



Emerging Ecumenical Issues in Worship

HORACE T. ALLEN, JR.

Boston University School of Theology, Boston, Massachusetts

Just over a decade ago an article by this writer entitled “Is there an Emerging Ecumenical Consensus Concerning the Liturgy?” appeared in the *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*.¹ That particular issue of the *Review* was dedicated to Professors Paul Hoon and Edmund Steimle on the occasion of their retirement from Union’s faculty. Now the present article seeks to carry that discussion a step forward, but is written in the same spirit of gratitude for wise teachers of worship and homiletics, one a Methodist and the other a Lutheran.

I. LITURGICAL CONVERGENCE

In that 1976 article, the question in the title was answered, in a somewhat tentative way, by reference to a number of trends which seemed to be manifesting themselves in a quite large and disparate number of liturgical traditions:

1. A commitment to realizing a weekly Word/Sacrament pattern, with ante-Communion (a liturgy of the Word followed by offering and general thanksgiving) as the non-eucharistic option
2. Increasing use of a three-year lectionary system for preaching in the context of the traditional Christian calendar
3. A renewed concern for active participation in the liturgy by means of a corporate planning process, increased use of congregational chant and song especially in psalmody, the involvement of a wider spread of the “senses,” the use of modern English, a certain informality of style, and most importantly, the sharing of liturgical leadership beyond middle-aged or aging clerical males
4. A new relationship between the liturgical life of the congregation and its catechetical and pastoral functions as in lectionary-related curricula for the church school and the development of forms of corporate prayer

¹Horace T. Allen, Jr., “Is There an Emerging Ecumenical Consensus Concerning the Liturgy?” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 31 (1976) 155-168.

and ministration to the sick and dying

5. The development of an impressive network of denominational, ecumenical, and artistic committees, offices, and consultations to support and encourage all these trends

In addition to these observations certain “critical issues” were identified, also five in number:

1. The “prior question” of sacramental theology

2. Baptismal questions—including the matters of infant communion, confirmation, and ritual elaboration—and eucharistic questions—including the matters of clerical presidency, discipline, the definition of dominical institution and presence, and ritual issues
3. The development of theologies and rites for the corporate celebration of reconciliation, unction, and other pastoral occasions
4. The development for both Catholic and Protestant communities of totally new systems of psalmody, incorporating new, generic translations of the Hebrew text and new musical genres for antiphonal or responsory song
5. The incorporation of freedom and flexibility, structure and spontaneity, and personal and corporate reality into unified rites

While it would be immodest to attempt an evaluation of these “prophetic” theses at this time, it is possible simply to refer the reader to the other articles in this issue of *Word & World* for evidence of a continuing convergence of the liturgical patterns described a decade ago. If anything, the trends noted have moved faster than expected. The service books and hymnals which have been published since 1976 provide impressive evidence, not the least being the *Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978) and its associated volumes. The publication in 1983 of *Common Lectionary*² by the Consultation on Common Texts and the anticipated revision of *Prayers We Have in Common*³ by the newly formed English Language Liturgical Consultation (ELLC) carry forward both lectionary and textual convergence. The vast literature of homiletical and catechetical materials relating to the lectionary testifies to a greatly increased sense of the centrality of corporate worship for all Christians. Add to this the springing up throughout the land of local homily-preparation groups, meeting weekly, either within a parish or as an ecumenical effort, and one cannot resist the impression that liturgical ecumenism may yet become the most powerful manifestation of the ecumenical movement, now over fifty years old. That history has most recently been celebrated by the publication by the World Council of Churches of what is already its fastest selling document, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*.⁴

II. THE ECUMENICAL CONTEXT

In alluding to the larger ecumenical picture which is paying more and

²Consultation on Common Texts, *Common Lectionary* (New York: Church Hymnal Corp., 1983).

³International Consultation on English Texts, *Prayers We Have in Common* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970, 1971, 1975).

⁴*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982).

more attention to liturgical matters, three contemporary sets of relationships need to be kept in view when assessing emerging ecumenical issues in worship.

