

Foreword

The original introduction to *Worship, Its Theology and Practice* makes a straightforward observation: the Reformed ecclesial family is not well known for its contributions to the liturgical life of the church, either in practice or in theological reflection. That hasn't changed much in the years since its initial publication. It is therefore wonderful that the 20th-century Swiss theologian Jean-Jacques von Allmen, acknowledged in his day not only as a generous ecumenist but as the preeminent source of *Reformed* thinking about Christian worship, should be an increasing source of wisdom and inspiration in our own time of liturgical foment and renewal. Fêted with an eminent festschrift at his retirement, anthologized in volumes of liturgical theology in the decades since, his voice invited as an interlocutor in specialized inquiries, von Allmen's work continues to be read, taught, discussed and increasingly admired by pastors and theologians from across the globe: Brazil, Indonesia, Romania, South Africa, Switzerland, as well as the UK, Canada, and the USA – and not just Reformed readers, but Anglican, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist, Orthodox, Baptists, and broadly evangelical readers, too. There are, I suppose, many reasons for this: von Allmen's unique history, his compelling theological insights, his lively writing style, and, despite a few places of disconnect, the continued relevance of his work.

Biography

Perhaps the most important facts of von Allmen's professional life are these: he was a churchman whose scholarly pursuits emerged directly from his pastoral vocation. Alongside this, his passion for the unity of the whole church led him

to strive for the liturgical revitalization of his own reformed-evangelical denomination.

Born into a devout Swiss family in 1917, von Allmen began his theological studies in 1936 at the Cedar House in Lausanne. Among his classmates (there were only eight!) was Roger Schutz, who later founded the influential ecumenical Taizé community in France. They appreciated one another deeply, and their friendship endured throughout their lives. In 1938, von Allmen transferred to the University of Basel to learn from two eminent figures now recognized as theological giants, Oscar Cullman and Karl Barth. Though one can certainly detect their influence in von Allmen's work (along with Brunner and a few others), it is more the theological energy they generated in the church that animated von Allmen in the years to come.

After graduating in the spring of 1941, von Allmen dedicated seventeen years to parish ministry. This wasn't a waystation in a journey toward the ivory tower. Von Allmen considered this work essential and by all reports exercised it with joy and enthusiasm. He baptized, presided at the table, married, buried, preached, and led worship; he taught catechism, visited his congregants, and prayed with them. His broader ecclesial horizon led him to consult regularly with ecumenical organizations as well as write and edit many theological articles. And his keen intellect compelled him to commence work on his doctoral dissertation on the ecclesiology of 18th-century Neuchâtelois theologian, Jean-Frédéric Ostervald. He completed this work in 1948, but for a decade afterward continued to serve local churches in Lucerne and then Lignières, until his appointment to the chair of practical theology at the University of Neuchâtel in 1958. This had been Ostervald's chair 250 years earlier, from which he positively influenced a generation of Swiss Reformed pastors; von Allmen held it until his retirement in 1980. He died, completing his baptism, in 1994.

Throughout his career, von Allmen maintained a strong connection to the local congregation, viewing it as the foundation of his theological work. He tirelessly advocated liturgical reform within his Swiss-Reformed community. Specifically, he pressed for a normative order of worship on the Lord's Day that

encompassed the “sacramental proclamation” of the Word *and* the celebration of the Lord’s Supper as an essential seal and confirmation of the gospel promises preached. Many scholars contend that this is the not-particularly-hidden thesis of the ostensibly educational *Worship, Its Theology and Practice*. For von Allmen, recovering the abandoned place of the Lord’s Supper within Reformed worship was the animating motif of his ecclesial life – the place of deepest intersection between his Reformed and ecumenical sensibilities.

Those ecumenical sensibilities prompted the co-founding of the scholarly organization *Societas Liturgica* and its journal *Studia Liturgica*; editing the Taizé-based ecumenical publication *Verbum Caro*; and helping to establish and serve as rector and president for the Tantur Institute in Jerusalem. He received honorary doctorates from universities in Romania, Scotland, and Switzerland. But perhaps most significantly, as an advisor to and member of the Faith & Order Commission of the Ecumenical Council of the World Council of Churches, he was one of the primary architects of the seminal ecumenical document, *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*.

His writing resumé includes dozens of books and hundreds of articles, mostly in French, with a handful in German. Many have been translated into other languages, and his most significant volumes were quickly translated into English – works on biblical theology: *A Companion to the Bible* (Oxford, 1958); homiletics: *Preaching & Congregation* (John Knox, 1961), and Eucharistic theology: *The Lord’s Supper* (Lutterworth, 1969).

