

THE LORD'S SERVICE

The Grace of
Covenant Renewal Worship

Jeffrey J. Meyers

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Introduction and Acknowledgments

I am amply supplied – Philippians 4:18

When someone called Goethe’s attention to the unsettling journalistic practice of undermining the public’s confidence in the originality of important men and their works by trotting out all the supposed sources of their inspiration, Goethe responded, “That is very ridiculous. We might as well question a well-fed man about the oxen, sheep, and swine that he has eaten and which have given him strength. We are indeed born with talents, but we owe our developments to a thousand influences of a great world, from which we appropriate to ourselves what we can and what is suitable to us.” Goethe’s point is twofold. On the one hand, we cannot *reduce* someone’s character and work to the sources that have sustained and inspired him. But, secondly, as the Apostle Paul said to the cocky Corinthians: “What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?” (1 Cor. 4:7).

I confess both truths. I am, of course, responsible for everything in this book, and my own personality, history, education, and idiosyncratic interests are evident throughout. Nevertheless, everything you read in this book I have received from someone else. *Everything*. I have been well fed by a rich feast of liturgies, liturgists, and liturgical theology spread for me by the Church of Jesus Christ. I cannot begin to identify everyone that needs to be

thanked; a short list must suffice. First, I want to acknowledge and thank the church and pastors of my youth—the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. This may seem odd for a Reformed pastor, but I believe it is appropriate and necessary for me to do so. I didn't always appreciate my liturgical heritage.

During my college years I was taught by various campus ministries to despise the formality, predictability, and rigid order in which I was raised. It was all just rote and therefore meaningless repetition, I was told. I was instructed to include in my “testimony” words to this effect: “I never heard the Gospel and didn't get saved until I came to college. No one ever shared the Gospel with me until I met people associated with such-and-such campus ministry.” It didn't take long for me to realize that this story was not accurate. Shortly after coming back to the faith of my childhood I would walk into a church service and be able to participate with relative ease. Most churches in the mid-1970's were still liturgically traditional. How did I know how to sing the hymns? Why could I recite the creeds without looking at the words? Why did these prayers sound familiar? What accounts for my being “ready” for the sequence of events in the worship? How did I know these stories that the pastor was reading? It all came back to me. As a child I was trained to worship. It was drilled into me from my infancy. Week after week I participated in the common liturgy of my Lutheran parish.

I may not have appropriated or appreciated the liturgy with maturity until college, but it was there all along. Indeed, in the liturgy of my childhood years, the Gospel was read, preached, sung, and prayed every Lord's Day! I knew it, and I believed it *as a child*. Even today when I occasionally worship with the local LCMS church in our neighborhood (which still uses the older liturgy from *The Lutheran Hymnal* [1941]), I experience freedom that I don't experience in Presbyterian churches that are constantly fiddling with the order and content of their liturgy. I'll say more about *that* later. For now, I simply want to give thanks to God and some long overdue credit to my Lutheran brothers in Christ.

Of course, I am no longer a Lutheran. I am Reformed and Presbyterian, an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church in America. There are theological and ecclesiastical reasons for my change that cannot be explained here. What I can do is acknowledge the contribution of many former Presbyterian pastors, professors, and friends, especially those men who challenged me to think biblically and theologically about the corporate worship of the local church. After my wife and I joined the First Presbyterian Church of Augusta, Georgia, Pastor John W. Oliver modeled for me the dignified way a minister ought to conduct himself officiating the service of worship. The late Rev. David Winecoff, my pastor and mentor while at Covenant Theological Seminary, spent many precious hours with me and other men personally training us in how to research, construct, and lead worship. I learned from him that the minister's stewardship of the corporate liturgy of the church is equally as important as the preaching ministry. I was also privileged to sit under the teaching of Dr. Robert G. Rayburn at Covenant Seminary before his death. I consider the present work something of an extension of his own *O Come, Let Us Worship: Corporate Worship in the Evangelical Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980). Dr. Rayburn's solemn warnings about specific liturgical errors commonly made by evangelical ministers in leading the service often echo in my mind when I stand before God's people on the Lord's Day.

In addition, the time I spent at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Tyler, Texas during the mid-1980's was of inestimable value—primarily for the mentoring and later friendship of James B. Jordan, but also for the rich liturgy my family and I entered into every Lord's Day. But Jim Jordan really does need to be singled out. One does not need to read between the lines in this book to see his influence on every page. My book is largely a popularization of his profound biblical, theological, and liturgical insights. So deeply has Jordan's work affected my thought and life that I suspect many parts come perilously close to plagiarism.

PART I

The Divine Service of Covenant Renewal:

*The first foundation of righteousness is
undoubtedly the worship of God.*

— John Calvin

The first part of this book (chapters 1–8) deals with biblical and theological fundamentals that are indispensable for addressing questions about the practice of corporate Christian worship. G. K. Chesterton once argued that when things go wrong, we need “unpractical men” who will analyze the problem before rushing in with solutions.