One crucial relationship is that between East and West. Thus far, the developments familiar to the readers of this journal have been principally the preoccupations of the churches of Rome and Protestantism. The published documents form a continuum from Vatican II to *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. Lurking behind these statements is the tumultuous liturgical history of Northern Europe of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But what of Eastern Orthodoxy? Has it not always worshiped in the vernacular? And have not the churches of the

East always given liturgical continuity an importance which would seem to contradict reforming tendencies? The answer to both questions is affirmative, except for North America in the matter of the vernacular. On this continent, for reasons which lie beyond the purview of this article, Orthodoxy has until the present time avoided the challenge of translating the liturgy. That is now about to change. Even now, new modern English translations of the Orthodox liturgies are appearing from influential sources within the Greek Orthodox Church and the Orthodox Church of America (OCA). One would like to think and hope that this will mark the beginning of the kind of dialogue and cooperative efforts that resulted from the decision of Vatican II to permit the use of the vernacular in the liturgy.

Another matter of ecumenical relationships, within the Western complex of churches, is less easy to document and not a little painful for this Calvinist to record. The impression one gets from many conversations, formal and informal, and from negotiations in such bodies as the (North American) Consultation on Common Texts, the Worship Commission of the Consultation on Church Union, and the North American Academy of Liturgy is that the two more liturgically-oriented traditions, Lutheran and Episcopal, are currently more interested in the Roman connection than in the Reformed and Protestant direction. Admittedly, this is a subjective judgment. It is a strange development, since Rome at the moment seems more interested in relating to the East and increasingly less interested in female priests and bishops.

A third contemporary issue of some interest, but not yet of great visibility, is the formative role of liturgics in the developing plan being proposed by the Consultation on Church Union (COCU), involving nine participating denominations. As part of its “covenanting” plan, now under discussion on the basis of its theological consensus, “In Quest of a Church of Christ Uniting,”⁵ COCU seeks the reconciliation of ordained ministries. However, COCU no longer envisages immediate organic union of the participating denominations; it anticipates instead two structural accommodations: (a) the formal, liturgical “reconciliation” of the ordained ministries of bishop, priest-presbyter, and deacon and (b) the formation therewith of local “Covenanting Councils” which will arrange all future ordinations in all the churches, respecting their own candidacy procedures and policies. Such councils will begin to coordinate all mission work at a local level.

Interestingly, as this plan for covenanting together has been put together

⁵Gerald F. Moede, ed., *The COCU Consensus: In Quest of a Church of Christ Uniting* (Princeton, NJ: Consultation on Church Union, 1985).

by the Church Order and the Church Worship Commissions of COCU, increasing scrutiny has been given to the services of worship which will effect the reconciliation of their ordained ministries. These services will, in fact, provide a number of these churches with a personalized episcopal ministry in historic succession, which they have not heretofore included in their polity. As these churches move forward this year and next from their votes on the theological document (“In Quest...”), it is to be anticipated that the discussion of the liturgies of reconciliation (which are *not* liturgies of ordination) will become intense, if not heated. Once again, now in a critical ecumenical context, the theological and political issues of worship as formative of the church itself will become evident.

III. EMERGING ISSUES

Taking into account the liturgical convergence already described and the promising if also problematic context of ecumenical and liturgical movement, let us now attempt to define what might reasonably be identified as emerging ecumenical issues. These will be seen to arise out of certain critical issues previously mentioned. Lest such an enumeration seem unnecessarily pessimistic or pejorative, let it be said by way of introduction that the very possibility of confronting such issues may be taken as significant evidence of the progress that has already been made ecumenically and liturgically. That is to say, we have already come to the point wherein it is possible to discuss disagreements without fear of upsetting fragile agreements and relationships. The common ground upon which we stand is firm enough to endure some earnest footstomping. Such was not the case only a few decades ago. But now we have vocabularies, consultations, personal connections, and even conciliar documents with which to enter into the deeper and more treacherous waters of denominational and traditional controversies. What then might some of these issues be?

Working toward re-establishing a weekly Word/Sacrament rite, that elusive “norm” of twenty centuries (?), at least three issues present themselves. The first two have to do with the Word, while the third is a sacramental issue. Many other more detailed matters could be raised, but in the allotted space of this article we will have to be happy with broad strokes.

With the extraordinary spread of the homiletical and liturgical use of the essentially Roman lectionary (1969)⁶ and the ecumenical revision of it in *Common Lectionary* (1983), several profound theological questions have surfaced having to do with what is clearly a highly charged area of discourse: the liturgical use of the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, and in particular the doxological use of the book of Psalms in Christian worship. Here is a classic theological and liturgical tangle, whose origins lie in the New Testament epistles themselves.

