



## **O Tempora! O Mores! Liturgical Literature and Resources for the Late '80s**

MICHAEL B. AUNE

Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary-The Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California

Browsing in a theological bookstore these days and coming upon the “liturgics/worship” section, one encounters a plethora of literature and resources which promise to inject new health and vitality into what we say and do in church. There are historical and theological studies of rites and prayers. There are anthropological and psychological studies of the role which ritual plays in individual and social life. There are studies of the language of worship that attend to issues of power, relationship, and inclusiveness as well as to questions of how to name God and to remember and proclaim God’s gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ. There are inclusive language lectionaries, liturgical supplements, inclusive hymn collections—and the list goes on and on.

In this essay, I will single out and discuss some of these recent books on worship, and I will highlight certain resources such as lectionaries, hymn collections, intercessory and eucharistic prayers which exemplify the promises, possibilities, and problems of ongoing liturgical renewal. These books fall into two general categories: (1) the culture or context of Christian worship; and (2) the particular nature of the communication event called worship. Together, these categories continue the theme first voiced nearly a century ago by the English liturgical scholar Edmund Bishop:

The history of Liturgy must remain a hopeless and irrational tangle...so long as there is a failure to freely and fully recognize the cardinal factors that dominate, and must dominate, the whole subject, the varying natures, spirits, and tendencies of the races and peoples that have found a home in the Christian church.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>“Kyrie Eleison,” *Liturgica Historica* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1918) 123.

### **I. THE CULTURE AND CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN WORSHIP**

The meaning of worship was once sought in an analysis of worship materials. The words were sifted, turned over, studied. What does each one mean? What do they all mean together in a package? Read them from beginning to end. Rearrange them. But one of the significant lessons which have been learned from the past twenty years or so of liturgical change is that the meaning of or in worship is “beyond the text.” It is located, or, perhaps better, emerges in the interaction of speakers, hearers, and language. That is, what is meaningful is a matter of what has significance to persons who are constantly interacting with a physical environment and with other people.

Thus, although liturgical study begins with texts or with what is said and done, it moves beyond such matters to consider the sociocultural contexts of people who worship. Lawrence A. Hoffman's *Beyond the Text: A Holistic Approach to Liturgy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University, 1987) is an excellent example of this significant trend in current liturgical scholarship. Concerned with gaining a better understanding of just what it is that people do in worship, Hoffman employs the methodologies and perspectives of social anthropology, the sociology and history of religion, phenomenology, psychology of religion, modern linguistics, and semiotics. He shows how human experience is structured by cultural categories that are reinforced by ritual. He redefines liturgical rites, in this instance those of Judaism, as reflective of social rather than geographical space and in so doing brings the worshipping community and its perception of itself to the center of attention. Such perception in turn is a community's sacred history, its myth, which is patterned and enacted in ritual contexts for the purpose of uniting, integrating, bringing about cohesion, and holding out a vision of hope. Ultimately, Hoffman attempts to arrive at a cross-cultural model for charting and studying the liturgical sense of the numinous, i.e., the relationship between worshipers and God. In asking new questions about worship—what it is and what it does—he takes the liturgical scholar “beyond the text” to the worshipping community.

In a similar vein, Mary Collins' *Worship: Renewal to Practice* (Washington: Pastoral Press, 1987) exemplifies the necessity for liturgical scholarship to connect with the worshipping community that lives beyond the text. For Collins, this involves a dialogue with selected aspects of contemporary culture. She argues that such a dialogue is both crucial and necessary because

the liturgical renewal so recently begun will be achieved only when the celebration of the paschal mystery of salvation in Jesus Christ is adequately enculturated, that is human grounded [*sic*] in the culture and in evangelical tension with it. (p. 3)

Among the results of her dialogue are some important insights into the people who worship, their meanings, their ritual patterns, their physical, psychological, and social needs. Collins also considers such topics as who are the hearers of the Word, inclusive language, ritual symbols and ritual process, spirituality, the baptismal roots of the preaching ministry, obstacles to liturgical creativity, the relationship of eucharistic practice to justice and ministry, and liturgy with young Christians.