Yet his most notable work in the English-speaking world is this work on liturgical theology: *Worship, Its Theology and Practice* (hereafter *Worship*).

Reception

Throughout the mid-1960s, in the wake of the second Vatican Council, theologians of every stripe (especially in Europe) were thinking deeply about the “problems” of worship. In this context, von Allmen’s work on liturgical theology was received as a remarkable gift. Those in the Reformed camp were especially gratified to be able to lift up one of their own as offering such a significant contribution to the ongoing ecumenical dialogue

that was becoming known as the Liturgical Renewal Movement. John Lamb, in the *Scottish Journal of Theology*, wrote that “This is probably the most important and valuable work on worship that has appeared in English for many years.”¹ Lewis Briner of McCormick Theological Seminary wrote in the *Journal of Religion* that “in the current flood of books on worship, this serious and scholarly study... is without question one of the best.”² And a review in *Theology Today* by Donald Macleod of Princeton Theological Seminary, presciently claimed that it would be “determinative in Reformed thinking about liturgics for decades to come.”³

The accolades came from other sources, too. Two Jesuit scholars engaged appreciatively, with Edward Kilmartin remarking: “Although written with a Reformed Church audience in mind, this study should provide a source of spiritual fruit for readers of all Christian traditions.”⁴ Matthew O’Connell of Fordham in the journal *Theological Studies* pronounced that “Anyone with a serious interest in liturgy, whether personal or pastoral, should read this book.”⁵ O’Connell’s review, in particular, engages in a friendly dispute with von Allmen on points where Roman Catholic theology and von Allmen’s ideas diverge – such as on the efficacy of the epicletic prayer or the words of institution during the celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

All the reviewers uniformly remark upon the clarity and vitality of von Allmen’s writing, as well as the pastoral, balanced, detailed, and generative nature of his theological insights. Claude Bridel, in his short biography of von Allmen, says that

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1. John A. Lamb, ‘The Lord’s Supper. By Jean-Jacques von Allmen,’ *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 1966, Vol. 19 (2), p. 251.
 2. Lewis Briner, ‘J.J. von Allmen: Worship: Its Theology and Practice (Book Review),’ *The Journal of Religion* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago, 1967), vol. 47, no. 2, p. 147.
 3. Donald Macleod, ‘Worship: Its Theology and Practice, by Jean-Jacques von Allmen (Book Review),’ *Theology Today* (Princeton, N.J.), 1966, Vol. 23(2), p. 301.
 4. E.J. Kilmartin, ‘J.-J. von Allmen, “Worship: Its Theology and Practice” (Book Review),’ *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* (Washington: Catholic Biblical Association of America), 1966, Vol. 28 (3), p. 336.
 5. Matthew O’Connell, S.J., ‘Allmen, J.-J. von: Worship: Its Theology and Practice (Book Review),’ *Theological Studies* (Woodstock, Md., etc: Society of Jesus in the United States, Theological Faculties), 1966, Vol. 27 (4), pp. 698-704.

“as a whole, the work combines the precision of a manual with the freedom of an essay and the depth of a meditation.”⁶ This praise was apt at the time, and remains so.

Theology

Von Allmen regularly taught a *Cours de Liturgique* at the University of Neuchâtel. *Worship* is based on his notes from 1960-61, which were winsomely translated into English by H. Knight and Fletcher Fleet and published by Lutterworth/Oxford in 1965. This same work was revised, expanded, and published in French as a kind of career capstone 20 years later as *Célébrer le Salut* by Labor et Fides in 1984.

A Linguistic Note:

My own sense is that the delight many experience reading von Allmen in English is due in part to his playful and even edgy writing style – he loved and was largely influenced by the poet C.F. Ramuz – but also to the skill of his translators. There is something helpfully jarring about reading a theological work in translation. Consider, for example, the use of the English word *cult* in this work as a simple transliteration of the French *culte*. It may be that originally the editors and publishers simply left the term mostly un-translated, preferring the Romance overtones of the Latin *colere* (cultivation, care, labour), to the Anglo-Saxon *weorthscipe* (acknowledgment of worth). The term fairly obviously refers to religious externals – the words and symbols and gestures and actions that make up the church’s rites. But it seems to me that one fortuitous benefit of the use of the term *cult* is that it compels a reader to think about human religious activity more broadly, even paganly, and simultaneously abandon some of the unexamined connotations that might attach to the more common word, “worship.”

