

The Function of a Theology of Worship

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THE QUESTION of what liturgics is has received neither a unanimous nor a theologically satisfactory answer in evangelical theology.

1

Prior to the eighteenth century there was hardly such a thing as liturgics as a disciplined concern with the questions of public worship. It is no accident that the theology of the *Aufklärung* was really the first to concern itself with liturgical questions, whereas Orthodoxy quite obviously betrays no real interest in it at all. After the theological and practical decisions with regard to the service of worship were made by the Reformation it was not until the period of the *Aufklärung*, with its enthusiasm for reforms, that the service came to be viewed theologically as the rational Christian society's "worship of God." The Protestant "cultus" was cleansed of its Reformation tradition, which by then had become unintelligible, and the reason given was the improvement of Christian worship in the spirit of a reasonable Christianity. Pietism—apart from Herrnhut—took no part in the discussion of liturgical questions, since the area of the public worship of the church lay outside its purposes. It was not until the great theological change at the beginning of the nineteenth century, in connection with Romanticism, that the evangelical church became interested in liturgical questions in any comprehensive and fundamental way. This was the beginning of Protestant liturgics.

This liturgics, of course, was peculiarly embarrassed both with regard to its theological foundation and its method as well as the material that was supposed to come within its province. The evidence for this is easily found in the numerous works on liturgics in the nineteenth century. The most complete of them all, the liturgics of Georg Rietschl, which sums up the results of the century, will serve as an example. (This book has been published in a second edition by Paul Graff fifty years after its first appearance.)² This learned work is decidedly weak theologically, strong as it is historically. It contains a tremendous mass of material, but it lacks any fundamental theological consciousness and therefore, despite all that can be learned from it, it is not properly a book on the doctrine of the liturgy. In this respect better attempts will be found in the old Erlangen

1 Translated by John W. Doberstein from an article in *Theologische Literaturzeitung*, Vol. 79, Number 9 (Sept., 1954).

2 Georg Rietschl, *Lehrbuch der Liturgik*, 2 vols., Berlin, 1900 and 1909, ed. by Paul Graff (Göttingen, 1951).

liturgiologists and also in the work of E. Christian Achelis.³ On the other hand, the liturgical sections of the numerous comprehensive books on practical theology published up to the thirties of this century are extremely brief, particularly with regard to the theological questions involved. What is the reason for this treatment of liturgics?

2

The cause of this uncertainty in Protestant liturgics is to be found in the system of practical theology inaugurated by Schleiermacher and Nitzsch. The idea of this practical theology is based on an autonomous ecclesiology, or, in other words, a philosophical view of Christianity as a religion.

Nineteenth century liturgics thought of itself as a discipline of "practical theology." It has adhered to this idea to this day, as if it were self-evident that liturgics must be subsumed under the idea of practical theology along with homiletics and other disciplines. But this is where we raise two questions. First, we must question the theological rightness of the idea of practical theology in the form set forth so influentially by Schleiermacher. The conception of Christianity that underlies it has been demolished by the work in dogmatics that has been going on since the end of World War I. It therefore becomes necessary to subject to a thorough re-examination the structure of this practical theology which is still determined by a concept of Christianity or the church derived from a philosophy of religion. It would take us too far afield from our theme to discuss this in detail. We must be content here to make it clear that a liturgics which is incorporated in this system is subjected to a premise which right from the start changes its foundation and its purpose. In this system liturgics becomes a theory of the forms of religious expression in Christianity, a description of the cultic forms which the religious life of the church has taken. Then it is no longer a theological discipline, but only a phase of a study of Christian piety or a Christian psychology of religion.