There has arisen in our time a most singular fancy: the fancy that when things go very wrong we need a practical man. It would be far truer to say, that when things go very wrong we need an unpractical man. Certainly, at least, we need a theorist. A practical man means a man accustomed to merely daily practice, to the way things commonly work. When things will not work, you must have the thinker, the man who has some doctrine about why they work at all. It is wrong to fiddle while Rome is burning; but it is quite right to study the theory of hydraulics while Rome is burning.[†]

[†] G. K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong With the World* (1910), in *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton, Volume IV*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 43.

Too many contemporary pastors rush to solve attendance and interest problems in their churches with “practical” solutions for making worship services more comfortable, relevant, or exciting for modern people. Such ad hoc, often novel, liturgical practices have ignited fiery controversies in Reformed and evangelical circles that some have called “worship wars.” Many authors have worked hard to sidestep foundational theological questions so as to suggest without needless delay practical down-to-earth, how-to advice to douse on this blaze. “The church is burning,” they cry. “We need water now!” But is all of this practical advice correct? Will all this activity extinguish the fire? It looks like water. It feels wet like water. Nevertheless, it would be a good idea for someone to examine the liquid to determine the validity of these claims. After all, it may be gasoline.

To paraphrase Chesterton, It is wrong to fiddle while a fire rages over worship practices; but it is quite right to study the biblical theology of corporate worship in order to discover the best remedy for quenching the fire. This book's first eight chapters do not contain a great deal of how-to advice. Some would say they are very unpractical. Nevertheless, I am convinced that Christian ministers and people must rediscover the foundational biblical and theological reasons for corporate worship. No pastor should plan or lead a congregation before God's holy presence in worship until he has carefully considered the kind of issues I address in the first part of this book. Ministers who actually compose services, write prayers, choose hymns, and are responsible for ordering the events of a corporate worship service are obligated to make a studied effort to achieve some competency in these matters. Christian men and women who gather together each week for the Divine Service will also find their experience of worship enriched by thinking through these same issues.

1

Why Go to Church on Sunday? Some Popular Answers

When you come together as a church . . .
—1 Corinthians 11:18

Occasionally I walk into a room in my home or even get into my car and suddenly forget why I am there. Why did I come in here? Where am I going? My daughters call this “spacing out.” “Dad’s spacing out again, Mom.” Of course, it normally only takes a few seconds to remember the reason I came into the room or got into my car. I can only imagine what would happen if the reason never came to me. What if I always walked into a particular room of my home without knowing why? Not knowing why one is in a specific place or doing a certain activity is not only embarrassing, but it’s also abnormal.

Something like this happens to many Christians when they walk into their church service on Sunday morning. Unfortunately, unlike my temporary amnesia, there is often no recollection of the answer to the question “Why am I here?” because the worshiper never had a clear understanding of the purpose of Sunday morning worship to start with. Some might have a ready answer to the question, but their reason for being in church might

be tangential to the purpose of the service as a whole. They come to church because their parents taught them to come to church. They come to church because it is the thing to do on Sunday. Because their children need religious education. Because they meet friends at church. Because they can make productive business contacts. But if asked to explain the purpose of the Sunday service itself, they can do little more than repeat the opaque word “worship.”

Many Christians today are confused about the meaning and practice of Christian worship. Before we address all the messy details about what ought and ought not to go on during a worship service, we must answer one foundational question: what is the purpose of a Sunday church service? In other words, *why* does a church come together on Sunday? Why is the congregation gathered together? What are they doing? What is the point? For the next seven chapters we will be exploring answers to these questions.

One way to answer questions about the purpose of Christian worship might be to compose a list of the various activities that we typically engage in during the Sunday meeting. Why are we here? We are here to meditate, sit, kneel, stand, hear, sing, pray, confess, praise, read, think, eat, drink, depart, etc. Of course, with such a list we have not really answered the burning question: *why* do we do those things? To what end? For what purpose? If we say that the purpose of the Sunday service is to gather together and do all these things, the question still lingers: why do we do *these* things? What does all of this hearing, speaking, standing, sitting, singing, praying, eating, and drinking accomplish? Why this particular set of activities and not others? What do we achieve by doing these things? At the end of the service what will have happened? What will have changed, if anything? Are we there for an emotional experience? An educational lesson? To praise God? What is the point of doing all this?

Moreover, if we can ask questions about the grand, overall meaning of the service, we can also ask about the form and content of each specific activity. As we shall see, the two are inexorably related. Why do we do these things and not others? Why do we say these

2

Covenant and Worship

*The counsel of Yahweh is for those who fear
Him, for He makes known to them His covenant.*
—Psalm 25:14

Why then are we called together as a church on the Lord's Day? What is the purpose of our Sunday assembly? What happens at church? I have already suggested that the word "worship" cannot adequately express what happens during the Lord's Day assembly. Indeed, we do worship and praise God, but that is not the whole story. In the previous chapter I also argued that the point of the Sunday service should not be reduced to evangelism, education, or experience. How can we avoid a similar reductionism in defining the purpose of our Sunday assembly? Only by identifying a biblical purpose that includes everything we experience and do in Christian corporate worship. God's covenant provides the key. Simply stated, the purpose of the Sunday service is covenant renewal. During corporate "worship" the Lord renews His covenant with His people when He gathers them together and serves them. But what exactly is a covenant and how does covenant renewal take place? We must take some time to examine what the Bible means by "covenant" before we dive into a discussion of covenantal corporate worship. The

distinctive manner of God's covenantal relations with His people will provide us with the basic order and structure of the corporate worship service.

