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# Disrupting Worship

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# Disrupting Worship

DIRK G. LANGE

## POSING THE QUESTION

When we think of Christian worship today, our questions are often couched in utilitarian language. “What is worship for?” might be the most common expression and certainly the most blatant example of such an approach, though, of course, the question knows many variations: How can worship be used to further our goals, whether they be evangelism, doxology, community, or church growth? Worship is considered a tool or instrument that can subsequently be confined or limited to very specific parameters. The “what for” question always carries with it the danger inherent in definitions—the danger of systematization or categorization.

The world of megachurches and other forms of popular revival worship poses the question in these categorical terms. Practitioners—presiders and preachers—of so-called “traditional” worship services, no matter what denomination, feel obliged to respond in pragmatic categories to the successful megachurches rather than formulating the questions about worship, about liturgy, in biblical terms. Not that the experience of revival worship is unbiblical; in fact, all too often its insistence upon Scripture represents a kind of literalist or fundamentalist perspective. Finding, simplifying, and shouting out truth as if it were contained in just one biblical verse or one sanctioned form becomes the task more of performance (and even entertainment) than the hard work (even tribulation or *Anfecht-*

*Worship is not for some pragmatic or utilitarian purpose. Nor do we offer something in worship in order to receive something in return. Worship is to remember the Christ event, to allow Christ to become “for us” as the gathered Christian assembly.*

tung) of engagement with the texts and with the experiences of life. Style takes precedence over meaning. Worship becomes the medium of this simplified truth and is likewise continually reduced. Complex forms, liturgical forms, are discarded. Prayers, liturgical prayers, are thrown out or discredited, especially if they are not spontaneous—unless, of course, they can enhance the performance; unless, of course, they have a utilitarian purpose.

Many practitioners of worship, whether ordained or lay, whether in Sunday worship or daily prayer, feel pressured to respond pragmatically, to “produce the goods.” How many parish search committees use the pastor’s “performance” as preacher as one of the primary criteria for issuing a call? The question about worship, then, is heavily influenced, even dictated, by the interpretative (and reductionist) agenda of the megachurches and, in particular, a newly discovered revival impetus.

Before answering the question “What is worship for?” we need, therefore, to explore a few basic premises of our interpretative process: How does the word confront us? If we believe that the word can be reduced to one biblical verse that can be communicated without outward signs (other than emotional manipulation), are we not on the slippery slope of the “enthusiasts” whom Luther never ceased critiquing for their reduction of the Holy Spirit to personal inspiration?<sup>1</sup> Luther’s critique suggests that worship cannot be reduced to a single performative medium (for example, the voice of personal inspiration) but calls upon a multiplicity of forms. This juxtaposition of forms is already witnessed in Luther’s own and radically disruptive interpretative project: namely, writing, preaching, reading, hearing, singing, and speaking Scripture through Scripture, not subject to human reason and understanding.<sup>2</sup>

Luther also develops the proposal of reading Scripture and preaching the gospel in his debate with the enthusiasts who wish to reduce the appropriation of the word to just one medium or just one interpretation. Luther immediately recognizes such a reduction for what it is: law. The question too quickly becomes: How do we use the word? We are once again back at the utilitarian question—a question that we know turns worship into our work. Perhaps the question we should be asking is: How does the word confront us in and through worship?

## BIBLICAL REMEMBERING

One of the first temptations to be revealed—a temptation common to current revival worship, to high liturgical traditions, and to hyper-Lutheran pietistic worship as well—is a strong cultural and historical form of remembering rather than a biblical form of remembering. Worship immediately “serves” a purpose:

<sup>1</sup>Martin Luther, *Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments* (1525), in *Luther’s Works*, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1955–1986) 40:79–223 (hereafter *LW*).

<sup>2</sup>Martin Luther, *Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther’s German Writings* (1539), in *LW* 34:285.

maintaining a culturally or ethnically defined religious insight or experience and inviting people into that experience rather than inviting them into confrontation with the word. The Renewing Worship proposal of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America can be read as offering liturgies that do not simply “remember” (in the narrow, cultural sense) but which allow the word to become *for* the worshiping assembly.