Our second question is this: Is liturgics a sub-discipline of practical theology even if we do not interpret practical theology in the sense intended by Schleiermacher and Nitzsch? It is quite possible that practical theology may discover a new and better theological basis. It is even probable that there can be such a thing as "practical theology" as a discipline of theology. But then the question remains whether liturgics can be simply a component of this practical theology. It cannot be doubted that liturgics has "practical" aspects. But it is not possible to view it as purely practical. It would be disastrous to think of it simply as a set of directions for the practice of liturgical acts. Liturgics is something essentially different, if it is rightly understood. If it is the doctrine of the worship of the church

3 E. Christian Achelis, *Lehrbuch der Praktischen Theologie*, 3rd ed., 3 vols. (Leipzig, 1911).

—and dare it be anything less than that?—then its function is that of a genuine theological discipline, just as surely as the worship of the church belongs not in a marginal area but rather in the center of her life.

3

This uncertainty in liturgics can be overcome only by a clarification of its theological foundations, and this is urgently needed in evangelical theology.

Evangelical theology has for too long concerned itself only marginally with the theological implications of liturgical questions. It has been taken for granted that the implications of theology for the liturgy were obvious. Even in practical theology liturgics has usually been treated as incidental. There have been seminars in homiletics and catechetics but not in liturgics. Almost never have there been lectures on liturgics as a major discipline. And in the area of liturgical research evangelical theology has hardly been represented at all. Only in very recent times have changes begun to emerge. In church history Lietzmann⁴ was a pioneer. He devoted a great part of his researches to the worship of the church. In New Testament scholarship attention was directed to the liturgical elements by Lohmeyer,⁵ Cullmann,⁶ and Delling.⁷ Dogmaticians, too, have turned to the discussion of liturgical questions, among them Karl Barth,⁸ Paul Althaus,⁹ and Peter Brunner.¹⁰ The first "practical theologian" to draft a liturgics based on a new theological orientation was Hans Asmussen.¹¹ Add to this the liturgical writings of Wilhelm Stählin, which are available in many essays and brochures.¹² More recently, Peter Brunner, a dogmatician, has made the first comprehensive contribution of evangelical theology to the doctrine of the liturgy in his essay "On the Doctrine of the Liturgy of the Congregation Assembled in the Name of Jesus Christ" in *Leiturgia*.¹³ The monograph by Vilmos Vajta, a Hungarian disciple of the Lund theology, *Luthers Theologie des Gottesdienstes*,¹⁴ Wilhelm Hahn's

4 For example, Lietzmann, *Geschichte der alten Kirche*, 4 vols. (Berlin, 1937 ff.); *Messe und Herrenmahl* (Bonn, 1926).

5 Ernst Lohmeyer, *Kultus und Evangelium* (Göttingen, 1942).

6 Oscar Cullmann, *Unchristentum und Gottesdienst* (Zürich, 1950).

7 Gerhard Delling, *Der Gottesdienst im Neuen Testament* (Berlin, 1952).

8 Karl Barth, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik* (Zollikon, 1932 ff.), for example, I, 2, pp. 229-261; 406-504; etc.

9 Paul Althaus, "Der Sinn der Liturgie," in *Luthertum*, Vol. 47, 1936.

10 Peter Brunner, *Die Ordnung des Gottesdienstes an Sonn- und Feiertagen* (Gütersloh, 1949).

11 Hans Asmussen, *Die Lehre vom Gottesdienst* (München, 1937).

12 For example, "Evangelische Jahresbriefe" (five articles on the German mass). *Um was geht es bei der liturg. Erneuerung* (Kassel, 1950)? "Liturgische Erneuerung als ökum. Frage und Aufgabe," in *Zeichen der Zeit*, Nos. 3-5.

13 *Leiturgia, Handbuch des evangelischen Gottesdienstes*, ed. by K. F. Müller und W. Blankenburg (Kassel, 1952).

14 Lund, 1952.

Gottesdienst und Opfer Christi,¹⁵ and K. F. Müller's "*Die Neuordnung des Gottesdienstes in Theologie und Kirche*,"¹⁶ should also be mentioned.