Yet a third book which examines closely the worshipping community that lives beyond the text, especially its physical, psychological, and social needs, is *Ritual and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) by Elaine Ramshaw. Her thesis is “that the paradigmatic act of pastoral care is the act of presiding at the worship of the gathered community” (p. 13). Like a growing number of liturgical scholars, Ramshaw is interested in redefining what has been traditionally termed “ritual efficacy.” Simply stated, the focus of attention is no longer upon formal/material constants such as bread, wine, gestures, valid or invalid formulae. Rather, the question of what rituals do is approached from a sociological or psychological point of view. That is, how do these patterned, repetitive activities unite, integrate, bring about belonging and

solidarity, and present a vision of hope, commitment, and transformation?<sup>2</sup>

Yet Ramshaw is careful to point out that ritual involves a great deal more than expressing and meeting human need. What prevents Christian ritual from becoming amateur psychotherapy is that it is normed by God's invitation, gift, and knowledge of human needs—needs which run “deeper even than our own self-knowledge” (p. 16). She includes in these fundamental human needs the need to establish order, to reaffirm meaning, to bond community, to handle ambivalence, and to encounter mystery.

## II. CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN WORSHIP AS COMMUNICATION

The studies looked at thus far have been attentive to the larger context of worship. The questions which now surface are of a more “nuts-and-bolts” nature. How does the liturgical event happen in such away that what is said and done socializes—even transforms—persons from various social strata and cultural backgrounds into a single assembly of God in the world? In other words, as an event of communication, how can the worship of the church say, show, make manifest, evoke new life styles and new ways of seeing the world that the gospel creates, as an alternative reality to the secular or unbelieving, unforgiving, unthankful, dysfunctional, and self-righteous world that many folks inhabit?

Although we have become more aware in recent years that Christian worship is an event of communication in which we not only speak to one another but also to God (and believe that God is addressing us), we have had real difficulty in translating such an awareness into a “what” and a “how.” We often try to pack into our worship every possible and conceivable element, and if it still does not “work”—i.e., if the experience is not more lively or compelling and if attendance has not increased—we will look for those resources which will fix whatever it is that is wrong.

But the attempt to enhance the level of liturgical participation and communication can best begin with a renewed and intensified awareness that Christian worship at its most basic is a dialogue. This awareness is rooted not only in our experience of communication, especially conversation, but is also at the heart of biblical religion, as Amos Wilder reminded us some years ago.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven: Yale University, 1983) Chapter 5; Michael Downey, “Status Inconsistency and the Politics of Worship,” *Horizons* 15/1 (1988) 64-76.

<sup>3</sup>Amos Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1971) 40-54.

Moreover, one of the most important contributions of twentieth-century liturgical scholarship has been its clarification of Christian worship as a dialogue, “ an event of listening and expression, where classic text and contemporary song meet to form one communion in prayer.”<sup>4</sup>

As a result, we can speak of a pattern that is essentially the same in the churches of East and West. This is a common rite marked by a gathering of believers at a particular time and place who say and do some distinct and definite things together: proclaim and respond to the Word of God, pray for the world and for the church, exchange the Peace, prepare the table and the gifts, make Eucharist, and share the gifts of God. Thus, what goes on is not simply the use of set forms,

but an event in which there occurs the *call* of God's revealing, saving Word and deed and our *response* in prayer, surrender, and thanksgiving.

The resources to be discussed in this portion of the essay, therefore, have been selected with this larger dialogical, interactive pattern in mind. The first is more theoretical in nature and is the introductory volume to the series *Alternative Futures for Worship* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1987). The second is a practical, "how to" resource written by Charles L. Bartow and entitled *Effective Speech Communication in Leading Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988).

The underlying motif of volume one of *Alternative Futures for Worship* is communication. Unlike conventional, even predominant notions of communication (*a sine qua non* of human existence) as information processing or the mere transmission of facts about the outside world, the emphasis in the essays by Michael Cowan, Paul Philibert, and Edward J. Kilmartin is upon how people share meaning, a particular response which makes sense. This is how we interpret reality as working, as providing a way to live, think, and act. At the core of Christian reality, and of the liturgical/ sacramental events which seek to render that reality intelligible and emotionally convincing, is God's invitation and our response.

