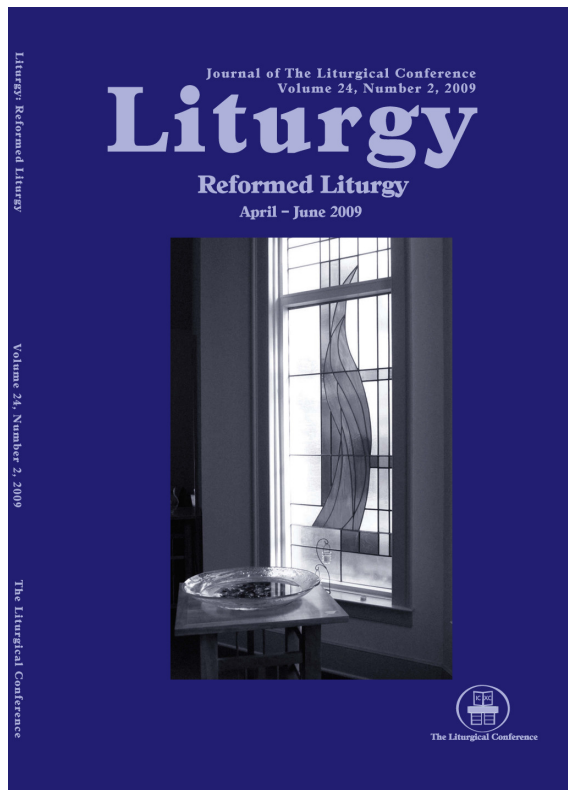


Special Supplement to the *AR&LW* Newsletter – Spring, 2009

Responses to the 2009 *AR&LW* Issue of *Liturgy*

By Ron rienstra and L. Edward Phillips



In the past six years the journal *Liturgy*, published by the Liturgical Conference, has thrice dedicated whole issues to AR&LW themes, the last being the most recent, published in February 2009 (volume 24, number 2). This issue offers reflections on the worship life of congregations with a rich sacramental life found in various Reformed denominations (RCA, PCUSA, and UCC), written in each case by the pastor. Authors and articles are as follows:

- Chip Andrus (PCUSA), First Presbyterian Church, Harrison, AR, “Sacramental Life in Reformed Congregations;”
- Cader Howard (PCUSA), Druid Hills Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, GA, “Journey to the Table: Reflections on the Sacramental Life at Druid Hills Presbyterian Church;”
- Jo Hudson (UCC), Cathedral of Hope, Dallas, TX, “A Church Called Hope.”
- Jacqui Lewis (RCA), Middle Collegiate Church, New York City, NY, “Sacramental Life at Middle Church;”
- Martie McMane (UCC), First Congregational Church, Boulder, CO, “Journey to the Table;”

- Russell C. Sullivan, Jr. (PCUSA), Pine Street Presbyterian Church, Harrisburg, PA, “Old – But New – Treasures: A Pastor’s Experience.”

The two articles following comment on these reflections. Taking a step back from praxis and pastoral reflection, they explore ideas that these articles stimulate and questions they raise. They are written from within the Reformed community and without, from a member of the Reformed family and a friend. All current members of AR&LW will receive a copy of the most recent issue of *Liturgy* as a benefit of membership. Subscriptions and downloads are available at the website of its publisher, Taylor and Francis: www.tandf.co.uk/journals/



From A Member of the Reformed Family

The text was Isaiah 55. The theme was God’s abundant grace. We had set the table with loaves upon loaves – many shapes and sizes – piled on top of and spilling over the rim of the paten. Likewise twelve chalices and a large jug filled with wine spoke beyond words to this same theme. After the service, a young woman came up to me with tears in her eyes, thanking me for my part in the service. I thanked her, and inquired about the tears. “I just never thought of God’s love that way before – overflowing,” she said. “But you’ve grown up in the church,” I objected. “You’ve heard hundreds of sermons, you’ve seen baptisms, you’ve come to the Lord’s Supper. How is God’s grace good news to you?” “I’ve heard it before,” she responded, “but I’ve never seen it before. I never tasted it.”