A. The Liturgical Use of Scripture

For centuries the Western rite skirted this whole problem. The eucharistic lectionary omitted any Old Testament lections, relegating them to the Daily Office, and used the Psalter in a christological manner, if only by the addition

⁶Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship, *Ordo Lectionum Missae* (Rome: Vatican Polyglot Press, 1969).

of a trinitarian doxology as the concluding stanza. As a result the Old Testament was present in the Mass only as it provided the background for priesthood and sacrifice. In the popular mind, this turned the message of the Epistle to the Hebrews on its head. In many traditions, of course, this situation was “corrected” by the unfortunate regular Sunday appropriation of the order of Matins (with sermon), either in its stricter liturgical Lutheran and Episcopal form or in the looser Protestant version as the Sunday morning preaching service.

Then came the Roman *Ordo Lectionum Missae* (1969) with its three-year Synoptic Gospel focus, together with a weekly Old Testament reading chosen invariably on a typological basis. That is to say, the Old Testament reading was chosen to complement the Gospel reading largely on a promise/fulfillment theological model. At the same time, the Psalm for the day was chosen for its complementarity to the Old Testament passage, thus setting up an invariable pattern of Gospel-Old Testament-Psalm. The Epistle was theologically connected to the other

readings in the festal seasons of Advent-Epiphany and Lent-Easter/Pentecost, and unconnected in “Ordinary” time (the Sundays after Epiphany and after Pentecost).

This liturgical conjunction of Old and New Testaments has however run into considerable criticism from quite diverse sectors. The biblical school of canonical criticism, which emphasizes the functionality of the sacred text in the formation, continuation, and reformation of community, insists that the Hebrew Scriptures be read in the context not of the Gospel but of their own faith community. They are to be seen as Scripture in that context, not simply as prophecy of a later fulfillment. This critique links up with the more cultural and political attempt of many churches to redefine their relationship to the Jewish people in such a way as to avoid both Zionistic affirmations and “supersessionist” triumphalism (i.e., the view that regards Christianity as superseding Judaism, thus negating God’s covenant with that people).

The Consultation on Common Texts’ *Common Lectionary* is a deliberate and therefore controversial response to these criticisms. While leaving intact the system of typology in the festal seasons, it has radically recast the Roman lectionary in “Ordinary” time by reading the Old Testament in the same sequential pattern as is the case with the Gospel and Epistle lessons.⁷

The Old Testament is read (in the Roman system) generally in light of its fulfillment in Jesus Christ, so that salvation history is portrayed, but it is set forth in a punctiliar way—with the Gospel letting parts of the Old Testament shine through selectively; rather than in a semicontinuous fashion in analogy to the semicontinuous reading of the Gospels and Epistles.⁸

The ecumenical acceptability of *Common Lectionary* seems now to turn on this biblical/theological point. The Holy See has refused the request of the U.S. Catholic bishops to permit use of *Common Lectionary* even on a trial basis, since it represents a divergence from the Roman rite. For this reason apparently, but also because of the loosening of the typological connection between Old and

⁷It should be noted that there is some residual typological pattern in the decision to read the ancestral and Mosaic narratives in Year A (of Matthew), the Davidic narratives in Year B (of Mark), and the Elijah-Elisha narratives and minor prophets in Year C (of Luke).

⁸Arland J. Hultgren, “Hermeneutical Tendencies in the Three-Year Lectionary,” *Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics*, ed. John Reumann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 148-149.

New Testaments, the Lutheran and Episcopal churches, after extensive testing, seem to be backing away from *Common Lectionary* (with the notable exception of the Anglican Church of Canada which has included it in its *Book of Alternative Services*⁹).

The Consultation on Common Texts is working hard at preventing an ecumenical failure by providing for *Common Lectionary* alternate Old Testament readings. These might also commend its work to the Protestant and Anglican churches in Great Britain, which are presently using a two-year lectionary which works on a weekly thematic scheme. Nevertheless, heavy questions of ecclesiology and biblical interpretation ride on this kind of discussion, to say nothing of the character of the Lord’s Day as a festival in its own right (apart from festal seasons). And without clarity at this point, the church may well find that it has no clear definition

of its relation to the Jews, the Holocaust, or Zionism.