These references may be sufficient to show that the need for thorough-going theological thinking on the questions of liturgy is being recognized. A beginning has been made which can lead to liturgics becoming a proper discipline in evangelical theology. Only a dogmatic clarification of its foundations can overcome the uncertainty and embarrassment that have hitherto characterized liturgics. Vajta's fine book on Luther's theology of the liturgy indicates the main theological questions which are involved in an evangelical liturgics. Moreover, the situation created for evangelical theology and the evangelical church by the ecumenical movement¹⁷ makes it imperative that we make our contribution to the ecumenical discussion of the worship of the Christian church instead of standing by in uncertainty because we have not taken the trouble to give adequate theological clarification to one of the most important of all the ecumenical questions which involve the unity of the church.

The foundations of liturgics cannot be laid within the framework of practical theology, however it may be constructed, but neither can it be based upon an ecclesiology, since the subject matter of liturgics cannot be derived from ecclesiology.

We have already raised the question whether liturgics can have its basis within the framework of practical theology. The subject matter of liturgics can no more be classified with practical theology than can, say, church polity. Its function is not primarily "practical," but rather "theoretical," that is, dogmatic. This would be scanted in the framework of a practical theology, unless one were to create an entirely new concept of practical theology. But even then it would be questionable whether the doctrine of the liturgy does not rather require a place in the total plan of theology—like ethics, for example, which in a sense is also a kind of "practical" theology.

Then it may occur to some that liturgics might be based on an ecclesiology.¹⁸ After all, it is concerned with the worship of the church. There can be no doubt that the service of worship is an act of the church, the church in action. But this is precisely where we must ask what is the relation between the church and the service of worship. There is in our time a strong tendency in the direction of re-constituting evangelical theology in the area of ecclesiology. For a long time theological discussion has centered essentially upon the question of the church,

15 *Eine Untersuchung über das Heilsgeschehen im Gottesdienst* (Göttingen, 1951).

16 In *Theologie und Liturgie*, ed. by L. Hennig (Kassel, 1952).

17 Cf. the discussion prepared for the world conference in Lund, 1952, *Ways of Worship, The Report of a Theological Commission of Faith and Order* (London, 1952).

18 For example, E. Pfennigsdorf, *Praktische Theologie*, 2 vols. (Gütersloh, 1930); M. Schian, *Grundriss der Praktischen Theologie* (Giessen, 1922).

especially since this question has been put in the foreground by the ecumenical movement. Besides, questions of the church are playing an outstanding role everywhere in Christendom, especially in Germany. Nevertheless, we ought to be warned against a development of theology as ecclesiology, but most certainly against tying liturgics to this sphere. The result would be simply a new statement of the view of Schleiermacher. But if the church is, as Luther phrased it, a "creation of the Word" (*creatura verbi*) and nothing but a creation of the Word, not even in the sense of being a creation of the Word besides being a sociological product, then certainly the worship of the church must be understood, not as a creation of the church, but as a creation of the Word. If it is certain that it is the worship of the church, then it is just as certain that it is not primarily the worship that the church creates, but rather the worship that creates, upholds, and sustains the church—*creatura verbi*. Therefore, to make the doctrine of the liturgy a part of the doctrine of the church or to derive it from it cannot be made to accord with the fundamental Reformation understanding of the church and the Word of God.

The foundation of liturgics dare not be keyed to ecclesiology any more than can ethics or church polity. Otherwise the likelihood would be that we should find ourselves moving on lines that characterize the theology of the Roman Catholic Church. And what would come of it could, according to Karl Barth, be only a bad copy of the Roman system.

5

The foundation of liturgics must consist in a theology of the service which is a development of the theology of the Word, for the doctrine of the liturgy is a function of dogmatics just as is ethics. Both are fundamental constituents of dogmatic theology.

