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Editor's Foreword

Preparing beginning preachers to stand before the body of Christ and proclaim the word of God faithfully, authentically, and effectively Sunday after Sunday is and always has been a daunting responsibility. As North American pastors face pews filled with citizens of a postmodern, post-Christendom culture, this teaching task becomes even more complex. The theological, exegetical, and homiletical skills that preachers need for the future are as much in flux today as they have ever been in Western Christianity. Thus providing seminary students with a solid but flexible homiletical foundation at the start of their careers is a necessity.

Traditionally, professors of preaching choose a primary introductory textbook that presents a theology of proclamation and a process of sermon development and delivery from a single point of view. To maintain such a singular point of view is the sign of good writing, but it does at times cause problems for learning in pluralistic settings. One approach to preaching does not fit all. Yet a course simply surveying all of the homiletical possibilities available will not provide a foundation on which to build either.

Furthermore, while there are numerous introductory preaching textbooks from which to choose, most are written from the perspective of Euro-American males. Classes supplement this view with smaller homiletical texts written by women and persons of color. But a pedagogical hierarchy is nevertheless set up: the white male voice provides the main course and women and persons of color provide the side dishes.

Elements of Preaching is a series designed to help professors and students of preaching—including established preachers who want to develop their skills in specific areas—construct a sound homiletical foundation in a conversational manner. This conversation is meant to occur at two levels. First, the series as a whole deals with basic components found in most introductory preaching classes: theology of proclamation, homiletical contexts, biblical interpretation, sermonic claim, language and imagery, rhetorical form, delivery, and worship. But each element is presented by a different scholar, all of whom represent diversity in terms of gender, theological traditions (Baptist, Disciple of Christ, Lutheran, Presbyterian,

and United Methodist), and ethnicity (African American, Asian American, and Euro-American). Instead of bringing in different voices at the margin of the preaching class, *Elements of Preaching* creates a conversation around the central topics of an introductory course without foregoing essential instruction concerning sermon construction and embodiment. Indeed, this level of conversation is extended beyond the printed volumes through the Web site www.ElementsofPreaching.com.

Second, the individual volumes are written in an open-ended manner. The individual author's particular views are offered but in a way that invites, indeed demands, the readers to move beyond them in developing their own approaches to the preaching task. The volumes offer theoretical and practical insights, but at the last page it is clear that more must be said. Professors and students have a solid place to begin, but there is flexibility within the class (and after the class in ministry) to move beyond these volumes by building on the insights and advice they offer.

In this volume, Melinda A. Quivik introduces readers to the ways in which the sermon does (or should) relate to the whole of the worship service. Too often, seminary courses in liturgy and in preaching give students the impression that preparation for preaching and planning the liturgy and music are separate tasks. Quivik effectively shows how proclamation and table, prayers and congregational song can (and should) all serve the word of God as offered in the Scripture readings for the day. This service to the word is unpacked in two primary ways. First, she reminds readers that while the Protestant Church often worships in a pattern in which everything revolves around the sermon, the ancient pattern of the dual foci of word and table better evokes the mystery of God's good news. Second, she shows how each of the four broad movements of most Christian worship practices (Gathering, Word, Table, Sending or Gathering, Word, Response, Sending) serve the word broadly and relate to the sermon specifically. Readers of *Serving the Word* will no longer be able to go about the Monday through Saturday work of preparing for worship thinking about preaching *and* worship but will always, in a more healthy and effective manner, think about preaching *in* worship.

O. Wesley Allen Jr.

Introduction

The title of this book, *Serving the Word*, carries a helpful double meaning. To serve the word is both *to receive* and *to offer* it. On the one hand, receiving takes place when people gather to hear God's word proclaimed through reading the Bible and preaching. The Risen Christ speaks to us as the face of God, present in our midst through the word. In all its forms, the word of God is proclaimed in the liturgy. That proclamation is, certainly, reading and preaching, but it is also the people's proclamation in song and prayer.

Offering the word, on the other hand, is first what God has done: given to us in the imagery, narratives, poetry, pleading, hymns, stories, characters, landscapes, dreams, visions, and more that inhabit the Holy Scriptures. But serving the word is also what the church does by making sure that the word is in our midst week after week. In our coming together, listening, proclaiming, eating, and being sent out again, the word of God is served by the body of Christ. God's word serves God's people and God's people serve the word.

Liturgical theologian Gordon Lathrop addresses the pervasive nature of the scriptural word as it finds expression throughout the liturgy:

The Bible marks and largely determines Christian corporate worship. It is fair to say that the liturgies of the diverse churches all have a biblical character. . . . [A]t the heart of the meeting the Bible is read and then interpreted as having to do with us. . . . Furthermore, the text of the Bible provides the source of the imagery and, often, the very form and quality of the language in prayers, chants, hymn texts, and sermons. Psalms are sung as if that ancient collection were intended for our singing. Snatches of old biblical letters are scattered throughout the service, as if we were addressed. Frequently images and texts drawn from the Bible adorn the room where the meeting takes place. To people who know the biblical stories, the very actions of the gathering may seem like the Bible alive: an assembly gathers, as the people gathered at the foot of Mount Sinai, the holy convocation of the Lord; arms are upraised in prayer or blessing, as Moses raised his arms; the holy books are read, as Ezra read to the listening people; the people hold a meal, as the disciples

did, gathered after the death of Jesus. To come into the meeting seems like coming into a world determined by the language of the Bible.¹

The word of God founds, guides, and animates all of worship. *Proclamation of the word in the sermon serves the whole of the worship just as the worship serves the preaching.* This is the subject of this book.

