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WW '72: CHAPTER 2

WORSHIP "IN SPIRIT AND IN TRUTH": LITURGY COMING TO LIFE

1) REVELATION AND RELIGION

Perhaps my argument with Bonhoeffer — see Essay 91, above — is simply a matter of meanings, of **DEFINITIONS**.

He — and Barth, and my teachers in Seminary long ago -- have simply defined the term differently from me: as a pejorative. "Religion" for them

represents the kind of easy pelagianism that characterizes so much of contemporary life when you mention the term. "Religion" for them is a pulling-yourself-up-by-your-own-bootstraps kind of spiritual struggle, a set of rules or rites designed to discipline the heart, devoid of any dimension of grace. Of course I'd want to reject that too. If THAT is what you mean by the term.



But "religion," as I would want to mean it, is not that. For me, religion has to do with the *humanum*. It's simply part of the package of our **HUMANITY**, neither good nor bad, but simply there. The word, as I would want to use it, refers to the heights and depths of human life as they are humanly perceived and humanly enacted. Paul Tillich defines religion simply as the content of human culture, just as, for him, culture is the form of religion. It is the human response — in life, in creed, in code and in cult — to the deepest realities of human life as they are humanly perceived. It is the human response to any one of a great variety of possible "gods" — whatever or whoever it is we "fear, love and trust in above all things."

It's good to keep in mind as well what religion is **NOT**, in the view I'm espousing here. It's not pelagianism, as I've noted. And it's not revelation. Religion has often been contrasted with, distinguished from, revelation.



Revelation, for the Christian — for me anyhow — refers to the specific content of the Divine self-disclosure to us, especially in the history of Israel and in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Whereas religion is universal and spontaneous and goes along with our humanity, **REVELATION** — of the God of Israel and of Jesus Christ — is specific. It must be taught, preached, proclaimed, announced. It is my contention that all people everywhere are religious, without even trying. But only some are Christians.

However — and this is, I suppose, the burden of my argument — the revelation of God in Christ by the Holy Spirit is always a *mediated* revelation. It is always “masked;” it is always **INCARNATIONAL**. It is always “in the shape of a human being.” For the Christian this means that the eternal Gospel of God in Jesus Christ will always assume a human form, with all the potential for offense in that form that our forebears knew in the Original Enfleshment. Jesus said, “Blessed is the one who takes no offense at me.” Incarnation always includes the possibility of offense.

Hence, let me suggest then in these pages a different definition of religion. Far from being a set of rites or rules for achieving spiritual growth or for attaining eternal salvation, “religion”, in my definition, is simply part of the **FLESH** of the incarnation. Our incarnational theology, as Christians, will not allow us to do away with “religion” — that is, human cultural forms — any more than it will allow us to do away with human institutional forms, or human ethical forms or human theological forms. All these are part of the “flesh” which the eternal Word assumes when that Word comes to dwell among us.

So the Christian “revelation” is always and everywhere and unavoidably and necessarily **MEDIATED** through “religion”. Otherwise we would be spiritualists or docetists. And “blessed is the one who takes no offence....”

Of course, some cultural forms mediate the Gospel **MORE CLEARLY** than others. As with our church theology, our church ethics and our church order, so also with our church liturgies. Sometimes, in the long history of the church, “religious” forms have helped the Holy Spirit in the witness of the Word among us. And sometimes, quite frankly, they have hindered that witness.

It remains for us to investigate (in the next chapters) precisely those cultural forms, those “religious” forms, which mediate the Christian revelation and to ask of them, “Are these **FAITHFUL** witnesses? Do these forms incarnate the Gospel for our age? Is the Kingdom of God — which comes indeed of itself, without our prayer, without our

participation in it, if need be — is this Kingdom of God coming also among us, announced also among us, proclaimed also among us, enacted also among us by means of these forms? Or not?” To ask these questions is to begin the task of liturgical reconstruction.

2) THE LITURGICAL MOVEMENT: A DEFINITION

Mention “**LITURGY**” today and most people will summon up pictures of either (a) the antiquarian searching through medieval manuscripts with the intent of imposing some ancient ritual on modern congregations, or (b) the aesthete, concerned with the Finer Things in Life and eager to Make Our Worship Beautiful. If these two caricatures were ever accurate (and I suppose there is at least a measure of truth in them), please be advised those are not my intentions here. I’m not talking here about antiquarianism, although surely history and tradition must be respected. And although the aesthetic is not my primary concern in these pages, I want to be certain to honour both God’s creation and our human culture.