6. Claude Bridel, ‘Jean-Jacques von Almen (1917); la passion de unit’, in Stephan Leimgruber and Max Schoch, eds., *Gegen Die Gottvergessenheit: Schweizer Theologen Im 19. Und 20. Jahrhundert*, (Basel: Herder, 1990), p. 571.

The book is divided into two sections. The first is on “Problems of Principle” and the second on “Problems of Celebration” – in other words, as the title suggests, worship’s *theology* and its *practice*.

The theological section articulates three penetrating theological insights about the Christological character of worship: Firstly, that Christian worship is a recapitulation of the history of salvation. That is to say, the church’s worship sums up and confirms God’s dealings with humanity throughout history. It emphasizes the pivotal event of Jesus of Nazareth – his incarnation, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension. It encompasses the cosmic past, present, and future, distilled and focused in Christ. Secondly, that Christian worship is where the church is made manifest. It is there, gathered to hear the Living Word preached, to celebrate its communion with Christ in the Lord’s Supper, to initiate new members into the life of the Holy Spirit and to be sent into the world – it is at *worship* that the church is revealed most clearly and comes to understand who and what it truly is. Finally, that Christian worship, with its eschatological horizon, is to the world both a threat and a promise. By it, the church presents itself as a symbol of hope for the future, for transformation according to God’s divine purpose. But worship also underscores what von Allmen calls “the transient nature of worldly existence” and the need for people to empty their hands in order to receive the good gifts Christ offers. Hence, the worshipping church represents both a challenge (French *menace*) to the world, and a pledge, existing in eschatological tension, carrying the potential for both disruption and fulfilment. This last theme is especially resonant in a contemporary church where certain factions seem only to emphasize the church’s opposition to the “world” while others lean into its consonance and collaboration with it.

The second section of the book takes these themes, alongside many others, and applies them to the practical exercise of weekly worship in the way that one might do while instructing pastors-in-training. There is a satisfying comprehensiveness with which von Allmen explores, for example, the “domains of liturgical expression” (logical, acoustic, visual, kinetic), the elements of worship (for instance three types of “proclamation

of the Word), the participants in worship, the day and place of worship, the order of worship, and more. This section, lauding the use of images and symbols, following the liturgical year, and commending the “moment of humiliation” – contains a stimulating mixture of affirmation and challenge to common Reformed sensibilities.

Von Allmen’s exploration certainly reflects a particular cultural location, and therefore not every specific recommendation or even observation translates well into other contexts. His presumption of the organ as the fundamental musical accompaniment, or his dubiously uncritical use of scripture in considering the place of angels in worship, for example, may seem to some anachronistic. Likewise, his approach to female leadership seems guided less by the full sweep of scripture and history than a desire in his own time to keep the door open to the reconciliation of the Protestant church with Roman and Orthodox siblings.

Von Allmen’s principal interest, however, is not in producing a transcendent “how-to” manual for worship everywhere and everywhen. He says so himself. Instead, he is offering a model of how to bring the most essential biblical, historical, liturgical, and theological considerations to bear on practical questions of liturgical celebration. His thoughts about the relationship between the worship offered by human beings and that offered by nature in its “laments and sighs” and “songs of praise” is, for instance, wonderful theological fodder in an age where Christians, dismayed by the effects of anthropogenic climate change, struggle to conceive of a healthy relationship between themselves, the non-human creation, and the Creator.

Continued Relevance

This is just one place where von Allmen’s theological reflections, dated though they might seem, offer an unexpected piquancy in our current age. Whether one reaches the same conclusions as von Allmen, his careful attention to biblical/historical/theological considerations, is instructive. For example, he outlines a distinction within Christian worship on the Lord’s Day between the first/Galilean phase (Mass of the Catechumens) and the second/Jerusalemite phase (Mass of the Faithful). Such a distinction is especially relevant to consider

today. For von Allmen, because Christian worship is both a threat and promise, the Lord's Supper ought to be reserved solely for baptized Christians. He recommends that those welcome in the former phase be carefully and hospitably dismissed for the latter. Almost no church does this. In fact, recent decisions by mainline denominations in the USA (PCUSA, UMC, and TEC) move in the other direction, i.e., opening up the table to the non-baptized. Whatever one might decide on this topic, von Allmen clearly lays out some of the implications and key remaining questions: Should baptized infants commune? Should committed but unbaptized adults not commune? A careful reading of *Worship*, and the arguments von Allmen marshals, would well serve anyone participating in such discussions.