In order to see how this serving occurs, we will look at some recent work by liturgical scholars. Especially since the mid-twentieth century, scholars have written about an ecumenical worship pattern evident through the two millennia since Jesus' time and across denominations. The pattern is plain in Luke's story of Jesus' postresurrection appearance on the road to Emmaus and at the table (Luke 24:13-35). It contains a complete image of the ecumenical pattern: gathering as two become three on the road, Jesus opening the scriptures to the disciples, Jesus breaking the bread through which his identity gives new vision, and the disciples leaving to find the others. We will explore these parts in detail in coming chapters. In the Emmaus pattern of Gathering, Word, Meal (or Response), and Sending, the relationship between preaching and worship as separate aspects of liturgical experience breaks down. Preaching and the breaking of bread are intimately connected. The word of God explained by the stranger on the road becomes, around the table at Emmaus, suddenly revealed as a "burning" in the heart. The disciples' eyes are opened when the word is linked to the bread.

Other books in the Elements of Preaching series place the preaching task under a microscope, as it were, in order to unpack the various pieces of the sermon from preparation through delivery. This book will invite the reader to see how God's word is the crux not only of preaching but also of the worship service as a whole, that the whole liturgy serves the Word as Christ is revealed in the midst of God's holy people.

The liturgy in its totality offers the assembly multiple ways to enter into the word, enriching the sermon by stretching its scope. Likewise, the liturgy is served by the preached word of God as it articulates particular biblical themes, makes tangible the abstractions, and invites local cultural expectations to inform the sermon. At the heart of both the sermon and the rest of the liturgy, God's word, the Bible, holds open its merciful visions.

This book contends that a liturgical experience grounded in—and shaped by—the word of God as it is preached in the context of Word-centered worship has the capacity to address the needs of people in every

age. For some people, this contention may seem dated, too tied to “tradition,” fraught with hierarchical decision-making structures. The technological changes of our time raise questions about the ways in which people receive information, ideas, impressions, experiences, and feelings. When we speak of word in worship, what sort of “word” are we talking about? Is word static or can it be in motion, electric with emphasis? Is word also image? Or does word contain image as one medium through which ideas are manifested? Is word quick enough to hold our attention any longer? Do we have the patience to listen to the word? Do we have the capacity any longer to enter into a narrative for a sustained period of time as our ancestors did? Can we take Mary’s place at Jesus’ feet? Or does word demand to be presented in flexible, shifting lights in order to hold us and capture our imaginations? People who spend time in a virtual world are used to being confronted with a number of different ways in which thoughts are represented and with rapid movement from one form to another.²

Liturgical leaders and planners best serve the assembly’s worship by placing the scriptural texts at the heart of the liturgy. When all aspects of the liturgy are grounded in the word of God for the day—whatever media are used—a certain cohesion of impression resounds. The word becomes the glue for all that occurs whether mediated through music, art, spoken and sung word, or other technology. The assembly does not grasp the meaning of God’s word simply by cognitive means but by living within many modes of expression: verbal and nonverbal, spoken and silent, still and moving, through symbols presented and even through their absence.

Every Sunday the biblical texts differ from the previous week. Over time, many texts are proclaimed. When God’s word is the core of the worship, the assembly sees the Lord and itself in the light of that word, through God’s lens. Images and themes address or exemplify the word of God for that day and bring together even conflicting interpretations that locate the worshipers in the multivalent complex of God’s reign. Because the preached word and the liturgical event within which preaching is located are integral to each other, this book invites the reader to explore how—through God’s word—the worship event as a whole informs and, in turn, supports preaching.

Liturgy, Pattern, and Practice

Before we enter into this exploration, a few preliminary explanations are in order. First, *liturgy* is what is done in the course of the Sunday assembly.

No church's worship event is devoid of liturgy. The words *worship* and *liturgy* will be used interchangeably here. To speak of a "liturgical church" is really to refer to all churches. Whatever the worship looks like, it is a liturgy (*leitourgia*). Scholars disagree about whether *leitourgia* ought to be translated "the work of the people."³ A *leitourgia* in Roman times was a form of "public service" and seems to have been used both for the wealthy to display their generosity in order to gain more power and for the ministry of priests or those who performed charitable acts. What people commonly mean by "liturgical" does not constitute liturgical worship. In common parlance, "liturgical" usually refers to parts of the liturgy that are present almost every week such as the greeting or dialog ("The Lord be with you." "And also with you") or the song sung at Holy Communion ("Holy, holy, holy, Lord, God of power and might . . ."). These are responses, hymns, invitations using scriptural language to anchor the worship in the Bible. To understand better that liturgy is a pattern rather than the language or song that repeats each week, it is good to keep in mind that every assembly practices its liturgy.