Here at the outset I should emphasize that the end or goal of God's covenant is always a feast. God invites us to a meal. We come to church on Sunday to eat with Jesus and one another, to feast in His presence. I wonder how many American Protestant Christians come to church in order to feast with God and his people at a common Table. Who would deny that this is the eschatological goal of all of God's covenantal works—the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:6–10)? Even so, when God renews His covenant with His people in history it always climaxes with a common meal. But I am jumping too quickly to the conclusion. Before we get there we have to discuss covenant making and renewal in the Scriptures.

No Simple Definition

I would solicit the reader's patience at this early place in the book. There is no one biblical passage I can point to that will lay out a definition of the covenant. There is no proof text that says, "Worship is covenant renewal." The components of a covenant and the contours of covenant renewal events will have to be carefully built up from an analysis of a variety of covenants, covenantal documents, and covenant rituals and rites described in the Scriptures. In the next few chapters I will demonstrate that the covenantal documents as well as the sequence of events by which God covenants and renews covenants all follow a similar pattern. God's covenantal initiatives normally take the same form, following a similar sequence of related actions. After I have discussed the covenant, the covenantal sacrifices, and the Trinitarian shape of the Christian worship service, the reader should experience the cumulative effect of this body of evidence and come to some cognitive rest on the content and sequence of covenant renewal worship.

The Bible uses the word "covenant" over three hundred times in the Old and New Testaments to describe the way in which God

relates to his people. God enters into, remembers, and renews His covenant with His people (Gen. 6:18; Deut. 5:3; Ezek. 16:60; Lk. 1:72; 22:20; Heb. 8:10). The people for their part must not break, but remember and renew their covenant with God (1 Chr. 16:15; Ps. 103:18; Hos. 6:7). There are covenant making rituals (Gen. 15:1-21; 21:27; Exod. 24:7-8; 34:27; Jer. 34:18), covenant documents (Exod. 34:27-28; the Decalogue, Deut. 31:9, 26; the entire book of Deuteronomy; Heb. 9:4), covenantal laws (Exod. 21-23; Ezra 10:3), covenant signs (Gen. 9:12; 17:9-14), covenant meals (Lk. 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25), covenant mediators (Heb. 12:24); covenant sacrifices (Exod. 24:8; Heb. 9:18-20; 10:29), covenant memorials (Gen. 9:15-16; Exod. 20:24; Josh. 4:7; 1 Cor. 11:25), covenant promises (Ps. 105:9-11; Heb. 8:6), covenant curses (Deut. 29:21; 30:1; Josh. 8:34), covenant witnesses (Deut. 31:26; Mal. 2:14), and more. Nevertheless, a good many Christians, even life-long Presbyterians, are often mystified by the concept of the covenant. We denominate our churches and schools with this word "covenant," but when asked to define it for outsiders words fail us. In days past, in early American social life, one could not live too many days without hearing the word "covenant" uttered by all sorts of people applying it to many different kinds of situations. Some legal documents could be described as covenants. A civil magistrate covenanted with God and the people to serve them as ruler. Covenants were written up and signed by nations outlining international agreements. Employers entered into covenants with their employees. And men and women would stand before pastors and judges on their wedding day and repeat these words:

I, Jeffrey, take you, Christine; To be my wedded wife; And I do promise and covenant; Before God and these witnesses; To be your loving and faithful husband; In plenty and in want; In joy and in sorrow; In sickness and in health; As long as we both shall live.

Unfortunately, except in certain legal contexts where “covenant” and “covenanting” is still used as “legalese” we do not live in a culture that speaks this way anymore. The word covenant has even disappeared from our marriage ceremonies.

One reason why so many are mystified by the word covenant and the concept of covenanting is that it is almost impossible to *reduce* it to a slogan or nice neat definition. The word describes a multi-dimensional reality that cannot be captured by a simplistic description. There is no straightforward definition of a covenant in the Bible. Think about this. Perhaps God didn't provide us with a succinct definition of a covenant so that we would be driven to examine the multifaceted details of his covenantal relations with us. In other words, by not giving us a cute little ten-word definition, God forces us to come to grips with the astonishing richness of his covenants with mankind.

Furthermore, there is no replacement word that can easily stand in for the word “covenant.” One cannot simply substitute the word “contract” or “agreement” or even “promise” for “covenant,” even though some have tried to do so. We might illustrate this with the marriage covenant (Prov. 2:10–17; Ezek. 16:6–14; Mal. 2:13–16). Unless I am mistaken, Christians do not normally talk about the marriage contract or the marriage agreement or the marriage compromise because we know that marriage is so much more than these. Like the marriage covenant God's covenant with us cannot be reduced to an agreement or a contract. The covenant is certainly not a deal or an agreement. It is not solely about law and legal status. It is not simply a promise. And it is much more than friendship. These words may express *something* of the meaning of a covenant but they fail to embrace its fullness. There is no simple definition of a covenant.

