the remembrance of me) are accomplished by earthly signs (water, and also oil; bread, and also wine). By doing the rites we receive the gifts they convey—forgiveness of sins, new life, and eternal salvation. The phenomenon of "gift" is crucial to understanding the character of the sacraments. It is the central reality that unites sacramental activity both to God's triune life and to the corporate identity of the assembly as the people of God and body of Christ.¹⁰

While human beings perform the rites, the sacraments are actually God's acts administered by those ministers who are have been aside by the Holy Spirit to serve *in persona Christi* and whom the church recognizes through ordination and call as holding the office of the ministry of the word and the sacraments. God intends his people to receive his gracious gifts and ministers are appointed to ensure that God's gifts are received.

It is because God acts in his word and in the sacraments of Christ to reconcile humanity with himself that the chief liturgy of the church is also called the Divine Liturgy.

For further reading

- Brunner, Peter. *Worship in the Name of Jesus*, trans. M. H. Bertram. St. Louis: Concordia, 1968. Brunner explains the difference between the sacramental and sacrificial elements of worship as God's service to the congregation and the congregation's service before God.
- Fagerberg, David W. *What Is Liturgical Theology? A Study in Methodology*. Collegeville: Liturgical, 1992. Fagerberg distinguishes between a theology of worship, a theology from worship, and liturgical theology. He analyzes the liturgical theological methods of Germanus of Constantinople and the Russian Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann.

- Irwin, Kevin W. *Context and Text: Method in Liturgical Theology*. Collegeville: Liturgical, 1994. Irwin argues that liturgy is a full ritual activity that has to be observed from the perspective of the participants and described on the basis of their perceptions of that event. But the texts have also shaped the context of the participants.
- Kavanagh, Aidan. *On Liturgical Theology*. New York: Pueblo, 1984. Kavanagh argues that “primary theology” is the encounter between God and the community of faith in prayer and rite and “secondary theology” is reflection on this encounter, including academic liturgical theology.
- Lathrop, Gordon W. *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993. Lathrop expands the concept of *ordo*, developed by Alexander Schmemmann (see below), to include the large categories of rite, time, and space, and probes the meanings implied in the juxtapositions of, say, teaching (catechesis) and bath, word and meal, Sunday and other days, Eucharist and daily prayer, and so forth.
- Power, David N. *Unsearchable Riches: The Symbolic Nature of Liturgy*. New York: Pueblo, 1984. Power explores the meaning of symbol and ritual and argues that ritual and symbolic language is the core language of religious reality and faith.
- Schmemmann, Alexander. *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*. New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1986. Schmemmann was the first to propose that the *ordo* should be the source of theological reflection. But the *ordo* is more than rubrics (rules and regulations) and has to be interpreted on the basis of its underlying principles.
- Wainwright, Geoffrey. *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine, and Life; A Systematic Theology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1980. Wainwright has a thorough discussion of the relationship between the *lex orandi* and the *lex credendi*. But see the refinement of this relationship in Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 73ff. (see above).