Every denomination and every church has a *pattern* to its worship. That pattern is "the liturgy" of that denomination or congregation. For Protestants, the liturgy takes diverse forms, including both Holy Communion and what is called "ante-communion" or a Service of the Word. For evangelicals, it is often joyous singing, a pastor's prayer, reading the word and preaching, intercessory prayer, and an altar call. So-called Praise and Worship services are liturgical in that they follow a pattern each week very close to the pattern just named. For many Quakers, the liturgy is sitting in silence until, at a certain point, someone rises to speak of what has come to her or him. This is a form of response to the word that is "heard" in silence. For Roman Catholics, the liturgy is the mass of Holy Communion. Orthodox churches speak of "the divine liturgy" that is continuously ongoing in the heavenly realm and which a given assembly participates in through ancient chant, incense, preaching, and the meal.

Diverse ecclesial practices also influence the liturgy of a denomination or a congregation. Where clergy ordination is a requirement for presiding at the meal, churches have altered practices to accord with availability of pastors and priests. For many Protestants, frontier settlement in the United States required churches to abandon the weekly meal because there were not enough clergy to preside. Especially for these denominations, the liturgical renewal movement has encouraged the use of weekly communion in

order that the churches might experience practices lost due to historical realities. Where laity lead services (Mennonites and Disciples of Christ, among others), the availability of ordained Christians did not influence the shape of the liturgy. For the black church, with roots in secret gatherings under the horrible oppression of slavery—where worship was a time for regaining dignity, singing hope, giving courage and comfort—the liturgical pattern is grounded in celebration. Cultural realities not only inform the shape and content of worship but also play a role in determining ecclesial structures and, ultimately, doctrine.

The task for worship planners and leaders in every denomination and congregation is to be aware of the influences of culture in order to weigh and test its potential transformation of the faith. Does the liturgical shape, for example, serve the preaching or does it mimic cultural expectations without regard for doctrine? Does the preaching serve the larger message of the liturgy or does it undermine the content of the confession of sin and of faith, the meanings offered through the hymns, the very content of the gathering? These are not easy questions to answer but must be kept in the forefront of worship critique.

Worship and preaching are concerned equally with theory and practice. In chapters 1 and 2, the theory of God's word as central to worship and of worship serving an ancient pattern will be discussed. Chapter 3 looks at an Ash Wednesday worship in order to use it throughout the rest of the book as a specific example of the ways in which preaching and worship influence each other. Chapters 4 through 7 cover the parts of the liturgy in greater detail.

A Few Notes on Language

First, some quotations from older sources in these chapters include non-gender-inclusive pronouns for God and for humans beings. I have left them as the author wrote them. I assume that readers will graciously understand the distance scholars have moved in recent decades toward acknowledgment of inappropriate pronouns and also gendered names for God who is beyond gender identity.

Second, the term *Sunday assembly* refers to the regular weekly worship of the churches. Many churches, of course, meet at other times during the week, but Christians have held to the Sunday meeting since the beginning. The word *assembly* includes those who are believers and those who may not be able to articulate why they are attending. In

short, it includes everyone assembled, not just church members or the baptized.

Third, there is a certain ambiguity to the term *word*, which will be discussed further in chapter 1. In general, where *word* refers clearly to the Risen Christ, it will be capitalized (Word). Where *word* is lowercased, it refers to the biblical text and also to the presence of Christ available to the congregation through the reading and preaching.



God's Word Is Central in Worship

Preaching serves the liturgy and the liturgy serves preaching because both are founded in the word of God. When faced with a mystery as huge as life and death, human beings seek a stable and sure foundation from which to survey the landscape. God's word is reliable, sure, unswerving, a source of salvation. Words are, after all, visible on a page, rendering for all people a sense that this God is available. The words do not disappear when we close the book. At least until the next translation is published from the ancient languages, the words do not change.

Because God's word invites divergent interpretations, these complexities compel us to talk with each other about God's meaning. Conversation about scriptural interpretation takes place in an atmosphere of intense conviction, testifying to the importance of God's word in the lives of God's people. Christians would not be so heated over doctrine and worship—would not split off so vehemently from each other—if what God's word says for us did not matter. By the same token, we would not be drawn to each other with the tenderness and commitment visible in congregations and between churches everywhere if we did not find in God's word the very center of our life together. Because we see it as central, we are united by the word of God.

What is meant by God's word, however, is much bigger than the words on a page. God's word is not only the Holy Scriptures—the biblical canon—but also Word of God: Jesus of Nazareth, the Risen One, the Christ, holy revelation, presence of God, source of redemption. Word is

also preaching, and in this sense God's word comes to us as both *word* and *Word*, for what is preached is the revelation of God in the midst of the world, a proclamation, a prophetic voice, a speaking that creates community by raising in the people's hearing the questions and assertions that lie at the heart of what puzzles and feeds us. Although the Bible does not contain a prescription for what worship ought to look like, we do have glimpses of the formative shape of worship on which the church is built. It is possible to imagine the structures and patterns of worship today echoing a number of biblical passages that highlight the fundamental importance of assembly, participation, and preaching the word. Notice the focus on gathering the people in Nehemiah 8:

When the seventh month came—the people of Israel . . . told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel. . . . And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, “Amen, Amen,” lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground . . . (Neh. 7:73b—8:1, 5-6).