The Language of Personal Relationship

Although God's covenants with us are “personal” and rightly describe “relationships” between God and us, nevertheless, biblical

covenants are not adequately described or defined as simply “personal relationships.” Regrettably, many in the Church have chosen to ape popular American culture and describe our relations with God using the language of “personal relationship.” This phrase has become a popular substitute for the word covenant. The first problem with this kind of language is that it is much too ambiguous. These days a “personal relationship” can be used to describe almost anything. People experience personal relationships with their spouses, workmates, friends, casual sex partners, pets, and even their cars. All one needs to have a personal relationship is at least one person. Furthermore, the precise nature of the “relationship” is left amorphous. So what does it mean when Christians talk about their “personal relationship” with God? It is often hard to know. This kind of trendy lingo is too fluid and for that reason can be quite misleading. To describe the worship of the Church as a time when people engage in or enrich their “personal relationships” with God can mean almost anything.

What is worse, I fear, is that Christians sometimes unwittingly give people the wrong impression when they use woolly terminology like “personal relationship” to talk about their closeness to God. Consider the word “relationship.” It is much too thin and flimsy to support the weighty character of biblical covenants. In our culture the word “relationship” likely conjures up images of television sitcoms such as *Friends* and *Seinfeld*. In modern parlance a “relationship” is an informal, non-binding association or friendship. A relationship might last for a while, but maybe not. People enter into a variety of relationships for personal fulfillment and happiness, just as they leave them when these conditions are not being met. These kinds of relationships can be on one day and off the next. They involve no formal or binding responsibilities. They bend, sway, and stretch according to the desires of the individuals involved in these “relationships.” They have no objective shape or form. This is not the case with covenantal relationships in the Bible.

3

Covenant Renewal: Worship as Sacrifice

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

—Hebrews 4:12

God's personal relations with us take the form of a covenant. In other words, the covenant structures God's personal relations with us. I argued in the last chapter that we do not merely have a personal relationship with God or with Jesus. That might mean almost anything. To some it simply means that Jesus is going to take them to heaven when they die because they prayed a prayer or walked down an aisle in church. To others it might mean more, so that they talk to Him when they are in trouble or come to church to think about Him occasionally. A covenantal relationship, however, is a *formal* relationship between God and us. Like marriage (which is a human covenant modeled after the God's covenant with his church, Eph. 5:22–33), God's covenant with us has a definitive form and content. Furthermore, there is a distinctive way of renewing covenantal relations in the Bible, and that is by way of sacrifice (Gen. 8:20–9:17; Gen. 15:8–18a; Exod. 24:4–11; 34:15; Lev. 2:13; 24:1–8; Num. 18:19; 1 Kgs. 3:15; Ps. 50:5; Lk. 22:20; Heb. 9:15, 18; 9:20; 12:24; 13:20).

According to the Scriptures, in corporate Christian worship the people of God are engaged by the Spirit and drawn into the Father's presence as living sacrifices in Christ (Eph. 2:18). This is how God renews His covenant with His people. He draws near to draw us near. And in drawing us near to Him we are renewed through sacrifice. Christian worship is sacrificial; when we say Christian worship is covenant renewal worship we mean that it takes the form of sacrifice and offering. Although we will develop this in more detail throughout the next chapter, the same five-fold covenantal pattern can be discerned in the way the details of the sacrificial ritual unfold. The first offering of Leviticus 1:1–9 illustrates this:

1. Call to Worship: God calls the worshiper to draw near. In response to God's call the worshiper comes with the appropriate animal. (Lev. 1:1–2)
2. Confession and Absolution: God requires that the worshiper die in the representative animal. The worshiper leans on the animal and identifies with it. After which it is slaughtered, the blood separated out and splashed on the altar as a public presentation to God that the worshiper/animal has been slain. (Lev. 1:3–5)
3. Consecration: God moves the priests to cut up the animal, making it fit to ascend the altar into God's fiery presence. The worshiper/animal must not only die, but it is necessary that he be properly prepared for God's holy presence. (Lev. 1:6–7)
4. Communion: The worshiper as represented now by the animal ascends into God's glory-presence (the fire on the altar) and becomes food for God. In effect, the animal has been turned into smoke and incorporated into God's glory cloud presence symbolized by the fire and cloud at the top of the altar. This is a communion meal.
5. Commissioning: Once the sacrifice is over, Yahweh sends the worshiper out renewed and empowered for service in the kingdom. (Num. 6:22–27)

The Lord serves us when He draws us near to Himself through “knife and fire” (Gen. 3:24), that is, by making us living sacrifices. This means that our reasonable liturgy, as the apostle Paul says in Romans 12:1–2, is to offer ourselves as “living sacrifices,” to submit to the Lord's transforming knife and His fire. The assertions made in these introductory paragraphs will take many pages to

explain and prove from the Scriptures, but we dare not move too quickly.

Abrogated or Fulfilled? Synagogue or Temple?

