

TWO

About Liturgy and Its Logic¹

WE LIVE IN A day of informality. All kinds of domains evince lack of confidence in system, order, formality, and tradition. So, a rather reputable sociologist said recently when asked a question about Max Weber: “He was too orderly for the facts—he still believed in logic and theories.” And another academic, a philosopher, smarting under the criticisms of pan-logical schemes, took to another and worse absurdity, insisting that the history of logic was a long mistake because “formal thought is nonsense.” Perhaps these rejections of formal and ordered schemes, thoughts, and practices ought not to be lumped—they probably bespeak quite different considerations in their respective fields. But the anxious posture towards liturgical formalities, within even the so-called liturgical churches, does have a kind of morphology to it. That morphology catches up a host of considerations, some of them almost like echoes of things said elsewhere. Certainly informal logics, formless learning, and liturgy without recognizable style and also “an experiment”—these seem to have a natural affinity.

In this brief essay I want to do several things. My overarching goal is to confront that vague notion that liturgy is in a bad way because it is formal, and that experimentation must be the order of the day. But I will do that, first, by considering in the abstract what wor-

1. Paul L. Holmer’s note: My debts are many to Peter Geach, “On Worshipping the Right God,” in *God and the Soul*; to Vilmos Vajta’s *Luther on Worship*; to Don Saliers for conversations; to the faculty of the Institute of Sacred Music at Yale for occasions for all kinds of reconsiderations.

ship is. Then comes a short excursus on formality and logic in respect to liturgy. Lastly, I propose to entertain the notion of an informal language of faith and its relation to the formal liturgy. In all of this I want to give a schematic rationale for a liturgy that has to do with its purposes and its ground, and that will reprimatinate the notion of a formal and invariant scheme.

Worship versus Honor

But all of this is to strike a raw nerve. For most liturgical anxiety seems to be engendered by people who think that the *latria*, the worship of God, is very much like the *dulia*, the reverence and even homage paid to distinguished personages, or the ordered regard given to saints, angels, religious founders, holy places, and duly remembered occasions. The distinction is made first in the Greek language, but it is given its substance in a Roman tradition. I want to draw the distinction anew. The veneration, awe, and regard that we might formalize as worship of a creature or something created is *dulia*; it is quite different from *latria*. So an emperor who demanded that a Christian bend both knees and prostrate himself before him could be demanding a blasphemous worship (in this case *latria*) when only *dulia* was deserved.

However, the kind of worship had, indeed, to be decided upon; but it did not depend upon how the subject felt about the emperor or God. For *dulia* does not differ from *latria* by degree but in kind. The difference is determined by the objectivities involved, by one being a creature, though a mighty emperor, and the other being God. The object, not the subject, calls forth the proper kind of worship. The object, clearly enough, has to be known before it is properly worshiped. But it is also true that a certain kind of worship, *latria*, for example, will also teach you what and who God is.

Still we might say that rites and ceremonies that are patriotic or familial, or like those we have on Reformation Day or when Methodists remember the Wesleys—these are very much like *dulia*. The formal talk and order of service here is clearly invented, if not contrived, and it requires skill to conceive it, a sense of appropriateness, and certainly many features unlike the worship of the divine (*latria*). Divine worship is more like an acknowledgment, a concession, and a capitulation of mankind to that terrible but joy-producing God.

But now there is a kind of restless confusion in the churches. Everything becomes *dulia*. It is as if the professional churchmen—they, I believe, more so than the laity—are continually inventing new things and amending old things almost as if the liturgy is not fundamental and that trafficking therein is to be expected. Obviously, the whole conception of worship itself seems to have gotten especially dim, and, with that, the concept of God too. The remark is often made, also, that the form of worship and the manner of the liturgy make no fundamental difference, for supposedly we are all worshipping the same God anyway in our differing manners and styles. There is no right and wrong liturgy. Surely this striking news has a way of relativizing every feature of worship; and liturgies then look as if they, too, are only cultural accommodations at best, and that the program for our time might be to find the temporarily best one. No wonder, therefore, the countless committees, the endless fermentations, the *ad hoc* inventions, and the pseudo pathos-ridden orders of service that are composed to give solace to idiosyncrasies, odd groups, and short-term wants.