A number of stories in the New Testament show the early church gathered together in bewilderment, struggling to find its way, and praying. Whether the scriptural references describe actual gatherings or amalgamated events meant to offer a portrait of the church for a particular reason or for teaching is not critical to the impression they give or the information that can be gleaned from them. In the New Testament images of Christians at worship we see the church as a community, a body, comprised of more than a mere listing of individuals. The church's identity is corporate. The body of Christ, its self-understanding, and its theology are formed by its gathering.

While the church's worship patterns and practices are varied, the diversity need not divide the body of Christ. Rather, the diversity of worship patterns and practices show that differences between denominations—and even differences between churches within denominations—allow for a richer and therefore more complete understanding of God's presence among God's people. While we look at the common grounding in God's word among nearly all Christian worshipers and rejoice over the abundance of expressions, we can marvel at the centrality of participation

by those who gather together, of reading Scripture and preaching, of prayer and prayer through song, of a meal, and of leave taking. We see, in effect, the pattern of Gathering to hear the Word, to eat a Meal, and to be Sent out.

A Participating Assembly

Participation serves preaching by providing each person the occasion to engage with God's word. Everyone has a role in worship. In 1 Corinthians Paul describes a worship gathering in which the mention of concrete offerings from individuals shows that the church's way of being together is based in what each one contributes.

When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn; and let one interpret. But if there is no one to interpret, let them be silent in church and speak to themselves and to God. Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. If a revelation is made to someone else sitting nearby, let the first person be silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged . . . be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues; but all things should be done decently and in order. (1 Cor. 14:26-31, 39-40)

This admonition is given to help the church learn how to worship. Note that this is not a prescription for what *ought* to happen in worship but a depiction of diverse contributions, word offerings, and the practice of weighing what is said.

The 1 Corinthians passage is about order and intention. Worship cannot nourish the people if it is chaotic. Worship is meant for "building up." The Greek word *oikodomēn* describes the church both as an "economy," a working relationship, and a domicile, a home. Everything that is included in worship should have a constructive purpose. First, we find variants of *oikodomēn* used as a noun: a building, such as temple buildings (Matt. 24:1); something that is constructed (Mark 12:10); a heavenly building that is promised when the earthly building is destroyed (2 Cor. 5:1); and in 1 Corinthians 3:9 the church is God's building.

Second, *oikodomēn* is used figuratively to refer to an activity that is edifying, that "builds up," as in the ongoing construction of communities

made up of strengthened individuals. In this sense, *oikodomēn* refers to the many members and the responsibility of each to engage in conduct that is useful and faithful, encourages “those who prophesy [to] speak to other people for their upbuilding and encouragement” (1 Cor. 14:3), and how “Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor” (Rom. 15:2). While these uses of *oikodomēn* focus on the individual, other passages speak to the creation of the church as a body. In 2 Corinthians 12:19 and 13:10 the epistle writer urges building up the church. In Ephesians 2:21 the assembly and the building become one: “In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord.”¹

Having established the foundation of this “economic house” as a construction that encourages, shelters, and nourishes, individuals can expect to find themselves a part of a community built on certain principles. First, each person coming to worship brings an offering, a preparation, already having paid attention to the needs of the assembly. Second, limits are placed on how many people speak and what they say. Acknowledging that everyone will have a turn, this insistence on limitations recognizes the fundamental requirements of civility and boundaries. Not everyone should speak in tongues for as long as there is time, but only two or three. And only two or three prophets should speak. Those who are silent observers are to listen and be altered by it. Others will listen to determine what is of use and what is not. And finally, what is done must be sensible to the assembly. If the worship is conducted in an unfamiliar symbol-system, it must be translated. This can be applied to much more than simply words or utterances of “tongues.” It can include spatial arrangements that are foreign or movements and gestures or songs and rhythms. If building up is the goal, and the course for doing that is the ready participation of the assembly, this text already points to central themes of liturgical renewal in our time.

Participation, then, requires gathering (bringing one’s full faculties and offerings). Throughout Scripture the church is found praying and singing. By singing together, the church publicly proclaims its heart: “About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them” (Acts 16:25). This is worship conducted in the face of oppression and despair. God’s word comes into the midst of those who are unjustly confined and abused. While the church prays and sings, people who are not part of the church (or not yet!) witness a way of endurance and hope.

Glimpses of early Christian worship do not tell us, of course, the substance or thematic structure of hymns, readings, revelations, tongues, or interpretive choices. We do not know exactly in which order anything was or might have been done. We do know that the people were admonished to keep order and to pray and prophesy for the building up of the community. Liturgical action served the word.

Proclaiming and Preaching

Those who study preaching expect that God's word read and proclaimed will be part of worship. What do we learn about serving the word in Scripture? The story of Paul meeting with the church, presumably in Troas, surrounds the reading with a number of vital qualities that constitute the liturgical event even today.