Before we move on to analyze the details of the sacrificial rituals and their application to the question of the form of Christian worship, I must stop and dispel a widespread misunderstanding in Reformed and Evangelical circles. In the remainder of this chapter I will present arguments for the continued relevance of the Old Testament's sacrificial rituals. The way of sacrifice has not been abrogated; *animal* sacrifices have. Discussion of the revocation of the sacrificial system has not always been carefully nuanced. The meaning and application of the Old Testament animal sacrificial system cannot be exhausted by referring it all to the historical work of Christ on the cross. This is a real weakness in post-Reformation Protestant theology (see the Westminster Confession of Faith 6:5, 8:5–6, and 29:1–2 for examples of this one-sided emphasis on the abrogation of sacrifice). In the New Testament sacrificial language is *not* confined to the historical work of Christ on the cross (Eph. 5:2; Heb. 9:26; 10:12). The author of Hebrews, for example, tells us that the entire Old Covenant sacrificial system “was symbolic for the present time” (Heb. 9:9–10).

As I shall illustrate shortly, much of the language used to describe the Church and the Christian life in the New Testament is derived from the tabernacle, temple, and sacrificial system. Contrary to some authors, the topic of the synagogue and its worship barely arise. This means that the reality of *life* in the new age was pre-figured in the sacrificial rituals of the old age. The life and worship of the Church of Jesus Christ do not so much derive from the synagogue (which was largely a peripheral institution in the old world),¹ but rather from the tabernacle/temple symbolism and rituals, as they are understood to be fulfilled by and in Christ.

¹ Donald D. Binder, *Into the Temple Courts: The Place of the Synagogue in the Second Temple Period* (SBL Dissertation Series 169; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1997).

Jerusalem was not the only place God commanded worship. According to Yahweh's explicit directions, every Sabbath day was to be a "holy convocation," one of the "feasts," according to Leviticus 23:1–3. Such a mandate demands local, weekly worship, and not in Jerusalem, but decentralized in the towns. This is surely the origin of what would later be styled "synagogues." The Sabbath services in the local gatherings were not explicitly regulated. In other words, God doesn't lay out a how-to list for synagogue worship like he does for sacrificial worship in the book of Leviticus. The absence of detailed regulations, however, did not mean freedom to do anything. Wise Levitical pastors and elders in the local towns would have understood that the regulations of the Temple and sacrificial system applied *mutatis mutandis* to the local services.² We know for a fact that synagogue practice was modeled on the temple, and by the time of Philo and Josephus synagogue worship was explicitly described in templar terms (e.g., prayers were described as "sacrifices," as in the New Testament, and the synagogue itself was considered holy space).³

Nevertheless, no first-century Jew would have failed to note a dramatic change in synagogue worship. Even though the pre-Christian synagogue services were modeled on the temple liturgy, the one thing they could never do during their weekly services was partake of the sacrificial meals. One memorialized Yahweh and experienced covenant renewal at the great feasting hall of the temple. In the new world, however, after the death and resurrection of Christ, the Church is the New Temple. She feasts with the King of Kings every week when she gathers. The fact that the covenant renewal meal is an integral part of weekly Christian worship was a dramatic experience for the first-century Jews. They understood the

² See Peter J. Leithart, "Synagogue or Temple? Models for Christian Worship," *Westminster Theological Journal* (forthcoming), and *From Silence to Song: The Davidic Liturgical Revolution* (Moscow: Canon Press, 2003), especially chapter 6.

³ Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History* (Raymond Scheindlin, trans.; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1993).

4

The Sacrificial Liturgy of Covenant Renewal

*Gather to me my faithful ones,
who cut a covenant with me by sacrifice.*
—Psalm 50:5

We have identified the purpose of the Lord’s Day corporate assembly as covenant renewal.¹ But as we have explained, and are about to explore in much more detail, God accomplishes covenant renewal through sacrifice. Therefore, we might also say that Christian worship is sacrificial. The way in which God renews His covenant with us is the way of sacrifice. Our reasonable *liturgy*, the apostle Paul says, is to “offer ourselves as living sacrifices” (Rom. 12:1–2). On the Lord’s Day God Himself draws near to draw His people near. The flaying knife of God’s Word and the transforming fire of his presence reconstitute and restore the

¹ Christian worship may be profitably understood from a number of theological and practical perspectives. I have chosen to analyze the Sunday service from the perspective of covenant renewal sacrifice because the preponderance of biblical evidence supports this frame of reference, but one might also consider the whole service as prayer, performance, family time, praise, drama, play, death and resurrection, dialogue, sermon, etc. Michael Scott Horton, for example, in his new book *A Better Way: Rediscovering the Drama of*

congregation, making them fit for life in His presence and work in His kingdom.² In response to God's covenantal initiative—His drawing near to us—we submit to His sacrificial work; that is, we confess, thank, praise, and pray as we are renewed through the Spirit and enabled to give unto our Covenant Lord the glory due His Name. And it all culminates with a meal. The Lord serves us bread and wine at the Table, where we experience as a community His *shalom*. This is the progression we must carefully examine in this chapter. Exactly how does this happen? The details, particularly the order of the sacrificial rituals so carefully described in the Old Testament, contain the divine pattern or liturgy for the people of God assembled for worship.