If the recent articles in the AR&LW-sponsored issue of *Liturgy* magazine are any indication, the experience of this young woman is not an isolated incident. It is being echoed in more and more churches within the Reformed tradition, as pastors and congregations seek to live into a sacramental view of life and worship – a view that focuses less on questions of *validity* and more on *volume* – i.e. how fully, how lavishly embodied worship practices can signify and seal the promises of God’s abundant grace. These communities are not persuaded to do so by articles in theological journals, or pronouncements from the liturgy police, but by experience, the epistemic coin of the realm. They know in their bones and sinews, their teeth and tongues and hearts,

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the importance of rich and regular celebration of the Lord's Supper, of vigorous and rigorous proclamation of the Gospel, and of finding their Christian identity in the living waters of baptism.

The sorts of stories told in *Liturgy* – individual, congregational, and denominational – are encouraging and inspiring; and they offer a glimpse into the state of liturgical worship within the Reformed family of churches. I want here to highlight some common themes found in these articles and a few of the common challenges they describe. I will do so by offering some observations, affirmations, suggestions, and perhaps a bit of circumspection as well.

Practice Makes Permanent

It may be that the counter-factual stories do not reach my ear in the conversations I have with pastors and partners in ministry, but it seems to me that *every* congregation moving from less-frequent to more-frequent celebration of the Lord's Supper – for even a season – stays with it. The appetite for encounter with God is not satisfied and diminished by frequent communion, but deepened and increased. Congregations and pastors are loath to return to more meager days when the meal was celebrated only once in a while. Furthermore, though these stories relate mistakes made in pastoral sensitivity or mystagogical preparation surrounding the change to greater frequency, these mattered very little in the end. The changes stuck.

What all this may suggest is that for decision-makers persuaded of the importance of the meal's *regular* (i.e. weekly) celebration in worship, a "ready-shoot-aim" strategy for congregational transformation may be exactly the right approach. Take advantage of just about any opportunity for initiating this change: a building renovation or move, a re-evaluation of congregational mission and vision, a change in pastoral leadership, the advance of liturgical seasons. Of course, anticipate problems and minimize them as best you can (knowing you won't catch everything), but set the table and bring people to it. Compel them to come in. Work out the details as you're able, but when the *kairos* presents itself, don't delay. In the words of the old hymn, "if you tarry till you're ready you may never come at all."

Say It Like You Mean It

The *manner* in which we celebrate the Lord's Supper is still a matter of some conversation, if not outright contention. Whether people are served by church officers at stations via intinction, or whether

they serve one another in circles around the table, or whether they remain seated and eat together from elements passed to them down the pews – these three dominant methods and the thousands of variations on them are not all equal. They do not all speak the same meanings with the same degree of clarity and power. And though there is certainly freedom to accommodate multiple ways of celebrating the Lord's Supper, there may be occasions to call more boldly for particular practices because of the way in which they speak a word that needs to be spoken.

I think, for example, of a workshop I led in Champaign, Illinois a few years ago, when a woman complained that she objected to the way her church celebrated the Lord's Supper – passing the bread and cup to one another in a circle around the table. "There are some people in this church I don't like very much, and it's so hard to look them in the eye and say 'This is the body of Christ for you.'" I responded by telling her that I couldn't think of a better reason than that for her to celebrate in exactly that way, and every week.

Overtime

There will always be resistance to making significant changes in a church's liturgical practices. Among the persistent pastoral challenges mentioned in these articles and echoed in my conversations with pastors is the amount of time required for worship celebrated in its sacramental fullness. For many of our congregations, the cultural pressure of the 60-minute time-frame is a substantial barrier to weekly celebration. Here pastoral scolding is not the best means for effecting the desired change. People will *always* devote time to those things they deem valuable. In fact, where we invest time, whatever we may say, is a reliable measure of what we *actually* do value. Nobody complains when the hockey game goes into overtime, or the baseball game into extra innings.

Therefore, when congregations or individuals are reluctant to celebrate the Lord's Supper weekly or to remember their baptisms because these "take too long," this is only a sign that their experience of the sacraments has been dry, thin, bland, anemic. God's presence meets us, but our congregations' full presence has been inadequately called forth. A solution here will certainly involve some teaching, but, more importantly, it will involve Initiatory and Supper celebrations that fully engage the senses, the mind, and our affective selves.