On the first day of the week [Sunday], when we met to break bread, Paul was holding a discussion with them; since he intended to leave the next day, he continued speaking until midnight. There were many lamps in the room upstairs where we were meeting. A young man named Eutychus, who was sitting in the window, began to sink off into a deep sleep while Paul talked still longer. Overcome by sleep, he fell to the ground three floors below and was picked up dead. But Paul went down, and bending over him took him in his arms, and said, "Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him." Then Paul went upstairs, and after he had broken bread and eaten, he continued to converse with them until dawn; then he left. (Acts 20:7-11)

This scene offers an image of how liturgy serves the preaching. Notice that the text says the gathering "met to break bread." The foundation of the gathering was food, although the sort of a meal is not clear. We cannot know whether the "discussion" was (1) proclamation of the word of God delivered by Paul as a preacher; (2) a debate over matters of interpretation; (3) a question-and-answer period with the apostle; (4) an evening of evangelizing toward greater stewardship and mission outreach; or (5) something else entirely. Yet the conjunction of word and meal is apparent. The substance of the gathering was so crucial that even Eutychus's near-death was not enough to break it up, pointing to the intensity and import of the exchange, the assembly's stretched abilities (how hard it is to stay awake through the night!), and the need for a leader.

In other words, the preaching is served by a leader whose urgent message is met by eager listeners who agree on a time to come together. The gathering offers food for the heart and mind and other food for the stomach.

Praying

Preaching is also served by prayer as both are permeated with God's word. In the very center of the Bible, we find the oldest hymnbook—the ancient prayers of the Hebrew people in the Psalms. Prayer has inexplicable necessity. God's people have practiced it in private and public, in search of personal revelation, in the desert, in print, through music and dance, by writing and by painting and conceiving icons, weaving and doing handwork, and in appeals to God's intervention for the public well-being. In the Psalms we see the full range of prayer concerns: lament and pleading, joyous thanksgiving, and honor toward the creator, savior, and advocate.

Intercessory prayer in worship is offered so that the church pours itself out to lift up to God the concerns and needs of the world. In Anne Lamott's famous schema, prayer is almost always "Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! Help me! Help me! Help me!"² This is not just the structure of an individual's prayer but also the church's. The assembly gives thanks to God for all things and then begs God's intervention and wisdom for the sake of the earth, for all people of faith, the nations, communities, and local concerns, often leaving time for the assembly to speak aloud or silently additional concerns and joys. The prayer of the people ends with a thanksgiving for the saints who have gone before.

Christians pray because God has commanded us to pray. We pray for our own communities but not before we have prayed for others. The prayers direct our attention to the many places where suffering needs to be met with deep compassion. In so doing, the word of God, so full of prayers, becomes our own words through Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit who groans within us even when we do not have the words ourselves.

Through prayer, God's word bridges distances and gives cohesion to the church when its members are not able to gather together in person. "While Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him. . . . As soon as [Peter] realized [he was free from prison], he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many had gathered and were praying" (Acts 12:5, 12). When Peter is released from prison by the help of what he comes to understand is an

angel, he realizes that the Lord has rescued him, and he immediately goes to the place where the church is gathered in prayer. This story images a strong connection between the power of God's word to release us from our prisons and to bring us together in a new bond of freedom.

We also see in Scripture the gathered people responding throughout the worship with assent to the things they are hearing just as with the assembly gathered in Nehemiah 8 to hear the priest, Ezra, read. The response of the people is not only an ending to a prayer petition or response to prayer but a prayer of its own. The church in Corinth was given a way of understanding the reason for its assertion, "Amen," in this way: "For in [Christ Jesus] every one of God's promises is a 'Yes.' For this reason it is through him that we say the 'Amen,' to the glory of God." (2 Cor. 1:20). The church says "Amen" to the word of life and hope and in so doing establishes its cohesion. In some congregations, the "Amen" comes out as a unified voice; in others, individuals call it when the Holy Spirit urges a response. In all cases, the Amen is an affirmation of God's word at work in the present moment.

Prayer is also fundamental to the church's identity. In the story of Judas's betrayal and death, the apostles seek to replace him. Two names are put forward. "Then they prayed and said, 'Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.' And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles" (Acts 1:24-26). God's word creates a context for the manipulation of decisive instruments (the lots). God's word is central to the church's reason for being, its discernment about direction, its leaders, and its patterns of work and worship.

Eating the Meal

Liturgical scholars have brought to our attention the ancient church's gathering around word *and* meal by which the followers of the Risen Christ kept their identity and retold their story. This is important to note, since the churches of North America have for many reasons and over a long period of time diminished use of this meal practice. (We will discuss the place of the meal in worship, through the story of Emmaus, in more detail in chapter 6.)

God's word gives us diverse accounts of Jesus' last supper (Matt. 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:15-20), including what Paul wrote to the church at Corinth:

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. (1 Cor. 11:23-25)

More than a prayer or an admonition, this meal offers a visible metaphor of how God’s word works among the assembly: gathering the people to take in and digest what is simultaneously simple and profound, temporal and ultimate, encompassing past, present, and future. It is both proclamation of its own meaning as gift and command to remember Jesus *in bread and wine*.