Learning to Like Liturgy

Before we begin to examine the covenantal, sacrificial order of Christian worship a defense of the word “liturgy” may be in order. The word “liturgy” is a Bible word and ought not to scare us, if we properly understand and qualify its meaning. In Romans 12:1, for example, we are urged, in response to God's mercy, to offer our bodies as living sacrifices. Such a course, we are told, is holy and pleasing to God; it is our “reasonable service.” The word translated “service” (or “worship” in some translations) is the Greek word *latreia*, which refers to the sacrificial “service” or “liturgy” by which

God-Centered Worship (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002) chooses to organize his discussion under the overarching theme of “drama,” and in so doing is able to incorporate satisfactorily these other perspectives (including covenant renewal). To my mind, however, covenant renewal sacrifice faithfully incorporates all of these other aspects and offers a better overall orientation to the movement of the liturgy as a whole. For more on the various aspects of worship see James B. Jordan, *Theses on Worship: Notes Toward the Reformation of Worship* (Niceville: Transfiguration Press, 1994).

²Note that what we customarily call the “Lord's Day” might also be identified as “the Day of the Lord,” which is its grammatical equivalent. Once we see this, we can read the Old Testament prophetic descriptions of the Day of the Lord and learn about what happens on Sunday. Every Sunday is a prototypical Day of the Lord. The Lord draws near to deliver His people and judge His enemies. The Last Day will be a cosmic, super Sunday.

the worshiper presents himself to God (Phil. 3:3; Heb. 9:9; 10:2; 12:28).

In Acts 13:2 the Antioch church's worship on the Lord's Day is described as follows: "On one occasion, while they were engaged in the liturgy of the Lord and were fasting, the Holy Spirit spoke to them" (my translation). Many newer translations speak of the church "ministering" to the Lord. The word "ministering" means "serving," and the Greek word used here is *leitourgeo*, which refers to public, congregational service—whether God's service to the people or the people's before God is hard to know. The language of Acts 13:2 ("the Lord's liturgy" or "service") is ambiguous, maybe purposefully so. It might refer to the service rendered *to* the Lord by the people or the service performed by the Lord *for* His people. Whether it is one or the other, or possibly both, one thing is sure: the assembled congregation at Antioch was engaged in what we would today call a "worship service." Like the Antiochene Christians we gather on the Lord's Day as the church, not to serve ourselves, but to be served by and to serve God. This is the "liturgy of the Lord."

In Hebrews 9:6 the word "liturgy" (*latreia*) refers to the ceremonies or rites of the priests in the old creation tabernacle and temple. In the new age God's people as a whole are priests. United to Jesus our high priest, the entire congregation has sanctuary access as "saints." A "saint" is a "holy one," a term that has special connotations. In the old order one who was holy could cross boundaries and enter into the tabernacle or temple without fear of punishment. Regular priests were invited into the Holy Place (Exod. 28:9) and High Priests into the Most Holy Place (Lev. 16:3; Heb. 9:25). After the ascension of Jesus into the heavenly tabernacle everyone united to Him has full sanctuary access as holy ones ("saints"). Therefore, as New Covenant priests the people of God perform priestly service (*latreia*) inside (not outside) God's house. This mode of "sacrificial living" *coram deo* ought to characterize our daily lives, to be sure, but on the Lord's Day there is a special sense in which we

are gathered together by God as the body of Christ in order to be drawn into God's holy presence as "living sacrifices."

The meaning of "liturgy," therefore, is intimately connected with the biblical practice of "offering" and "sacrifice" at the holy tabernacle and temple. More important than finding the word "liturgy" in the Bible is the recognition that God has established a carefully delineated way of approaching Him. God's way of graciously drawing us into his presence is not arbitrary, but follows a predictable sequence that is controlled by His holy and merciful character as the Triune God. According to the New Testament, the way or order in which God drew the sacrificial animals into His presence in the Old Testament symbolizes God's appointed way of drawing sinful human beings into His holy, but life-giving presence in His Son. By means of the sacrifice of "a son of the herd" (Lev. 1:5; literal translation) with the priest's help, Yahweh drew faithful worshipers near. Now in the new creation faithful worshipers are brought near in the Son with the help of the Spirit. This is the way of sacrifice. Sacrifice answers the question: "How are we drawn into God's presence?" The sacrifices are *qorban*, "that which is brought near" (Lev. 1:2; 2:1; 3:1–2; 4:23; 5:11; 7:38). Furthermore, the Hebrew verb "to sacrifice" or "offer" (*qrb*) is related and means, "to cause to draw near." The worshiper who offers a sacrificial animal draws near to God. Biblical sacrifice is not a technique invented by man in order to secure something from God or to draw down his favor. Rather, God has graciously provided man with a way of entering into His presence in His Son by His Spirit, and that way is the way of sacrifice.³

³For Israel, the sacrifice is based on the gracious will of God by which He has entered into a covenant relationship with his people, and the Lord therefore says concerning the blood of the offering in Leviticus 17:11: 'I have given it to you . . . on the altar.' In contrast to the position taken by Köhler, the sacrifice here then cannot be seen as a result of a human attempt to ascend to the 'unknown God,' for in it God rather descends to humankind in order to lead it back to himself. At the same time, it is made clear that this reestablishment of life in communion with God can proceed only by way of death. The sacrifice is thus given by the grace of God as a means of atonement . . ." A. Noordzij, *Leviticus*, translated by Raymond Togtman (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 20–21.