Surely this kind of thing seldom requires anything like *latria*, not even *hyper-dulia*, the kind of regard that belongs to the Virgin. Maybe it is *dulia*, but if so it is a rather poor version most of the time. Certainly it is a dubious and exceedingly obscure view to hold in mathematics that one can change the notational system and still say the same thing. The person who asserts that there are many ways in ordinary prose to say any one thing is evincing an altogether human unwillingness to concern himself with the details. A little care will show that one must pick words very scrupulously or otherwise the point of the remarks ebbs away. Perhaps this willingness to let worship and liturgy float around coheres clumsily with doubtful views like “we are all bound to the same heaven” or “you worship your way and I’ll do mine, but we’re all doing the same thing anyway.” This kind of thoughtlessness, which sometimes passes as “ecumenical” or “pluralism,” is often the only vague consensus (“we are all right in our disagreement”) that settles over religious people who have given up specific beliefs and knowledge of God. For if religion is only a kind of accident, something you happen into, then it well might be that there is little difference that matters between a fortuitous loyalty and an

informed faith, and between a liturgy dreamed up yesterday and one that is rooted in self-conscious conviction and long-term confession.

The notion that a liturgy might be an expression of how people feel is surely not a defensible consideration. One can invoke all the notions of freedom, Christian or otherwise, and still it is not the case that the criterion ever legitimately shifts to the human side quite like that. For worship (*latría*) can be wrong and wrong in a strong sense. The only criterion is not whether it works or whether it turns people on. In fact, if it did, it might be a little dubious. For getting “turned on” is an expression that belongs to Old Glory, to sex, to heroics, to childhood memories, and even to the exceedingly boisterous Hallelujah Chorus as we so often encounter it. Maybe these do invoke *dulia*; but they surely would do even that only if their excellencies were supernatural and if they were invariably united with Jesus Christ and God. The homage would have to go with that associated Person of persons. Most of the time they do not, and little else need be either said or regretted. But it would be odd to say that Christian worship and liturgy are only stimulating or expressive. For worship requires not that one like the liturgy but that one come to abide in God Himself. To worship God requires that one really worship Him and not get engrossed in the liturgy. The liturgy gets its legitimacy and point from the fact that God requires an offering, enjoins contribution and repentance, promises a pardon, and proffers redemption. But this makes sense only because there is a God whose will is our law, whose pardon is our renewed life, and whose mercy reads our very hearts.

It is only for a God like that, whose grace is our boundary and whose pleasure is a life of glory for us, that a liturgy makes sense. No wonder, thusly, that only that God, not just any god, can mend our broken lives, pardon our sins, and, finally, redeem our careers. For reasons like these, in addition, if one please, to His having created us and sustained us, we must give Him *latría*. We cannot beg forgiveness for our sins from anyone else; we cannot pray for mercy to just anyone who happens by. The thorough and total humbling that true worship becomes is also our surest way to know the true God. For such worshipful practice, such striving of the inward person, is only requited with the true God. If it is directed to someone else, it is idolatry. But the other point also must be made that such contriteness of heart and demeaning of oneself will never be demeaned by God

Himself. We have it on good authority that when so petitioned and sought, God wills Himself to be found.

But still, this is not to say that all worship is equal and all liturgies a fair go. We have here no assurance that “wanting” is enough or that plain good intentions are the warrant of worship. On the contrary, both Old Testament and New suggest a general unfriendliness towards the variegated worshipping of mankind. The quality of worship, absolute submission, the acknowledgment of sinfulness, and a fantastic gloria belong very intimately indeed only to a God for whom the universe is His dominion. He alone knows our falling, our rising up, and we owe Him continuous acknowledgment.

