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WW '72: CHAPTER 2 WORSHIP "IN SPIRIT AND IN TRUTH": LITURGY COMING TO LIFE

4) THE ARENAS OF WORSHIP: AN ANALOGY

In the fourth chapter of the Gospel of John, the Evangelist records a conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the Well of Sychar which provides a kind of commentary on what I have been saying about the relationship between



LITURGY AND LIFE. In a wonderfully condensed and economical dialogue, the Evangelist presents Jesus and the woman at the well discussing (of all things!) liturgy.

She points out that Jesus is a Jew, worshipping in Jerusalem. But she herself, she maintains, is a Samaritan — for whom Shechem is the holy place. It's as if she were trying to begin an argument about **LITURGY**: "I'm low church, whereas you are high church," or *vice versa*. Or, if you prefer, "Our worship is in German — God's language — whereas yours is in Swedish." Or again, if you prefer, "I'm a Missouri-Synod Lutheran, whereas you're only Presbyterian." You can fill in your own antipathies.

I am delighted to see Jesus sidestep that kind of argument. It's as if he says, in response to her needling, "Hold it, mother! You're all wrong. True worship is not a question of high church or low church, German or Swedish, Lutheran or Presbyterian. **TRUE WORSHIP** — worship 'in spirit and in truth' — has to do with life in faith — how you live. That's the kind of worship our Scriptures seek."

What happens **WHEN BELIEVERS GATHER**, then, is preparation for life — and more. Worship as cult, as liturgy or ritual, is proclamation and enactment of what ought to happen as you live your life day-by-day. It's the daily, hourly, life-of-love that's central. And in worship we have the possibility of meeting the Life-of-Love, by appointment, one could say.



Permit me then to identify **FOUR ARENAS** of human worship and to draw a simple analogy. The four arenas are these:

1. Life Itself
2. The Holy Communion, the gathering of the Family of God around Word and Sacraments
3. corporate prayer with others, with or without a discipline or rule, and
4. private, personal prayer and meditation.

So. Let's take them, one by one, using a simple **ANALOGY**.

1. The first arena of worship is life itself, as I have already suggested. **LIFE** itself is where we reveal what or who it is we “fear, love and trust above all things.” If the Christian does not, as they say, cut the mustard in daily life — in a faithful, loving response hour-by-hour to God and to the neighbour — then all other worship is a sham, no matter how pious or pretty or proper it may be. I hope that it is quite clear by now. Your life ought to be a prayer. Your life ought to be perceived by others as a prayer.

2. With life itself at the centre, let's think of **HOLY COMMUNION** — the gathering of the family of God around the Word and Sacraments — as a condensation, a drama, proclaiming and enacting, in the space of an hour's time, all that we hold to be most important about life. From the point of view of “religion” as I have used that term here, this is what The Sunday Service is all about. It is a drama, a representation in word and in action of the deepest realities of human life as Christians know that life.

But there's more. For the Christian, life itself is illuminated, rescued and re-directed by the One whom we are bold to call The Life, Jesus of Nazareth. So The Service on Sunday morning is not only a drama — something we do, something we enact — it is also a **MEETING** with the Lord of Life.

And that meeting provides liturgy with its significance from the standpoint of “**REVELATION**” as I have used that term. The Holy Communion is without doubt a Word and a dramatic Enactment of what Christians hold to be most important about life. That Word-in-Enactment is, so to speak, its human meaning, its cultural meaning, its anthropological meaning, its secular meaning, its “religious” meaning. (And it is one of the prejudices of this book that this cultural meaning is too often ignored by Protestants.)

But there is another meaning to the Liturgy for Christians: It is a meeting with the Lord

of Life and with one's sisters and brothers in the family of faith. It is, yes, a **COMMUNION**.

That is the chief reason why I prefer the term Holy Communion over the term **EUCCHARIST**, which has an equally impressive history in the church and which is being used once again by many today as a substitute. The term Eucharist (Greek for "Thanksgiving") is too one-directional. Eucharist certainly suggests appropriately what we do here, with a resonance of joy too often missing in most of our so-called celebrations. But it is one-directional. It describes well what I do, towards God and towards God's gifts, that is, give thanks. But — if you're following me — I feel it remains too "religious" a term, in the sense of the word "religious" suggested in this chapter.