The way of sacrifice, therefore, is God's appointed way of mercifully bringing the worshiper near to Himself by means of the substitute/representative animal. Ultimately, this is the way of Jesus Christ's life, death, resurrection, and the resulting incorporation of His (and our) humanity into the Trinitarian family life of the Godhead. Jesus Christ offered Himself by the Spirit to the Father once for us all, and we, too, united to Christ, follow this pathway. By the Spirit we are drawn into God the Father's presence united to Jesus Christ.⁴ This is what happens every Lord's Day in the worship service. This is the way of sacrificial worship—united to Christ we are not only brought together by the Spirit, but by the same Spirit we are drawn into the Father's presence in His Son by cleansing, consecration, and communion.

The Sacrificial Pathway

The primary focus of this chapter is on issues surrounding the order of the service. I am referring to how the service progresses—what comes first, second, third, etc., and why *this* ought to follow *that*, and *that* follow *this*. Even though this temporal dimension of biblical worship has been largely neglected in our own tradition (the emphasis instead being on the “elements” of worship), I believe that explaining the biblical order or sequence of man's approach to God in the service may be the key to resurrecting a hearty Bible-based liturgy in our churches.

I am sorry to say that you will find very little help from our own tradition in this area. We talk a lot about “elements” and what is permitted or forbidden in worship, but questions about proper *order* or *sequence* remain for the most part unaddressed in our circles. Many Reformed theologians and pastors, of course, do have a

⁴ “There is a movement of grace (creation, revelation, salvation) from God toward the world—from the Father through the Son and in/by the Spirit; and there is a movement of grace (faith, love, obedience) from the world to God—to the Father through the Son and in/by the Holy Spirit” (Peter Toon, *Our Triune God* [Wheaton: Victor Books, 1996], 37).

general sense of how a worship service should be ordered, but they usually have not thought through *why* this order is appropriate.⁵ I believe that the traditional Christian liturgical order arose in the early Church from a gut-level familiarity with the biblical way of approaching God, even if Church theologians have not always explicitly identified the biblical source of their intuitions. After all, the Church's roots are Jewish. If Gentiles joined the people of God they were grafted into an olive tree that had been growing for many generations (Rom. 11:17, 24). The Apostles went "to the Jew first" (Rom. 1:16) so that the community that developed was thoroughly familiar with the temple meal rituals and would have naturally applied these to the new covenant meal. How else would they have done it? What I offer here is a reasonable biblical explanation of how the traditional order of Christian worship developed as the corporate, sacrificial, covenant renewal service of God.

Without going into too much detail up front, an outline of the temporal progression of sacrificial/covenantal worship ought to be established before we proceed to explain the service in detail. One might think of the three major "sections" or "movements" within the service as three "steps." The movement of the liturgy is an *ascent* into God's presence along the pathway He has established. Just as every sacrificial animal passed through three "zones" and underwent three major "operations" on its way up the altar and into the presence of God, so also the human worshiper travels the same sacrificial pathway up the "holy mountain" into God's presence. By faith we understand our progress during the Lord's Day service to be God's graciously drawing us into His presence, making us fit in

⁵ D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, for example, devote a little more than two pages (out of 190) to questions of order and sequence in worship. The sequence they commend is quite traditional, but their rationale for such an order is rather flimsy. They repeat the old saw that "Scripture does not provide a fixed order of worship" (*With Reverence and Awe: Returning to the Basics of Reformed Worship* [Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002], 97) and go on to suggest that the service ought to be ordered according to a "gospel logic." I have no problem with this as long as we remember that the gospel is grounded in the covenantal patterns and sacrificial system graciously given by God to His people in the Bible. If that fact were granted, then we could begin to think through the liturgical implications of the sequence of events performed in the sacrifices.

5

The Lord's Service and Ours

What do you have that you did not receive?
—1 Corinthians 4:7b

In view of the one-sided emphasis in some Evangelical and Presbyterian circles that the congregation gathers to *give* praise to God and not to *get* anything, I must insist on the lopsided, impoverished nature of this posture. We have been told by well-meaning teachers, even otherwise orthodox Reformed theologians, that it is downright wrong to come to church in order to get something. A popular shibboleth has it that Reformed or Presbyterian worship stands apart from other theologies of worship in that we do not come to church to *get* anything but to *give* praise and honor and glory to God. Regrettably, many modern Reformed works on worship take this position. The first sentence in John Frame's popular book on worship is: "Worship is *the work of acknowledging the greatness of our covenant Lord.*"¹ He assumes this definition throughout the book. I could

¹ John Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1996), 1 (his emphasis).

quote other recent Reformed authors to the same effect. Most of them define worship as what the people of God do, the work they perform on the Lord's Day, specifically the adoration, praise, and honor that they ascribe to God. This notion must not be permitted to go unchallenged. It is only half of the truth, and the *second* half at that.