An odd thing about liturgy, then, is that it has to conform to this God. If it does not, it may easily become both a folly and an abomination in God’s sight. Of course changes have taken place, some trespassing the divine limits (like the blasphemous black masses and other practices evincing contempt for God), and others are needful accommodations to all kinds of changing conditions. So Latin was once standard for large segments of the population; so, too, with Syriac, Coptic, and Ethiopic. But languages that are dead or classical are easily misunderstood or not understood at all. Thus there have been and will continue to be changes in the public performances of the acts of worship of almighty God. But these are small-scale enough and do not require “experimentation” and shifts in our major conception of what God and mankind are. Neither do they suggest that the logic of liturgy has changed from being God-centered to being only an “expression” with limited validity and applicability.

Liturgy as Form

But another consideration is appropriate. The liturgy, considered now as a public work and a duty, cannot help being a kind of form. It is not as if God is changing so rapidly that new material has to be inserted into the liturgy just to keep up with Him. If the liturgy were totally, or even significantly, culturally dependent, then we could say that it would need continual revision. For with a changing material, plainly the form would have to be different too. But liturgy is not an expression of how people see things; rather it proposes how God sees all

people. It may seem an exaggeration to suggest it, but, strictly speaking, liturgy is no more an invention or a human device to get hold of God than is the gospel itself. On the contrary, that form has to get whatever justification and rightness it possesses in virtue of its being the very logic and shape that goes with that divine content. An example may be in order.

If a road is icy and slippery and if the person knows the task of keeping control of an automobile on an icy highway, it is simply a requisite that that person be fearful of such a highway. There are fears and fears. The person who is paralyzed with such fright also shows his or her ignorance or lack of experience, for the fear of icy roads need not be completely devastating or debilitating. A just and practiced apprehension admits the fearfulness and converts the person into a careful and wary driver. To have no fear is not a strength, but it is a sign that ignorance is invincible or that bravery has now converted to foolhardiness. Something like this obtains with God. He is not to be taken lightly. To know Him is to be fearful, but again a qualified fearfulness. No wonder then that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

But the issue can be put more strongly in ecclesiological terms. Just as fear is part of the very logic and understanding of an icy highway, so the striking and complete adoration and reverence paid to God (*latría*) is part of the logic of knowing God. That is why liturgy cannot be done lightly and why there is something formal about it. For the formal side of worship develops because the worship is not an option, it is not a voluntary aside, it is not a hobby. God is an infinite and uncreated Excellence and Power with whom all things begin and end. And this is so for all equally; hence there is a point to saying that the awe for God is not a function of a specially gifted insight or of a whimpering spiritual stripling. Because God is who He is, there are some standard relations to His creatures, and worshipful demeanor and practice is the least we can do if it is not the most. The worship is proper, not an option.

This is why worship has also a public exercise. God does not address us only where we are odd or unique. If so, we could never understand each other in a common worship. Instead, there is a public logic about that liturgy; it is as if God being what He is, therefore

all of us must be worshipful. That liturgy limns the united and public feature of God's importance to mankind. That there is also room for private prayer and a rich devotional accommodation to God by each individual goes almost without saying. But the countless permutations of the latter ought never to confuse us into thinking that the public worship is only a higher case of the same. That is not true. What one does on one's own behalf in achieving a total assimilation to God-centeredness can only be hinted at. There is room for spiritual odysseys as numerous as God's special creatures; but liturgy and public worship need not be subsumed under them. For liturgy takes its dignity and its formality not from the needs of the individual but from the commonality that we enjoy as God's children and members of His family.

Liturgical Hyperconsciousness

There is another aspect of all this that deserves our attention. For liturgical enthusiasms these days ebb and flow because of a host of concerns. Surely there is some of it that is commendable. For one thing there is the plain matter of not allowing the liturgy to be too much, in and of itself. Thus, no believer ought to be conscious of the liturgy when the aim of the liturgy is to make one conscious of God. Furthermore the rules of the liturgy, its veritable logic, rest in God and His works, not in traditions and customs, even though the latter, too, may have spawned components. Again, the criteria are not in the past but in God. So, some of the needful reform is part of the constant effort to get us out of the *dulia* towards a deeply performatory language and practice that does establish a genuine *latria* towards God Himself. After all, it is a little absurd to be reverent towards the practices and then forget about being reverent to God.