Charles L. Bartow's *Effective Speech Communication in Leading Worship* rests upon this view of the dialogical, interactive relationship which is said to exist between God and a community of faith. Thus, at the outset of the book, he tells us that his goal

is to get you to think with me about worship as an experience in which people listen to and talk with God and one another. If we can achieve at least a tentative meeting of minds on that score, perhaps we can then move ahead to explore options for doing our listening and talking with ever increasing competence and integrity. What we will end up with, God willing, are insights to be reflected on and not conclusions to be defended, principles to be put into use, not rules to be obeyed. (p. 15)

Bartow illustrates these principles with a discussion of the major elements of Christian worship, moving step-by-step through speaking the written Word, calls to worship and benedictions, leading unison confession and responsive praise, reading the Scriptures, and administering the sacraments. This book is useful to folks of various Christian traditions as a textbook and a workbook for

---

<sup>4</sup>Ralph A. Keifer, "Pastoral liturgy is NOT in the book," *Pastoral Music* 4/4 (April-May 1980) 17.

dealing practically and pastorally with the basic element of the church's worship—the verbal utterances which make the event happen.

This emphasis on language as action, as being able to do something powerful, persuasive, and even transformative, while relatively recent in Western thought, is at the core of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Well-known is the biblical view that language is an actual manifestation of divine power. We call this Word of God. God speaks and light is brought out of darkness. God speaks and a people is established in a covenant relationship with God. God speaks and God's beloved Son undertakes his mission to redeem humankind. Words are viewed as having power to

manifest the divine, to structure existence, to relink people and God, and to organize human life in a truthful and trustworthy manner.

The liturgical proclamation and performance of the Word make more vivid the intensely personal engagement of a community with God and God's activity as living words "that produce a variety of responses—emotional and physical as well as intellectual and spiritual."<sup>5</sup> Moreover, we regard God as speaking to us rather than writing to us.

The recent *Lectionary for the Christian People* (New York: Pueblo, 1986), prepared by Gordon Lathrop and Gail Ramshaw, is especially attentive both to this speaking and how it sounds. While basically conservative in its maintenance of key biblical imagery, this lectionary (LCP) provides a significant opportunity for us to regain renewed appreciation for the transformative power of language to carry the truth. LCP can also alert us once again to some of the key emphases of the early Christian movement such as inclusiveness and solidarity. These emphases dovetail with what we are learning about the power of language in the process of socialization into a community's beliefs, traditions, and values—a process that involves the acquisition of a worldview and occurs through language-mediated interactions as one learns what to say, how to say it, and how to feel about it. Christians run into difficulty, however, because we are socialized into and acquire two radically different worldviews. One has to do with the Christian message with its emotional language of family, affection, a personal and caring God, and change, indeed, a reversal, in the II world order. The other is a worldview consisting of beliefs, traditions, and II values which are often contradictory to the Christian message, especially in matters of power, relationships, and social experience. Language is powerful in both of these worldviews. One seeks change and transformation in a *communitas* in Christ. The other seeks to keep present power arrangements and relational alignments securely in place.

It is not only LCP which alerts us to these potential transformations which the Christian message claims and promises; so too do recent resources on intercessory prayer and contemporary hymns. Intercessory prayer, as we learn from Walter Huffman's *The Prayer of the Faithful: Understanding and Creatively Using the Prayer of the Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), is a use of language which involves giving God our ultimate allegiance, undermining the political and economic realities of our day, and experiencing "something of the liberation that is ours in Jesus Christ." Huffman roots his discussion in the

---

<sup>5</sup>William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1987).

doxological nature of the language of prayer in the Judeo-Christian tradition, particularly the Psalms and the Lord's Prayer. He traces the origins of the practice of formal, public intercessory prayer from the early church to the present day. In the remaining chapters of his book, Huffman explores the nature of intercession and its expression through the preparation and presentation of the prayer leader and provides some guidelines for and examples of this central speech event of Christian worship. Prayer can be a use of language in which the assembly images the coming full reign of God and experiences a formation of attitude and action on behalf of those for whom we pray.

Another way we do these things is through our hymnody. The work of British hymnodist Brian Wren exemplifies well an effort among hymn writers to expose and "dethrone" the sort of

God language which speaks of dominance and coercion, seeks total control, and leads to a sense of false security for human beings. In Wren's *Faith Looking Forward* (Carol Stream, IL: Hope, 1983) and *Praising a Mystery* (Carol Stream, IL: Hope, 1986), we find an enormous variety of biblical God-imagery which opens us to the liberating direction of the divine action. Wren wants to be inclusive, contemporary, and trinitarian in his hymns. He notes in the introduction to *Praising a Mystery* that

to be a contemporary Christian means going gratefully to the past (and especially to scripture as seen through one's own and others' traditions) with a self-searching honesty about who and what you are, and what is really going on in your own time. There is nothing novel about this. (first page)

Perhaps what is novel is the dawning, if not deepening awareness that our God-talk is always metaphor or analogy. That is, we speak of God and to God in terms drawn from our human experience. So, our difficulty is most likely in coming to terms with our own experience and perhaps not wanting a divine love that delights and surprises as well as hurts and aches. Yet this love has as its goal a communion in the death and resurrection of Christ, where barriers of hate and separation are broken and forces of depersonalization and disunity are overcome.