But how do we approach the question of a biblical form of remembering? Can we even discern such a pattern of remembering? To begin, we will need to explore the dangers of our cultural and historical forms of remembering. Cultural or historical forms of remembering will always risk excluding someone. Similarly, they always risk reducing the gospel to one particular experience. The effect of this becomes clearer when we look at the celebration of the Lord’s Supper and our theologies of Holy Communion. This is where Luther turned in attempting to answer the question about remembrance.<sup>3</sup>

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*“something in the Christ event cannot be captured by our  
memories, by any act of imitation or remembrance”*

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Why do we look back as if the event—call it the Last Supper, for example—could be localized historically? This looking back defines the event as an ending rather than as a beginning; as something resolved, as something that we keep as a memorial, rather than something calling us, something ever irrupting and sending us out. The continual irruption of that “event” in our lives is here opposed to simple imitation and memorial. Something in the Christ event—its singularity—cannot be captured by our memories, by any act of mimesis, imitation, or remembrance. This singularity continually returns or irrupts into the ordered patterns of our lives, scattering principles, rules, laws, foundations, reference points of faith, and ultimately our selves.<sup>4</sup>

If we look at the meal tradition in the gospels, we discover that Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God through his table fellowship, through the ancient ritual action of a meal. But we will also notice something peculiar: Jesus was breaking every ritual norm when he celebrated a meal. This act of “open commensality”<sup>5</sup> radically disoriented and reoriented the participants in relation to their accepted cosmology.<sup>6</sup> Jesus would eat with those deemed unworthy (or ritually “unclean”), and when he ate with “religious folk” he always introduced an element to unsettle the ritual purity of the event—he wouldn’t wash his hands, for example (Matt

<sup>3</sup>Martin Luther, *Psalm 111*, in *LW* 13:351–387.

<sup>4</sup>See my chapter, “Eating, Drinking, Sending: Reflections on the Juxtaposition of Law and Event in the Eucharist,” in *Ordo: Bath, Word, Prayer, Table: A Liturgical Primer in Honor of Gordon W. Lathrop*, ed. Dirk G. Lange and Dwight W. Vogel (Akron, OH: OSL, 2005).

<sup>5</sup>John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994) 70ff.

<sup>6</sup>For further discussion of cosmology and its reorientation through the liturgy, see Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Ground: A Liturgical Cosmology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).

9:9–13; Luke 7:36–50; Luke 19:1–10). The meal tradition Jesus initiated—constituted not only by the Last Supper but by all the meals Jesus celebrated with his followers—was not to be simply another religious ritual, which has its own inherent justification. Rather, that very meal tradition was to be liturgical, that is, something that doesn't have its center in itself but always points away from itself. In that movement, the participants in the liturgy are made aware of their responsibility to those who are not yet part of the meal celebration.

The meal tradition as celebrated by Jesus was so radically different, so radically new, that the meal (the sharing of bread and wine—and not the elaborate ceremony of the Seder meal, for example) became the central act by which the early Christians (and all subsequent generations) remembered Jesus—*by which they gave thanks (eucharistia)*. This “meal remembering” was not confined to imitating what Jesus did, nor was it the exaltation of one particular cultural pattern of remembering, both of which would only have diluted the memory of the radical newness of what Jesus began. Rather, it was an attempt to embody that radical reorientation effected by Jesus. It was an attempt to let the Christ event become “for us.”

This reorientation does not mean that our liturgies reject the “old” or the culturally and historically defined ritual expressions. Jesus, in the gospel accounts, uses the ritual of the meal, a culturally and religiously defined ritual, to make a statement about his mission on earth. But in so doing, he radically transforms that meal-sharing practice. We have here a hidden clue to a deeply paradoxical characteristic of Christian liturgical practice. Jesus uses the old to establish the new. An old word is used to describe something new. An old practice is used but radically transformed. If we do not pay attention to even the subtlest linguistic shift occurring at the heart of the liturgy, we set ourselves up for a series of misunderstandings that will only divide.

Jesus radically transforms a culturally and religiously defined meal-sharing practice to announce the gospel. This same dynamic—using the old to say the new and in so doing reorient the old—happens with the word “liturgy” itself in the New Testament. The word has been the bane of some Lutheran and Reformed theologians as if it recalled the Roman high mass or some such other beast. We do not need to be afraid of the word when we understand its biblical use. The old Greek word—*leitourgia*—itself undergoes a radical transformation in the New Testament.

Initially, in ancient Greece, *leitourgia* signified a work or initiative that was freely enacted by an individual or a family for the benefit of the people—a neighborhood, a city, or a state. Through time, this free action became institutionalized—it became an imposed action. This became the more common definition—a work of the people for the state (or sometimes a divinity) that was obligatory.

In the Septuagint, *leitourgia* was used exclusively for the cultic service rendered by the Levites particularly in the temple. It was a word designating an official action in conformity with the Levitical laws—it defined an obligatory ritual.

In the New Testament, however, the word is not used to designate what we

commonly understand as liturgy. It is used to designate an ethical action—in particular it means “to minister” as in 2 Cor 9:12: “[F]or the rendering of this *ministry* [this collection of concrete support for the poor] not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many *thanksgivings to God*” (italics added). It is also used to describe Jesus’ liturgical role as mediator—this is the “more excellent ministry” in Heb 8:6—an utterly new form of mediation.