B. The Doxological Use of Psalms

The Psalter business is simply a smaller (or larger?) incidence of the same problem. The church must ask itself whether the liturgical use of the Psalms requires a Gloria or doxology (as at Eucharist) or a christological psalm prayer (as in the Daily Office). We now have hymns; we are in a different situation from those centuries when psalmody *was* hymnody. Just as one can rejoice over the resurgence of psalmody as doxological and musical and participatory, one must also take quite serious note of how and when and where in Christian liturgy the psalms are used and misused. Here too loom up in the most intense way the urgencies of inclusive language. As soon as we dig into the piety of the Psalter we are confronted, in the English language certainly, with a formidable dose of patriarchy. Shall we simply rewrite those 150 hymn-poems? In that event what shall we say about our commitment to the inspiration of Holy Writ? What is a valid translation of Scripture for liturgical use?

C. The Shape of the Eucharistic Liturgy

Space permits no further salting of these wounds in the body of Christ. So let us turn to the other side of the Word/Sacrament unity. What of the emerging ecumenical shape of the eucharistic liturgy? There appears to be a general and widespread consensus that Gregory Dix's four-fold "shape" is normative: offering, blessing, breaking/pouring, and giving. But large debates remain as to the meaning of "offering," and the form of the blessing is by no means entirely resolved. The growing use of a classically structured Eucharistic Prayer, which includes the Words of Institution, is by no means an ecumenically acceptable conclusion. Many Protestants resist any suggestion of a prescribed text for such a prayer; some Reformed Christians resist the requirement that the Lord's "words" be included in such a prayer; and many Lutherans doubt the necessity of a prayer at all. And underneath this whole battle lies the volatile theological matter of a theology of sacrifice on the one hand or of proclamation on the other.

The options of consecration by formula, fixed prayer, or extempore prayer are not casual or negligible denominational variants. Each option carries with it a serious and developed theology which must be engaged in ecumenical con-

⁹Anglican Church of Canada, *The Book of Alternative Services of the Anglican Church of Canada* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1985).

versation. At the moment there is no ecumenical consensus; even within traditions serious divisions exist.

IV. TWO FINAL QUESTIONS

Above all of our traditions loom at least two important theological questions. One has to do with the relationship of liturgy and life and the other with the basic theological definition of what is happening in the transaction we call "worship."

Liturgy and life. Remembering the intimate connection between the renewal of liturgical form and social life in movements such as the Wesleyan Movement, the Oxford Movement, and the Catholic Renewal Movement of the 1950s and '60s, it will not seem strange to observe that

there is now lively discussion about the liturgy as the corporate moment of the church's social existence. Does the liturgy have concrete and direct social and even political meaning, or is it simply, as both Protestant and Catholic fundamentalists would have it, a moment of inspiration for the pious individual to "go and do likewise" (or otherwise)? Paul Lehmann, lately of Union Theological Seminary, New York, has put it most directly: "Politics are the business of liturgy." "As far as Christian faith and obedience are concerned, the focus and context of liturgy are etymologically and theologically politics."¹⁰ For many, the tortured ethical issues of our time, such as economic imbalance, ecological destruction, hierarchical tyranny, gender and race-based oppression, can be "read off" the church's weekly encounter with God's judging and saving Word and its eucharistic festival meal of love. Others would prefer a more careful and discreet isolation of the church's sacral phenomena from carnal and political contact. That is one thorny but inevitable issue involved in ecumenical convergence. How directly is prayer a political event?

The nature of worship. Finally, we might pose what might be regarded as the bedrock theological question, What is worship: offering or response? Vastly different rites and theologies have been put together, depending upon the answer to this question. It will not do to try a vague "both/and" compromise. Underneath this set of options lie such dichotomies as divine/human initiative, the priest/preacher stand-off, the sacrifice/memorial discussion, and finally the creation/redemption "starting point." In a way, all of these dichotomies are symbolized by that enduring liturgical battle over whether the Lord's words (the *Verba* or Words of Institution) are, in the liturgy, words of prayer or of proclamation. As yet there has appeared no definitive or ecumenically compelling resolution of these issues. But surely we are now in a far better situation to undertake the dialogue than has been the case for decades, if not centuries. We now know that *communio in sacris* is part of the path we walk, not just a distant goal, and that common prayer, praise, and proclamation are in fact essential if common eating and drinking together are to happen—officially or unofficially. Most importantly, our liturgies have ceased to be "stones of stumbling" and have become evident rocks in a river over which we must all find our way. For on the other side is that shore which Jesus envisioned (John 17) as did Moses before him (Deuteronomy 34).

¹⁰Paul L. Lehmann, "Praying and Doing Justly," *Reformed Liturgy and Music* 19 (1985) 80, 78.