First, and above all, we are called together in order to get, to receive. This is crucial. The Lord gives; we receive. Since faith is receptive and passive in nature, "faith-full" worship must be about receiving from God. He gives and by faith we receive. The Lutheran scholar Vajta is surely correct:

Faith will never reach that degree of maturity where it could live without receiving. A grateful reception of God's gracious gifts will always remain the task of Christian worship, for it is impossible to evolve a church service out of the spiritual assets of the believers.²

By faith Christians are given and receive God's forgiveness, Word, nourishment, and benediction in worship. We come as those who receive *first* and then, second, only in reciprocal exchange do we give back what is appropriate as grateful praise and adoration. More and more I am discovering, especially in our modern context, how crucial such a conception of worship is. Too often in conservative churches, worship or liturgy is described first of all as the "work of the people." While I do not deny that we "work" during worship, I do regard this definition as dangerously one-sided. Whatever we "do" in worship must always be a faithful *response* to God's gifts of forgiveness, life, knowledge, and glory—gifts we receive in the service. Without this perspective, the purpose of the Lord's Day assembly degenerates into an opportunity for Christian people to gather together and offer human devotion to God.

² Vilmos Vajta, *Luther on Worship* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), 129.

Slouching Towards Pelagianism

Stating it this way calls attention to two more related problems with this conception of worship. First, it is dangerously Pelagian. As Calvinists we should be able to see the Pelagian danger lurking in such a one-sided conception. Sadly, too often Calvinistic churches have embraced Calvin's *soteriological* reformation without also adopting or even understanding his correlative *liturgical* reformation. Hughes Oliphant Old explains, "What Calvin has in mind is that God is active in our worship. When we worship God according to his Word, he is at work in the worship of the church. For Calvin the worship of the church is a matter of divine activity rather than human creativity."³

And since Pelagianism goes hand in hand with a Unitarian understanding of God, it is no surprise that worship framed in these terms tends to ignore the Trinity. In the traditional liturgy the service of God on our behalf has a very definite Trinitarian shape to it. I will explore this in more detail in the next chapter, but for now it is enough to call attention to the fact that God *serves us* when He graciously draws us into the presence of the Father in spiritual union with His Son. This Trinitarian content and shape safeguards against Pelagian conceptions of the liturgy. When the liturgy embodies the service of the Triune God—not simply service to the Triune God, but Father, Son, and Holy Spirit's service for and in us—we are not likely to slouch towards Pelagianism. During the Divine Service the congregation is taken up into the giving and receiving that characterizes the inter-trinitarian relations between the Persons in the Godhead. God's eternal tri-personal life of loving give and take is the origin and ground of all such human activity in the liturgy.

Interestingly enough, not even God gives without the expectation of receiving something in return. First of all, within the

³ Hughes Oliphant Old, "John Calvin and the Prophetic Criticism of Worship," in *John Calvin & the Church: A Prism of Reform*, ed. by Timothy George (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 234.

society of the Trinity, the Father gives to the Son with the expectation that the Son will “give back” love and submission. The same thing can be said of each of the inter-personal relations within the Godhead. Secondly, God gives to his creatures with the expectation of receiving back from them love, fellowship, and submission. The Father gives the Son to us, and the Son, united as He is to humanity, is Himself humanity’s reciprocal gift. The offering [back] of humanity to God the Father is accomplished by the Spirit in the humanity of Jesus. We participate not only in receiving the gift of the Son but also in the Son’s mediation of humanity’s response to God. So then, giving in the hope of receiving does not imply a contractual understanding of personal relationships, either within the social life of the Trinity, or between God and man, or man and man. The word to describe the “rules” or “form” of this reciprocal giving and receiving is the word “covenant”.⁴

Much of what goes by the name “contemporary” worship has evacuated the Sunday service of God’s service to man as well as the proper Trinitarian context of our response. It is all about what *we* do. The reduction of Christian worship to “praise” and “giving worth to God” by well-intentioned conservative pastors desirous of purging the Church of superficial worship forms will only continue to feed the very thing that they oppose.

The Pastor as Jesus’ Representative

For example, to name one side effect of this kind of thinking, the disappearance of the minister as the Lord’s representative and

⁴ Some very interesting philosophical and theological work has been done here by John Milbank. See his “Can a Gift be Given? Prolegomena to a Future Trinitarian Metaphysic,” *Modern Theology* 11:1 (Jan. 1995):119–161 and “The Ethics of Self-Sacrifice,” *First Things* 90 (March 99): 33–38. Milbank’s articles, however, will be very difficult reading for almost anyone. Milbank aims at bringing radical Trinitarian orthodoxy to bear upon the current philosophical and societal question of what constitutes genuine personhood. As William T. Cavanaugh explains, “Milbank provides a corrective [to the notion of ‘pure’ gift] . . . in pointing out that a certain kind of exchange does take place in the divine gift. Although it is true that we can never make a return to God, ‘since there is nothing extra to God that could return to him,’ in the economy of the divine gift we participate in the divine life, such that the