But constant innovation also makes people too conscious of the liturgy itself. They are always wondering what is coming next, and soon the whole business gets to be a kind of drama, full of surprises, and the would-be worshiper is made an aesthetic spectator. And one cannot be that towards God. Besides, surprises are indeed initially pleasurable, but after a while they, too, get terribly wearisome. The Church can easily make itself into something it is not, for the church

building and worship is not the arena of everyday life. When a child learns the story of the *Odyssey* in a mood of enchantment at his mother's knee, we all know that he is likely to be a bit chagrined when he tries to learn Greek. In every domain of our common life, there is that transition from hearing the story to becoming the actor, from easy aspiration to laborious doing. The liturgy does not have to carry people all the way; and trying to contrive it so that it will violate both the gospel and our fragile spiritual balance. God has refused to let things external and public carry us all the way to the goals He has set before us. Our will, affections, and habits must also be changed, and God Himself still leaves a great deal for each of us to do on his own. The liturgy is like the logic of life within which each of us must learn to improvise.

This brings us to a very plausible mistake. We want the liturgy itself to be genuine, to be non-formal, conversational, and richly idiomatic. All of this has a commendable root. Most of us recognize, too, that the liturgy does not work if it is only an everlasting entertainment. It is a structure of words and rites, sayings and acts, by which we Christians confess, plead, praise, and thank. But our point is that that structure is, indeed, formal and in the third person. How can it be otherwise? It will make God most proximate to us when we do not have to think about the words, acts, and other participants. Yet each of us must also remember that God-nearness does not happen to the group *en masse*, nor is it an automatic by-product.

Each of us is an individual, and we do not—indeed, cannot—share or have all things in common. Each has his or her wish, slant, outlook, feelings, and grip on the world and self that gives genuine content to individuality. And Christianity is at war with the worldliness that otherwise engulfs each individual. There is nothing quite like success—plain economic prosperity, a sense of deserved repute, a belief in one's importance in his field or to others—that knits us quite so quickly to the world. By getting to be at home in it, worldliness really gets to be at home in us. Thereby, too, we lose our spiritual stature and become worldlings. For most of us, our individuality is wasted in getting comfortable in the routine of this life; but fortunately God seems to have made us for things eternal and kept us remarkably unable to achieve our contentment anywhere else.

This is why the main themes of the liturgy never have to be tampered with; it is only the vernacular or that in which it is couched that sometimes needs change. By the same token, once we take our children-status in God's Church and kingdom with any seriousness, we also begin to think, to act, and to talk differently. And our individuality comes back in full fruition. Real worldliness is a matter of time, but so is real godliness. After a while, perhaps maturation and conversion will make words of faith come easily to our lips. What was an apostle's remark, that he lived no longer himself, but Christ lived in him, can become a remark made by each individual on his own behalf. We cannot say everything Christian in concert—there has to be the individual speaking too. But we cannot begin there. All kinds of personal conditions have to be met. However, such personal speech, pathos-ridden and deeply expressive, is surely a desideratum. The liturgy typically has to be descriptive and measured to the work of God Himself. Yet, to bring that into one's own life and history supposes that there is a same and old teaching that is permanent, now to be put together with our impermanent and brief lives. It is the darkening of each mind that makes people say that the permanent is a folly; it is the moral injury in the individual, not sufferings and misfortunes themselves, that make them think God is irrelevant. So, that individual does become all-important. Unless his mind is guided by truth and his will by rectitude, his individuality becomes perverse. However, it need not be so.