If we are right in starting with the assumption that liturgics is first of all the doctrine of the liturgy, it follows that the foundation for it must be laid in a dogmatic consideration of the concept of worship. One might call this also the theology of the liturgy. No less a theologian than Karl Barth has presented something like a theology of worship in his book on the Scottish Confession, "The Knowledge of God and the Worship of God according to Reformed Doctrine,"¹⁹ and also in frequent references in his dogmatics. There is also a dogmatic discussion of the liturgy in a section of Asmussen's "The Doctrine of the Liturgy." In both it is evident that the theology of the liturgy is indeed a development of the doctrine of the Word of God. The same applies to Peter Brunner's extensive contribution already mentioned. Here the right theological starting point has been achieved, and the doctrine of Christian worship is determined by the conception of the Word of God. Only there can an evangelical liturgics find its standards,

19 *Gotteserkenntnis und Gottesdienst nach reformierter Lehre*, 1938.

just as evangelical ethics must start there. Like ethics, liturgics, too, is a part of dogmatic theology. It could, insofar as it is a theology of worship, be included in dogmatics. But, as in the case of ethics, it may prove right—Karl Barth to the contrary—to make it relatively independent of dogmatics, especially since liturgics may consist not only of the theology of the liturgy, but also includes in its essential field of work historical and practical elements without which it would be incomplete. Liturgics stands alongside of ethics. Both are to be understood as theological disciplines founded upon dogmatics. It should at least be noted that there can be no thought of deriving liturgics from ethics. But a theology of the liturgy will have to make it clear that the evangelical concept of the service of worship will not allow a separation of “cultus” from “ethos,” and yet that it is impossible that the Christian service of God be merely identified with ethical obedience.

6

Only a dogmatic reflection which is centrally Christological will lead to a legitimate doctrine of the liturgy, which is the chief part of liturgics.

Hitherto liturgics has suffered from the fact that it has neglected to lay a theological foundation or treated it too lightly. Thus the impression was given that the main constituent of liturgics is a history of the liturgy and that the history of the liturgy itself would provide the standard for the treatment and solution of practical liturgical questions. But then liturgics became more a subdivision of comparative symbolics, understood as a description of the various kinds of services in the Christian churches. From these it was only a step to liturgics as a part of the phenomenology of religion or the psychology of religion, as, for example, in Niebergall.²⁰ Naturally, the Christian service of worship as a religious phenomenon can be made the subject of the scientific study of religion. But this method will not show us its essential nature any more than one can see the Gospel or the church from the point of view of a philosophy of religion.

Liturgics must not allow itself to be made into an empirical, descriptive science. It must not be oriented upon the psychology of religion or anthropology, if it is to be, what in truth it is, a theological discipline. But since the Christian service of worship can be understood only theologically, then a doctrine of the Christian service of worship can also grow only out of dogmatic theology. And what will be determinative here is that this dogmatic theological thinking be centrally Christological. And here, too, the possibility, which very easily suggests itself, of thinking of the church's worship as the particular Christian manifestation of the universally human worship of God must be sternly resisted. It is revealing to see in textbooks of Roman Catholic liturgics how they begin theologically with a general concept of worship, and unfortunately, many evangelical liturgiologists

20 Friedrich Niebergall, *Praktische Theologie*, Vol. II (Tübingen, 1919).

have followed them in this respect. This is precisely the point, however, where under no circumstances can we operate with natural theology, if we are not to make a right understanding of Christian worship impossible from the very start. It is by no means accidental that in the New Testament acts of worship are not described in terms of ideas taken from the worship life of the Jews and pagans. Christian worship can be expounded only in relation to Christ; that is, its foundation must be Christological. Christian worship is founded exclusively upon the Christ-event and therefore it is fundamentally different from all human worship of God. Because this is so, liturgics has a legitimate place as the theological doctrine of Christian worship.

7

The function of liturgics as the theological doctrine of Christian worship is not to devise and construct the Christian liturgy, but rather to determine the dogmatic place of the service, to set forth its essential nature on the basis of the apostolic witness, and to present the principles which should govern the forms of worship.