Extrabiblical documents from the early church, unearthed in recent decades, contain glimpses of worship meals. The oldest, the *Didache*—from between 50 to 100 c.e.—was discovered in 1873.³ Justin Martyr’s *First Apology*,⁴ written in 150 c.e., explains to Emperor Antoninus Pius (in power from 138 to 161) what Christians did and believed in order to persuade the emperor to stop persecuting them. From c. 315 c.e. we have the *Apostolic Tradition*,⁵ which contains descriptions of ordination for bishops, presbyters, and deacons, including prayers that are said at such times, the orders for parts of the liturgy, and a detailed second part dealing with teaching newcomers the faith. We cannot know whether this document records the normal actions of the liturgy in order to teach it or is an attempt of the writer(s) to prescribe what should be done. Regardless, the influence of the document is seen in the fact that much of the language found in the ancient liturgy is still used in worship today.

Forming the Church

Some scholars now think that the *Didache* may have been written a mere twenty years or so after the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth and shortly before Paul wrote his epistles to the churches. It was certainly written in a political climate that was hostile to the church. The *Didache* (literally: The Training—or Teaching—of the Twelve Apostles) describes “the preserved oral tradition whereby mid-first-century house churches detailed

the step-by-step transformation by which gentile converts were to be prepared for full active participation in their assemblies."⁶

The *Didache* seems to have served as a guide, then, for teaching the faith. It begins by establishing the "two ways: one of life and one of death," detailing the vast differences between them and the practices that build up the community, dealing with baptism in surprisingly precise terms, leaving more and more open the options for use of water. Best, it says, is immersion in a river. If that's not possible, use other water whether warm or cold.⁷

Whatever amount or kind of water is available, the *Didache* only insists that the water be poured three times invoking the name of the triune God. From the beginning, the church recognized that worship—even central sacramental moments—would need to be conducted differently from place to place, allowing for necessary inculturation. Only water itself and words naming the Trinity would be the same everywhere, and these elements could not be arbitrarily treated. However God's word is served, some core convictions transcend place while other aspects call for response to local options.

Regarding assembly on the Lord's Day, Sunday, the *Didache's* instruction assumes four things. The church gathers on "the day of the Lord" because (1) it is the day on which Christ Jesus was raised from the dead and it is God's own "divinely instituted" desire; (2) the church confesses sin when it gathers; (3) the church gives thanks; and (4) the church breaks bread.

A certain logic is expressed in this description of the fundamental actions in worship, just as there is a logic in the *Didache* itself. Prior to baptism, the church teaches the difference between the way of life and the way of death. Those who will be baptized learn the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer. They learn about the orderliness of God's divine love for the world. They are baptized in water "in the name . . ." From then on, every Lord's day they gather with others to acknowledge sin, give thanks, and eat a meal.

The *Didache* admonishes and teaches the ways and times for fasting (on Wednesdays and Fridays, as distinct from the "pagans" who fast on Mondays and Thursdays)⁸ and for prayer, especially the Lord's Prayer. But what it does not even mention is the practice of reading Scripture and preaching. What are we to make of this? Is it possible that this document may have left out some aspects of its general practices because they were so familiar they did not need to be mentioned?

Such is the case with much of contemporary practice. Our church orders and instructions, for instance, do not mention the need to turn on the lights when we gather or arrange the chairs. Those things are not worth mentioning because they are so necessary and everywhere practiced. Perhaps the writers of *Didache*, likewise, do not remark on the obvious parts of the liturgy such as reading the prophets and letters of the evangelist(s) and preaching.

Unlike the *Didache*, Justin Martyr's *First Apology* describes the preached word in quite particular terms: "On Sunday all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place. The memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read for as long as time allows. When the reader has ceased, the presider exhorts and invites us into the pattern of these good things."⁹ Here is a portrait of a church struggling to make itself plain and nonthreatening to the oppressive powers. The preacher, to whom Justin refers as the "presider" (one who "presides," who calls the gathering and sets out the order for the time together) is also the preacher, the one who gives a discourse on the readings. The preacher calls the people into a *pattern*—to see themselves as having been given abundant life because of—the design of "these good things" that God has set out. Perhaps this gave the emperor a glimpse of how he might see his way to stop killing them! Christians might be allowed to live if all they do is listen to a reading and a speech, eat, and give to the needy. What could be less threatening?

Today the eucharistic ("thanksgiving") meal practices of Christians differ widely. Some omit the weekly meal described in the *Didache*, Justin's *First Apology*, and the *Apostolic Tradition*. When churches do not hold the communion meal, they practice instead a Service of the Word, also called "ante-communion" because the word comes before (*ante-*) the communion meal in the full Holy Communion liturgy. Speaking of a Service of the Word as one that is part of a longer pattern of word plus meal indicates that the "norm" is the latter. Of course, not all denominations or churches agree on what is the norm, but it is in fact the pattern we see in Justin's description: Gathering, Word, Meal, and Sending food and money to the poor.

When a meal is held, churches vary on the prayer said over the food. Some Christian churches today use a pattern much like the *Didache*, while others use a longer prayer based in early documents like the *Apostolic Tradition* that includes a recitation of thanks for creation, for Christ Jesus, remembering the words he said at the Last Supper, and for the Holy Spirit.

Some churches use only the Words of Institution (also called the *verba*) before distributing the meal, believing that Jesus' words are proclamation of the meaning of the bread and the wine and must stand alone. For them, the prayer said over the meal is not to be thanksgiving for all that God has done, but a declaration of the meaning of meal as in "This is my body . . . do this . . ."