The term Communion, on the other hand, is multi-directional. It implies a meeting, a **MUTUALITY**, a dialogue, an exchange. Perhaps I'm being rather flat-footed here, but the term retains for me more of the aspects of "revelation" in worship without denying the "religion" in worship. The Communion is a drama of Thanksgiving, sure. But it is also a meeting with the Lord of Life. And with our brothers and sisters in faith.

As for that drama, let's remember who is **ON STAGE** and who is in the audience. In popular misconception, it is the people who are in the audience (the nave), with the pastor, leaders and choir performing on stage (the chancel). And God is in the prompter's box, whispering cues now and then to the actors. Most of our church architecture — with clearly-defined nave and chancel — contributes to this perception. But it's the wrong one, as Søren Kierkegaard reminds us.

Kierkegaard says that in Christian worship we are **ALL** on stage — the whole Christian assembly as actors in the drama. Perhaps the pastor, leaders and choir are in the prompter's box. And it is God who is in the audience, as judge and critic, who will write the final Review. Of course — and our analogy disintegrates as we admit it — God is also the Author. And the lead Actor!

3. If, then, from the point of view of religion — from the point of view of what we Christians are doing here — The Communion is a dramatic enactment, in the space of an hour's time, of all that Christians hold to be most true about life, then our moments of corporate prayer with others take on the character of **REHEARSAL** for that drama, and for life itself. "Religiously" speaking, in Matins, Vespers or any other occasion for corporate worship which is not Communion, we are rehearsing our part in The Drama, understood as both liturgy and life. That rehearsal can include both word and action. It is essentially a corporate discipline for faith, preparing us for life.

Like The Holy Communion (The Drama) and life itself, this rehearsal is also an occasion for meeting, since the **WORD** will be there in hymns, psalms, scripture, prayers, preaching, or other witness. It differs from *The Drama* (The Communion) in being

brief, simpler and a partial enactment. Yet the Word is there, and it will be a “real presence” too, “incarnated” in human proclamation and in human presence. And if the Word is not present — if there is no reference, in human word or human action, to the saving acts of God in the history of Israel and of Jesus Christ — then it simply is not Christian worship; We are not rehearsing the correct script. More of this later in Chapter Three.

4. If Life-in-Christ itself is the centre, if The Communion be understood as a dramatic enactment of that life, and if corporate prayer becomes a rehearsal for that drama and for that life, then where does private, personal prayer fit in? Within the limits of our analogy, private, personal prayer becomes the **PRACTICE** of one’s individual part. That is, “religiously” speaking, my role in private devotion or meditation: I am practising for my role, submitting to a discipline that better prepares me to take my place on stage — and in life — with all others in the family of faith.

Of course, as with all of these experiences, in private devotion too there is the dimension of “religion” — our words and actions — and also the dimension of “revelation” — meeting with the Word. That Word is present here too, or should be, or it is not Christian “practice.” That Word is present in the words and acts of recollection, thanksgiving, participation, proclamation or expectation that go to make up the personal, disciplined practice of my role. This meeting with the Word will be enough to justify any act of worship in its own right, because it is an authentic **ENCOUNTER** with the Lord of Life.

As with all analogies, this one mustn’t be pressed too far. There are certainly limitations and dangers in this analogy, as in all others. Perhaps the chief **DANGER** in an analogy using drama is the temptation to make of worship some kind of theatrical experience. But if we can begin with a clear idea of what it is we’re doing when we “name the Name” of God in Christ, in private worship or in public, then there is at least the possibility that our reforms in liturgy will have begun from the correct centre.

As for that **REFORM**, if there are possibilities for a vibrant, vital, lively liturgy, that possibility hinges on our faithfulness to two realities which ought to inform and instruct all our worship, as they ought to inform and instruct our obedience generally as Christians. I refer to our Tradition and our times: God’s Word addressing us out of our past, present — and future! In Chapter Three we will ask, “How is the God we know in Jesus addressing us out of our Tradition, out of all that we have been given from our past?” In Chapter Four we will ask, “How is that Eternal Good addressing us out of our times, out of the contours, shapes and styles of contemporary culture?”

Theologian Karl Barth has reminded us that in our day we must do our theology with the Bible in one hand and the *New York Times* in the other. It is something like this which I am suggesting here as our **LITURGICAL** homework as well.