The nascent Christian community found itself in a bind. The word to describe “worship” was overburdened with obligatory, ritualistic connotations. How could they use this word and dissociate it from the prescribed legal, “ritualistic” actions of the Levites? How were they to use this old word to say something new?

In the New Testament, we witness a distinct effort to shift the metaphor of worship, to rid the word *leitourgia* of its ritualistic connotations, its old connotation, while at the same time keeping the word itself. In a broad brushstroke and certainly open to much critique, I will suggest that the traditional metaphor for public worship was a “receive and give back” or a “take and give” schema. The gathered people, the assembly, receive something (a gift of liberation, a gift of forgiveness, a gift of bountiful crops, etc.) and in return they give something back (a sacrifice, a commitment, a thanksgiving, praise). This metaphor, as you know, is still very popular among believers, ordained and lay alike. What happens in the New Testament, however, is a redefinition of the metaphor of gift. Something has been given—the gift of Jesus Christ himself—but the people can give nothing in return. The only possible response is ministry, service, *leitourgia* to the neighbor, continual openness toward those not included, the outsider, the outcast, the refugee, the other in all his or her suffering and need. The only liturgical response—if we can even call it a “response”—is an ethical response or... perhaps not a response but liturgy, which is ethics itself.

#### BIBLICAL REMEMBRANCE AS CONTINUAL DISRUPTION, AS PROCLAMATION

We have touched on the complexity of answering the question “What is worship for?” by focusing upon a biblical form of remembrance. And we have discovered that Scripture, and particularly the liturgical actions Jesus himself engaged in as recorded in the four gospels, give us a clue to the paradoxical characteristic of worship. Part of the paradoxical characteristic of worship is its use of the “old” to say the “new”—for example, the redefinition that the New Testament gives the word *leitourgia*. This redefinition makes us aware that worship is not something that can be contained in itself (as some proponents of ritualist liturgies would like), nor is it something purely utilitarian (as some megachurch or revivalist manipulators propose), nor is it dry ritual that can simply be discarded or squashed under forms of theological orthodoxy (as some pietists insist). Liturgy as ethics is continually attentive to the voice of the neighbor calling, calling the participant out; it is the suffering and need of the other pleading. Liturgy is constantly being disrupted by that voice and thus continually points beyond itself.

In the New Testament, we witness a struggle to find an expression—a liturgical expression—for the singular event called Jesus Christ. This singular event is not just the cross and resurrection but the whole life of Christ. Jesus explained the Scriptures as they related to his life while walking with the disciples to Emmaus. These disciples first heard the word and then tasted the word. The challenge posed to us is intimately linked to the challenge faced by the Emmaus disciples. How do we remember this singular event, this life? How do we remember this encounter through our liturgical actions? How do we encounter the Christ event without shutting it down, without capturing it in one particular form of remembrance? How do our worship and the ritual actions that make up our worship carry us always to the reorienting encounter with “Christ and all his saints”?<sup>7</sup> How does our worship avoid becoming a game of mastery and performance? How is it continually disrupted as it listens to the call of the suffering and the needy, the voice of the wounded?

The challenge of renewing worship is embedded in these questions. We have some old words and some traditional liturgical actions—actions surrounding the reading and preaching of the word and the sharing of a meal. But these gifts need to be attentive to the cry of today, to the needs of today, to the suffering and injustice, to the blindness and fear of today. These gifts need to express something new. In order to do so, the old is not discarded; rather, old and new are placed together—the old with the new. The old and the new are juxtaposed to one another.

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Our search for purpose or meaning of worship patterns has now revealed something astonishing: the meaning or pattern or purpose we seek is not a prescribed order or, to use the old Latin word, an *ordo*. What we find is not a model but, curiously enough, a way of reading, a way of interpreting. Would *ordo* then also need to be redefined, reoriented? This is exactly what is happening in several documents of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches and in the work of several preeminent liturgical theologians.<sup>8</sup>

Today, liturgical theologians are engaged in a process that is already evident in the writing of the New Testament and in the liturgical documents of the early church. They are taking this old word—*ordo*—that carries with it the negative connotation of the strict and legalistic ordering of worship and using it to suggest that the pattern or *ordo* of worship is a dynamic, engaged way of reading the gifts of

<sup>7</sup>Martin Luther, *The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods* (1519), in *LW* 35:51–59.

<sup>8</sup>Most notably Gordon W. Lathrop, emeritus professor of liturgy, Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia.

God, the world, and the individual together. The *ordo* or pattern of the liturgy is a way of “making meaning” by being attentive to the word in the world, to the word suffering in the world, by being attentive to the other and the community.