The discrepancy in words said over the meal serves to help us continually critique the bases of our own practices so that we hold in tension the valuable paradoxes that lie at the heart of God's word about this food of life. When Jesus took and blessed the bread and wine, his blessing can be understood as a thanksgiving in the classic Jewish pattern of *berakah*. Yet he also used the complicated verb of existence—"is"—to describe what he held in his hands to bless ("This is my body . . ."). The texts of the Last Supper, at minimum, direct us to understand the bread and wine in some way as Jesus' body and blood.

The church has been divided for two millennia over the meaning of that one word *is*. Do we say the elements both are and are not his body and blood or only one or the other? This disagreement is clear in the churches that were founded on the theologies of Rome (transubstantiation), Luther (real presence, ambiguity), Calvin (presence of Christ is in the gathered people), and Zwingli (we remember the historic Jesus in the meal). Do we say his words of blessing are thanksgiving or proclamation or both?

To find our unity as the church of Christ requires us to hold these differences in tension, appreciating the vast possibilities for the ways they show us greater complexity and great depth of faith. There is no one right way. But in all of them, the preaching serves the rest of the liturgy by illuminating meaning, and the liturgy as a whole surrounds the preaching with echoed imagery from the appointed texts in song and prayer. In the words of Origen, the sermon and the meal say the same thing: "bread (drink) of the word; bread (drink) of the eucharist."¹⁰ The food of faith comes to the people in at least two ways.

Balancing Worship and Culture

It may be said that all churches today in some way base their worship on the word of God. Yet Scripture sets out numerous options, some of which even sit in conflict with each other. The truth is that *Scripture itself is based in worship*. The contents of the canon—the books that constitute the word of God—were chosen because of their importance to the people who

gathered for worship. The writings that came to be most nourishing for the assembly formed the core of the writings that needed to be included in the canon. The earliest followers of Jesus gathered together after his death and heard the accounts of his appearances to various believers, and they continued to gather together in his name and to read the writing of the prophets and the apostles (remember Justin's description of worship). Gradually a body of literature grew that was dear to them in their meetings. They wanted to hear the stories again and again. The early churches, at least as recorded in certain documents, practiced their faith in many ways but fundamentally grounded worship in the writings they cherished. Those writings have become what we know as the Bible.

The word of God (which we have known for centuries as the canon of biblical Scripture) came out from the worship of the people. And the worship came out of the Holy Spirit's having gathered the people around the symbols of Christ's continuing presence in their midst. "Where two or three are gathered, there I am," Jesus had promised. But where the word is read, the word must also be interpreted.

Different days and times may call for different ways of worshiping. Sometimes a reading from Scripture and a sermon are called for. Sometimes silence is needed or prayer spoken or sung. After an alarming public tragedy, a prayer vigil is often needed where people gather in silence, in candlelight, for companionship and contemplation. There may be singing or a sermon and a meal. It is necessary for the worship leaders to know their communities and discern the most appropriate ways for God's presence among the people to be made clear.

When speaking this way about worship—that different times call for different worship—it can easily sound like worship is something the worship leaders create or dream up to suit the moment. That is not what is meant here. There is a pattern of trustworthy practices on which worship leaders draw in order to open the worship space to the people. These practices are handed on to each generation from the ancestors who gathered together in secret at first around the letters they had smuggled from one community to another, needing to hear the word of God because it strengthened them. They heard the apostle Paul writing to them, "I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world" (Rom. 1:8), and other empowering greetings.

We do not come together first and foremost to give something to God, but to lean on what God has already given to the church. Through the

word, we hear God's voice. By eating bread, we taste God. In each other, as members of the body of Christ, we see God. We meet the Risen Christ in the assembly. We come to worship in various stages of faithfulness. Some of us may arrive with great spiritual confidence, rich with trust and direction. Others come with disabling questions, doubts, and fears. We cannot count on everyone feeling fervent in their convictions every Sunday. Many—perhaps most—of us come because we have not got the faith we desire. "Our hearts are restless, Lord, until they rest in thee," Augustine prayed.¹¹ We bring our restlessness to worship. And there we are met by the word that convicts and emboldens, the word that points the way and shows us images of the kingdom of God prepared for us. We hear about the present day and the end of time. We are given many tasks to do and the means to face them, fed by bread of word and bread of wheat.

At the same time, the actual event of worship will welcome many different rhythms, time frames, gestures, and "styles," all moving toward the same goal: the presence of God as promised among God's people. The richness and paradox of God's word invites every worshipping community to attend to how its worship reflects its culture. This can be a minefield of difficulty. What is of God? What is of the culture? How do we distinguish? If we are committed to a certain way of doing worship, is it because that is a gift of our ancestors, or is it a once worthy but now stultifying habit? Can a non-Native American culture grasp the use of sweetgrass smoke as incense? Can a non-Hispanic community be formed around a mariachi mass? Can a northern European culture sing South African freedom songs?