Awareness of this experiential matrix of both worship and doctrine has much to teach us about what we are doing liturgically and why we are doing it. Close examination of early eucharistic prayers, for example, with their expressed need and desire for hope, cohesion, and vision, can provide a model for what we say and do with bread and cup because our need and desire are so remarkably similar. Once this continuity is acknowledged, we begin to see how eucharistic prayers are expressive of both history and the moment and provide an interpretive scheme for the organization of faith and life, for how believers think, act, and live.

Such matters have been on the agenda of the eucharistic prayer study group of the North American Academy of Liturgy in recent years. Their work is now available in the volume *New Eucharistic Prayers: An Ecumenical Study of Their Development and Structure* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), edited by Frank C. Senn. Fifty-two texts currently in use by Roman Catholics, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Methodists, and Presbyterians have been studied and their component parts analyzed. The material in this volume illustrates how various believing communities seek to understand and express the history-and-the-moment intersection of eucharistic faith and practice. At the same time,

however, unsettled and unresolved questions remain. Senn notes the following examples:

How much linguistic variety and metaphorical innovation is tolerable in public prayers? How can concern for gender-inclusiveness be reconciled with masculine names of God in the Christian tradition? How can the view that the whole eucharistic prayer is "consecratory" be brought to bear on historical theological concerns about the juxtaposition of various parts: e.g., institution narrative and epiclesis, offertory and Anamnesis-oblation? How much are we bound to particular structures of eucharistic prayers: e.g., Roman or Antiochene? (p. 8)

Too, in addition to matters of structure, theology, and language, attention needs to be given to the environment, music, and postures of the presider and assembly. We are being reminded (finally!) that the *way* in which the eucharistic prayer is proclaimed either can reinforce or contradict what theology claims, even promises, is going on. Kevin Seasoltz's essay, "Non-Verbal Symbols and the Eucharistic Prayer," points out well that while form and content can be distinguished, they cannot be separated. Moreover, his historical review of gestures, such as the manual acts, signs of the cross, and the elevation, prompts the question of whether these gestures "say" re-enactment, re-presentation, and moment of consecration. The actual texts and their theologies of the Lord's Supper, however, seek to communicate a gracious transaction between God and the church made possible by a clear, unambiguous word of promise addressed to us and not to objects.

What also hinders the possibility of this kind of communication in the Lord's Supper is the structure of the eucharistic prayer as a "unified monologue." This largely uninterrupted discourse is addressed to God (and sometimes to the elements). The work done by this NAAL study group has further clarified the simplicity of responsorial, dialogical, interactive ways of eucharistic praying that were the practice of some early Christian communities. The involvement of the assembly in these prayers, especially through the use of acclamations, has been strongly suggested and employed in our own day. The goal of such involvement is well stated by Seasoltz:

Christian people cannot really know what the eucharistic prayer is meant to be in their lives until they experience it as expressive and constitutive of their faith on its deepest levels. (p. 233)

### III. CONCLUSIONS AND PROSPECTS

The preceding essay has provided a select sampling of the available literature and resources for contemporary worship. My concern throughout has been with material which not only helps us better to understand the larger cultural context in which worship takes place, but also with resources which can be used within the overall liturgical pattern of divine initiative and human response. Much of what has been said in this essay can be subsumed within Robert W. Jenson's observation that "every rite of the Gospel is a conversation, God's address and our response...and like every proper conversation is a complex exchange."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Robert W. Jenson, "Sacraments of the Word," *Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (2 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 2.310.

The increased awareness of the dialogical, interactive dynamic and design of the church's worship will continue to push us "beyond the text" and to examine more closely and critically the social context and behavior of worshipers, what they expect and experience, what they think the language that is used means, and what the event does as a whole. In the meantime, the literature and resources considered in this essay can prompt us to ask basic questions about what we are doing in worship and how we might do it better—not for the sake of developing flawless liturgical technique, but for working toward a deeper, perhaps more compelling, experience of our dialogue with God and with one another.