I have described this “pattern” as a way of reading, as a way of negotiating faith in God and our lives in the world. It is not simply taking these “gifts” and placing them in a set order. It is not simply taking these gifts and creating a new Lutheran setting. When the shape or pattern of worship is fundamentally biblical we are also saying that liturgy, in putting the old together with the new, is breaking open the old. The Bible has this curious habit of putting things together that we don’t always think belong together, a curious way of breaking open the old so that we can never go back to the older—sometimes more comforting—meaning. The Bible has a curious way of always putting things in juxtaposition in order to produce a third thing, a new meaning.

Here is the “pattern” into which we, as a liturgical assembly, are invited: it is “readings and preaching together, yielding intercessions; and, with these, it is *eucharistia*—thanksgiving—eating and drinking together, yielding a collection for the poor and mission in the world....It is ministers and people, enacting these things, together.”<sup>9</sup> Worship<sup>10</sup> is holding word and sacrament together as a means of pushing the assembly toward a further understanding of God’s presence in their lives and in the world around them. The sacraments are not overemphasized, resulting in a hierarchical ecclesial institution that justifies itself by controlling and safeguarding access to them. And the word is not used as a straitjacket, forcing a legalistic observance; nor does the word allow itself to get caught in a pluralistic trap where every individual interpretation is authorized. All extremes result in a loss of a sense of “church” as communion—as *koinonia*. All extremes result in a deafness to the cry of the neighbor, to the deeply ethical characteristic of worship.

This biblical pattern of remembering the Christ event is not a model or a method. It is anything but a static, prescribed liturgy. The idea of using the old to express the new, of using the old and reorienting it—or the whole idea of the juxtaposition of “things” within worship—this is simply a way of reading the Bible and a way of celebrating the sacraments. This pattern is opposed to mastery; rather, it is constantly being brought under critique, open to revision and renewal, open to adaptation, almost requiring that it be broken by the one who comes, by the one who comes unexpectedly.

Old words are made to say something new—so new in fact that even readers, theologians, and pastors today do not always recognize what is happening. So all too quickly we interpret our rituals, our lectionary, our baptism, our Eucharist as rituals performed in certain ways. Whereas, what emerges from this juxtaposition is a new way—a gospel way—of interpreting the world, of giving meaning to indi-

<sup>9</sup>Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, “So we believe, so we pray” (The Ditchingham Report), delivered in Ditchingham, England, in August 1994.

<sup>10</sup>We begin to realize that the word “worship” too is an old word in need of breaking as it becomes something other than simply a “response” or work.

vidual lives and of providing a vision—a cosmology—for the world. What emerges is not a new “thing” but a dynamic struggle to continually express the singular event into a new situation. It is the struggle to repeat the singularity of the Christ event.

But there is yet more. The pattern we are speaking about is not, as we have seen, just the imitation of certain acts that are witnessed to in Scripture. But it is also not simply a juxtaposition of the new and the old. It is the recognition that any form—whether old or new—is inadequate to express the singularity, the uniqueness of the event, the Christ event.

The question “What is worship for?” has now become the question: How do we remember? How do we remember the Christ event? Luther asks this question in his commentary on Ps 111.<sup>11</sup> And in the treatise *Against the Heavenly Prophets*, Luther argues against two forms of remembrance that we have already outlined (remembrance as memorial and remembrance as purely sacramental).<sup>12</sup> Remembrance, for Luther, is closely linked to external means. It is not just an affair of the heart, acknowledging God and denying external means, nor is it something that turns the external means into a mediator to God.

Luther challenges the way we remember, the way we worship. “If now I seek the forgiveness of sins, I do not run to the cross, for I will not find it given there. Nor must I hold to the suffering of Christ, as Dr. Karlstadt trifles, in knowledge or remembrance, for I will not find it there either. But I will find in the sacrament or gospel the word which distributes, presents, offers, and gives to me that forgiveness which was won on the cross.”<sup>13</sup> The remembering is not the remembering of the cross as an event. It is not the remembering of the Last Supper or even of the sacrament. The remembering happens—it is *distributed*, Luther writes—when it is enacted in the liturgy. When it is preached and given away.

Our worship invites us into this radically different pattern of biblical remembering that will yield or give us a glimpse of meaning. The teaching and bathing, the reading and preaching and praying, the thanksgiving and sharing, the collecting and the sending: all these juxtapositions are for the sake of expressing the grace of an “unsayable” (*unaussprechlichen*) event. “We are to publish, praise, preach, and confess the [unsayable] wonders God has done for us through Christ.”<sup>14</sup> How do we witness to that form of remembering in our presiding and preaching? How do we proclaim this remembering that does not capture the event but allows something of the event to become “for us,” for the assembly? ⊕

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<sup>11</sup>Luther, *Psalm 111*, in *LW* 13:372.

<sup>12</sup>Luther, *Against the Heavenly Prophets*.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 40:214.

<sup>14</sup>“Unsayingable” (*unaussprechlichen*), not “indescribable,” as the *LW* translates (*LW* 13:372; see *WA* 31/1/412).