In order to think through these questions, the Lutheran World Federation convened an ecumenical group of liturgical theologians from all over the world. They met in Nairobi, Kenya, to examine the crucial and difficult balance between worship and culture/s. The product of their work is the 1996 publication, "The Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture: Contemporary Challenges and Opportunities."¹² The document found that cultural practices and patterns are echoed in worship in four modes:

1. Worship practices are *transcultural*: "The resurrected Christ whom we worship, and through whom by the power of the Holy Spirit we know the grace of the Triune God, transcends and indeed is beyond all cultures."¹³ A Christian worship experience is not entirely inculturated, according to Nairobi. While Jesus of Nazareth was born in Bethlehem and died in

Jerusalem, living in human history, we proclaim his resurrection as an event that gives hope in a transcendent reality to everyone despite cultural differences. For a balanced relationship between worship and culture, the transcultural will find expression in the whole liturgy, supporting the sermon's proclamation of universally applicable good news.

2. Worship practices are *contextual*. We know Christ because of the particularity in which he revealed himself to the world as a specific human born in a historical time and place. Jesus of Nazareth, we believe, was not an amorphous vapor but a fully human man who lived among us. The Risen Christ is revealed to the people of God through media particularized *in* culture: places of gathering differ, as do ways of greeting and moving together, songs, food, modes of offering, patterns of prayer. All of these and more are created out from a given community. The context is the means through which the Risen Christ becomes real to a people. If the context is completely ignored, if the local breads are not used for the meal, if the Scriptures are not proclaimed in the language of the people, if the songs have no relationship to the rhythms of the marketplace or festival celebrations of the nationality or race, Christ remains invisible. Because God created the world, because Jesus became incarnate in it, because the Holy Spirit moves among the people now, the context within which we live and move and have our being is blessed and can be relied upon as a necessary location for the revelation of the Lord.

Churches may bring into their sanctuaries plants of the local environment, bake bread made of local grains or rices, bring water from the local river or lake for the baptismal font, use artwork made by local potters, sculptors, painters, and quilters to tell the stories of God's work among us on earth. The dances of the people may be used to express community for a Sunday when such movement best connects to the word of God. Any means of using God's gifts to proclaim the gospel, from any cultural heartland, may be useful to the congregation. The test for faithful use of such gifts has to do with its grounding in God's word. The worship serves the word. Serving the word is local as well as universal.

3. Worship practices are *countercultural*. The word of God does not endorse all human desires, but rather opposes those forces that endanger, oppress, distort, and do harm. God's word in Romans 12:2 exhorts the people not to be conformed to this world but to be transformed. Some of the work of transformation requires preaching that corrects and admonishes, proclamation that intervenes in destructive life patterns, and opposes public policies that run counter to God's call to care for those in need. The prophetic word from the pulpit is supported by hymns of lament and stewardship, prayers that lift up the lowly, and a meal that feeds each person equally.
4. Worship practices are *cross-cultural*. This refers to the many ways a particular worshiping community can include in its worship reminders of cultures other than its own. To sing the songs of others reminds the assembly that the triune God is for all people everywhere. The texts, then, become the reason for the song, not familiarity alone or tradition or availability. It was not so many decades ago that the songs of the church were thought to be the province of particular denominations or cultural groups. That divisiveness has dissipated. We do not segregate the church's music but find that each body is enriched by the music of others. We strive to learn as many tunes and texts as possible. Today's Internet and printing capabilities make sharing music and other liturgical resources among churches very easy. Many churches that have experimented with different worship services on Sunday, defining them especially by different musical "styles," have now come to speak of "blended" worship in which many musical expressions are used in every service. In worship that strives to include cross-cultural elements, worshiping communities have a concrete way—through music—to break through racial, ethnic, and cultural barriers. Music is not the only vehicle for cross-cultural expression. On Pentecost in many churches, the story of the coming of the Holy Spirit in tongues of fire is read in several languages.

Worship that maintains a balance among these four ways in which worship relates to culture will have a strong plumb line for measuring

liturgical choices. Consider the many elements in worship that speak to this balance. If a sermon and a song endorse wealth as a gift of faith (to use an extreme but not uncommon example), the liturgy endorses secular values and fails to critique the culture. The worship, then, remains predominantly *contextual* because it reflects and upholds a love for riches. Where, then, is the prophetic—the *countercultural*—voice? Shall the church be silent in the face of usury, of stealing from the poor, of dishonoring elders, or ignoring the needs of the blind and the lame? A countercultural word will build the identity of the Christian community as one that does not simply accept and endorse all of society's values.

Intercessory prayers that raise up the well-being of nations and racial groups other than the assembly's own keep worship *cross-cultural*. When an assembly sings outside its own cultural comfort zone, learning the music of strangers, the people are encouraged to know something about their sisters and brothers on the other side of the world. Where the worship service is all about the *contextual* issues of our neighborhood or nation and fails to mention God, there is, then, no *transcultural* element. Where, then, does the church differ from a popular and beneficial civic organization?

If worship leaders occasionally review the contents—especially Scripture readings, sermon content, prayers, and music—in order to notice the weight given to these four relations to culture, it will be possible to discern whether the worship for that particular assembly is balanced.

The word of God is complex, paradoxical, interpreted from any community's social location, including its cultural values and patterns. God's word—at the heart of the liturgy, whatever the shape (Holy Communion, ante-communion, or Praise and Worship)—is both reflective of culture and in tension with it. Worship that maintains an ancient structure and remains in a flexible and ambivalent relationship to the word of God has the best possibility of faithfully edifying the assembly.