In addition, contemporary theologians and pastors would benefit by dwelling upon von Allmen's convictions about the recovery of the Lord's Supper in weekly Christian worship – convictions informed by his reading of Calvin, Ostervald, and other Reformers, as well as by his ecumenical engagement with theologians of other denominational identities. For von Allmen, the sacramental proclamation of the Word and its sacramental ingestion are *essential* to all Christian worship. The ancient and biblical pattern of both apostolic witness and weekly communion are the “pulse-beat of liturgical life.” Von Allmen contends that the abandonment of the latter in Reformed and evangelical communities is a lamentable disfigurement of God's plain intention. Again – especially in evangelical protestant circles – this conviction is a bracing challenge, given von Allmen's persuasive marshalling of biblical, theological, historical, and liturgical arguments in its favour.

Another area where von Allmen's insights have already borne fruit – and might bear more – is in the theological sub-specialty of ecclesiology. Though von Allmen explicitly eschews diving into ecclesial waters in this work, one of his central theological convictions has to do with the church re-discovering and renewing itself *at worship*. Thus, theologians like the Evangelical Simon Chan, the Methodist Geoffrey Wainright, the Lutheran Gordon Lathrop, and the Roman Catholic Matthew Ploeger, among others, have turned to von Allmen to chase down arrows he raised long ago as a way of considering how the church's identity and activity might be

re-assessed or re-articulated in light of its life as a worshipping assembly of the body of Christ, animated by the Holy Spirit.

In one of my own scholarly works,⁷ I make use of the Nicene Marks of the church – Unity, Holiness, Catholicity, and Apostolicity – as a lens through which to explore von Allmen’s liturgical theology for clues about the identity and activity of the church. In our present day, the church’s cultural influence in the world is waning, and the ‘true’ church becomes harder and harder to distinguish from people groups that claim the name of Jesus but seem to be animated primarily by political allegiance or social affinity rather than the Holy Spirit. In such a world, it will become more and more important for us to think carefully about what it means that the church’s holiness entails a kind of separation from the world. What is “the world” and what does “separation” even mean? Likewise, if the age of denominations is nearing its end, von Allmen may be a useful guide in helping us think about how the universal church relates to each local church in its liturgical particularity.

Of course, the fecundity and generativity of von Allmen’s theological reflections in the following pages is not exhausted by these examples. Further questions could be explored surrounding the fittingness of infant vs. believer baptism, the gifts and graces of the Holy Spirit, and the meaning of church membership; questions about who may fruitfully be invited to and receive God’s grace at the Eucharist; questions about the structure of worship and the salvation story it invites people to witness to in worship; questions about worship space and its capacity to open congregations to God’s transformative activity; questions about the church’s missional vocation in and to the world. Jean-Jacques von Allmen’s confessional location and ecumenical experience make him perhaps uniquely suited to bridge present gaps between mainline liturgical traditions and word-centred evangelical traditions.

Conclusion

In today’s “post-Christian” cultural moment, with young people especially abandoning the church in record numbers,

7. Ronald Andrew Rienstra, *Church at Church: Jean-Jacques von Allmen’s Liturgical Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2021).

perhaps the most pointed question for von Allmen – and for us – is whether the church ought to abandon much of what it has known and been in order to be more appealing to the world, and thereby satisfy its obedience to the Great Commission.

However, von Allmen argues that this question is founded on a misunderstanding of worship. Worship is not primarily aimed at the world but at God. One of von Allmen's favourite images for the worshipping church is a beating heart: oriented toward God in the systole, toward the world in the diastole. There cannot be one without the other, but they aren't the same thing. Yes, von Allmen says, the church should put more energy into its evangelistic efforts, and it can always serve God in the world with more compassion, more vigour, more obedience. But these valuable things are not to be confused with the worship the church offers as the assembly of the baptized. In fact, von Allmen declares that worship itself has an evangelizing force because those worshipping the triune God "radiate joy, peace, freedom, order, and love."

One may wonder what sort of worship was offered in the parish churches in Neuchâtel, Lucerne, and Lignières, and whether those churches – with all that radiating joy, peace, freedom, order, and love – resemble much the churches of our world in the present day. There are times, of course, when the church's life expressed in its worship does indeed pulsate with divine power. May it be ever so with us.

This is one of the most remarkable things about von Allmen's writing: that all his extraordinary, far-reaching theological insight emerges from someone deeply engaged in the ordinary and everyday work of a pastor among garden-variety Christians: teaching, visiting, baptizing, marrying, burying, preparing worship, preaching, and presiding at the Table each Lord's Day.

My hope is that a little exposure to the Gospel through Jean-Jacques von Allmen in this work inspires the church to worship with precisely what he urged: a "maximum of theological urgency and spiritual fervour." (p. 79)

Ronald Andrew Rienstra
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