What is the modern liturgical movement? From my perspective, I observe a real **CONSENSUS** emerging in the Christian church, cutting right through confessional and denominational differences, as to what liturgical renewal in our day is all about.

I would suggest that it has to do with bringing “liturgy to life.” **LITURGY COMING TO LIFE** is the title of Bishop John A.T. Robinson’s helpful little book, and he means his title to be read backwards as well as forwards. The Church’s liturgical homework, since before the Second Vatican Council of the 1960’s, has involved a rediscovery of the significance of the Reformers’ suggestive prepositions — “in, with and under” — in their explication of the meanings of the Holy Communion. The Lord of Life is present, the Reformers maintained, “in, with and under” the bread and wine.

Liturgical renewal means at least this: an acknowledgment of the possibilities of discovering and discerning the presence of the Lord “in, with and under” a Word and an Action, discovering and discerning the presence of the **HOLY** “in, with and under” the **COMMON**. This is an insight which can instruct all of our common life, including our cultic liturgies.

At its base, it is nothing more than a return to the classic catholic insistence, *finitus est capax infiniti* — that God has made this world in such a way that the finite can receive and contain and show forth the infinite. The Common, in Robinson’s rendering, is capable of the Holy. Hence It’s no accident that Christians call their chief act of **WORSHIP** the Holy Communion: the Holy “in with and under” the Common.

In still other language, liturgical **RENEWAL** means a new appreciation of the fact that we have a heavenly treasure in earthen vessels, in the Written Word of scripture, in the

Spoken Word of sermon and Christly conversation, and in the Enacted Word of sacrament and of service. It is to assert, with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, that worship in a secular age is like life in a secular age, requiring both a worldly holiness and a holy worldliness.

This has been an exciting **DISCOVERY** for me, making all the difference in liturgy and in life. It provides for the possibility of a life lived out under the Good News proclaimed and enacted in the liturgy, and a liturgy throbbing with the juices of life. It contains the implication that any valid statement about life-in-love, as the Christian understands that life in Jesus Christ, should also be a valid statement about liturgy, and vice versa.

Our **CHALLENGE** in finding what's vital in worship in the church today is actually quite simple, whether you're speaking of a rural parish of fifty souls or a "megachurch" with a membership of thousands. It's the same challenge as that addressed by Paul in his letter to the Romans. On the one hand, how shall we make our life a genuine act of worship — "a living sacrifice" — to the God of Jesus Christ? And on the other hand, how shall we make our worship a genuine expression, in word and in action, of our lives and of that Life which enlivens everyone?

It is our **ASSIGNMENT** in these pages to investigate the possibility in our congregations for a vibrant, vital, various, lively liturgy. But before we turn to that work, let's look at life itself as living sacrifice.

3) LITURGY AND LIFE: "PRESENT YOUR BODIES..."



One of the major contributions of the liturgical movement has been the insight that worship is chiefly **ACTION**. Pastors and laypeople are rediscovering that what happens among Christians on Sunday morning is primarily a meeting, an encounter with God and with one another and our response in that encounter.

Liturgy and **ETHICS** meet where the life of faith — the life of love-in-action — becomes a liturgy wherever it is lived. As we shall see in our next installment, and as the Hebrew prophets long ago insisted, the truest "liturgy", the truest worship — "in spirit and in truth" — becomes the act of mercy to the dispossessed, the act of justice to the exploited, the act of loving concern to the unlovable. On the corporate level it includes attention to politics, economics, business, industry, production, distribution, environment, and development. It is no accident that those Christians most directly concerned with living worship in our day are often the same people, pastors and laity, who live and act for social justice, civil rights and peace at home and abroad — often at great personal cost.

If liturgy and ethics do not **MEET**, if liturgy and life do not meet, at the altar and in the world, then we are simply no longer walking within the tradition of Israel and of Jesus.

Liturgy, rightly understood, has **NEVER** been simply the fussy preoccupation of a few antiquarians or aesthetes. At its most basic level it requires each of us to present our bodies as a living sacrifice.



“Present your bodies” at the **ALTAR**. Yes, of course.

But also in the world, in your work, in your **LIFE**. It is one offering, one presenting. And that, friend, today as in other ages, is apt to cost you something.