All of this then produces fidgety and restless Christians too. For they dislike the hard work and disciplining of their spirits that God requires of each of us. It would be so much easier if absolutely everything Christian were totally vicarious. Then we could slip into the liturgy and have our spiritual stresses remedied by learning or perhaps a divine office. But this finally does not work. There is also the matter of the transfiguration of the human heart and all its affections. The cries to have the liturgy be relevant and confessional and genuine may, indeed, be a symptom of the recognition that as those sayings stand they are mostly the words of others. On the other hand, this is the way God reveals Himself, through externals, through Jesus, sacraments, Bible, and the words and deeds of others. He cannot be directly apprehended, and neither can the language of faith be put on

one's lips in a flash. So the cry for fresh and immediately appealing liturgy that has the ring of authenticity in every syllable has to be transposed into a lower key.

The Church's liturgy has to aim at permanence and order, formality and stability. But a single person's life has to strive for a richly inflected life and language that will put mood, manner, case, and person in a single context. To ask that the latter be made a public requisite for liturgy itself would condemn it to a few whose lives had sufficiently warranted it. To make the public liturgy the normative content for every private utterance would lead to our forgetting that God is present and is near in a very special way to each person whose heart and mind is open to Him. There has to be a language for that too. But God is available, as Luther never tired of saying, only in the externals, so that is where the God-centered life begins.

Liturgy itself is not celebration unless one has learned first that there is a God whose benefits can be praised. It is not a technique for softening up church members, nor is it an experiment or a matter of new gimmicks, useful for religious causes. Liturgy only stays Christian and has suitable purposes insofar as it remains within what God has instituted. Only then will genuine *latria* ensue. Otherwise it becomes one more bit of human folly that has a role only in virtue of a loose association with church life but scarcely any in respect to God. Liturgy is not the belief—it is the logic of the belief, the context within which a person can become a believing Christian.

The fact is that the dependence is the other way around. The public liturgy (just as the gospel story in the free churches) is that public sense and meaning that is in consequence of God being *pro nobis*. Here the formal character of public worship is a guarantee of universality and generality. This does not make liturgy less genuine or less personal and hence artificial. On the contrary, public liturgy and again, the gospel itself, declare what is the case for everybody; and it declares the point of departure for every Christian. Private devotion, in which the personal slant and the will that is one's own are the particulars, is parasitic upon the public material rather than the other way around. Furthermore, it is only when the public liturgy and/or the story of God being born, living, dying, and being raised for us is absorbed, that personal devotion is even Christianly relevant. The liturgy, almost like the gospel itself, is a protection against an over-

evaluation of our peculiarities and a safeguard against presumption and self-concern. It is almost as if we need continually the reminder of the God who makes all human lives a necessary *latría*; otherwise we quickly succumb to an awe over our own significance, and we find our lives giving us both the *terminus a quo* and the *terminus ad quem*.

For it is not as if liturgy should please us. Rather it is the case that we must please God. The Lord of all is also our judge and our determiner. The awe and fear in that state of affairs cannot be matched until we remember daily that God is also our benefit. The liturgy keeps these elements straight. Our lives need no longer be cursed by self-seeking or bracketed by impossibilities. And He makes a truly human life possible in virtue of what He declares for all mankind. The God who does that for one does it for all; and the formal and even general manner of the liturgy keeps that universality and scope intact. More than this, the hidden God who is everywhere cannot be found everywhere; He is revealed in the Word that is Jesus Christ, in the Bible, sacraments, Church, and that liturgy that articulates His nature and benefits and secures our reverence (*latría*).

The liturgy is, then, a kind of logic of God's relation to man. For when one wants to know what and who God is, that liturgy declares it. In this sense, the liturgy is an elemental theology or kind of knowledge of God. Yet it is not quite a totally sayable and communicable bit of knowledge either, as if it could be handed on to others without comment. The irony is that liturgy, like the story of the gospel (which nonliturgical churches try to make the substance of their worship), cannot just be believed, *eins, zwei, drei*, the way we would a piece of information. This is why a worshipful community and solemnity, a series of practices and reverence, are necessary ingredients. For with all of these, the very posture of the worshiper, his or her humility, submission, and rejoicing, are, as it were, practiced and performed, not just enjoined. All of that is part of the logic of God and worship.