Liturgics dare not think of its task as being that of giving an analysis of the Christian liturgy on the basis of the *historical* materials and thus achieving a synthesis. Nor must we expect of liturgics that it see as the goal of its theological endeavor the construction of the correct Christian service of worship, as it were, the *ideal form* of worship achieved through theology. This has, of course, been attempted again and again in various quarters. This would seem to me, however, to be a misunderstanding of its theological task which rests upon a misunderstanding of Christian worship. By its very nature the Christian service of worship does not come into being as a theological construction of experts, but is rather that which occurs in the history of the church as a meeting of the Lord, acting in Word and sacrament through the Holy Spirit, with his church, the liturgical form of which is the product of the faith and obedience of Christendom.

It is no accident that in the New Testament we find no definite, normative "original form" of worship, no "sacred liturgy!"

It is not the task of liturgics to supply this lack. Not even the Roman mass can be misconstrued as the product of theological construction. It, too, is something that grew in the long history of the church. The only task of liturgics as the doctrine of the liturgy is theological reflection upon the liturgy. As such its first task is to define the dogmatic place of the liturgy and thus clarify the question of the relationship between the Christian service of worship as an event in the church and the saving event in Christ and the appropriation of salvation. Further, its task, above all, is to search the Scriptures, that is, the apostolic witness, and gain from them the answer to what is the essence of the Christian service of worship, in which task it should naturally take into account also the witness of the

church in its confessions. This opens up a profusion of questions that require a theological answer, beginning with the fundamental question of the *saving event* in the worship of the church, so impressively treated by Peter Brunner—the understanding of it as God's service to the congregation in the administration of the means of grace as well as the congregation's service to God in prayer and praise, in which connection especially the question of the relation between the service of worship and the sacrifice of Christ has again been revived. But the church year, with its Sundays and festivals, and music and art in the service also set tasks which need to be thought through theologically. This also enjoins upon liturgics the task of coming to terms with the conception of the service of worship and the forms it takes in various Christian confessions. By carrying out these tasks a theology of the liturgy can finally arrive at the point of setting up definite principles or guide lines for the right form of worship in the church.

8

The theology of the liturgy provides the critical canon by which to test and judge the Christian service of worship in its historical form. Its function with regard to the liturgy is critical, not creative and constructive. It shows practical liturgics, which give directions for the right disposition and conduct of services, the ways in which the church may employ the service of worship.

Just as theology as a whole has an essentially critical function in the church, so liturgics as a theological discipline also performs a critical function. We have already pointed out that it cannot be the function of liturgics to create the liturgy for the church. This does not mean that a liturgiologist may not participate in a reform of the liturgy when this is deemed necessary in a church. Indeed, in some circumstances it is part of his task as a theologian to press for a needed reform of the liturgy and make it his concern that the tradition of the church shall not be looked upon as sacrosanct and inviolable. But his real task as a scientific theologian is, like that of the dogmatician, to test the doctrine and preaching of the church by the Scriptures, to examine and to judge theologically the worship of the church in its historical form, as it appears in the liturgics of the church, in the light of what he learns from the apostolic testimony of the Scriptures as the doctrine of worship. Here, too, is the only place where we can work out theologically the critical canon which will make it possible to define our position with regard to the history of the liturgy and its results. And the history of the liturgy presents us with a whole series of fundamental theological questions, the discussion of which we dare not leave to the Anglicans and Benedictines. Only when it has done this can liturgics undertake a genuine *practical*-theological task, which, to be sure, is also in its province and which is certainly to be looked upon as the goal of this work.

The worshiping church of the present needs not only a right understanding of what it is actually doing when it holds services; it also needs help and counsel and direction in so conducting and so fashioning these services—and this is its task when it responsibly undertakes the ministry of Word and sacrament—that through the Word and sacrament they may be “worship in spirit and in truth.”



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