(On a related note, I'm pleased to see that, by and large, conversations seem to be moving beyond the nearly useless shorthand terms so often used during the worst fighting in the worship wars. i.e.

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“contemporary” vs. “traditional” – meaning “pop music and emcee” vs. “choir, organ, and master of ceremonies.” These articles echo my own experience that rich sacramental worship is not tied to any particular expressive style.)

Sacrament and Service

It seems that many churches find that a renewal in their service to God goes hand-in-hand with a revitalization of the service their congregation offers Monday through Saturday. That is to say, it seems that enacting our covenant life with God in the sacraments and practicing their ethical implications outside the church’s walls are mutually reinforcing activities. The more we see Jesus at the Meal, and offer ourselves as living sacrifices, the more we are motivated to seek and serve him where he is found in the world, among the least and lowly, hidden by what Mother Theresa called his “gruesome disguises.”

This linkage is especially heartening. But there is a subtle danger here: that we might fall prey to the temptation of *testing* the efficacy of our worship by behavioral standards. Reformed folks will always remember that worship – inside the sanctuary and out – isn’t about what we do, but about what our Triune God does – in both revelation and response. Our own transformation into greater Christlikeness and its fruit in our ethical activity is the blessed byproduct of our encounter with God in worship. Let us look for both, but not wonder whether or not God is active based on how many people volunteered that week to teach ESL classes or serve soup at the local shelter.

Hooked on a Feeling

A related word of caution pertains to the temptation to measure our worship by its affective depth. We are right to celebrate moments of deep emotional engagement in worship, coming as we do from a church tradition so profoundly shaped by the Enlightenment, with its emphasis on faith’s rationality. Yet even as we “loosen up” and allow more of ourselves to be fully present to the God who meets us in worship, let us be discerning and wise. Hendrikus Berkhof reminds us, “God does not always move us deeply; and all that moves us deeply is not God.”¹

Semper Reformanda

One of the characteristic traits of those churches that trace their ancestry back to John Calvin’s

Genevan Reformation is that they are (or claim to be) *semper reformanda* – *Reformed*, and always reforming. Alas, when this aphorism is invoked to justify changes in worship, two things are often forgotten. The first is the *agent* of change; the second is the *measure* of change. The full quote in Latin is this: *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei* – *Reformed*, and always being reformed according to the Word of God.

The passive voice of the second participle implies that the Church doesn’t reform itself, but is the continuing object of *God’s* reforming action. This should give us some humility when we press for liturgical adjustment. Second, we are always reforming, it’s true, but not reforming willy-nilly according to social whims or cultural pressures; we are to be reformed *secundum verbum Dei* – *according* to the Word of God. The Bible is the canon, the norm, the final authority in matters of faith and practice – including the practice of worship and the faith which shapes it and is in turn shaped by it. Where reform is pressed without biblical warrant, there is cause for Reformed people to be concerned.

The Wetter, the Better

I am constantly surprised that conversations about sacramental and liturgical worship focus most of their energy on the Lord’s Supper. Of course this is important. But baptismal celebrations and remembrance receive very little attention. Here too, celebrating voluminously is crucial for our congregations’ engaging in this sacrament and knowing deep down their identity in Christ, their inclusion into his Body, their gifting by his Spirit, their calling to his service, and their forgiveness by his Father. The prominence of the font in worship is a good first step, but only a first step.

There are hints in these articles, and elsewhere, of richer baptismal practice both inside and outside the church’s walls: river-rafting as baptismal remembrance, funerals understood as the completion of the baptismal journey, or Ash Wednesday services that make the connection between marking the penitent with the cross in ashes and marking the newly baptized with the cross in oil, signifying that death and sin do not have the last word.

I would encourage congregations that are moving to weekly celebration of the Lord’s Supper to likewise initiate a weekly baptismal remembrance. I can imagine, for example, a pastor who has learned the baptismal anniversary dates of everyone in her

¹ *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 17.

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small congregation², so that each week before the prayers of the people are said, those whose anniversaries fall in the following week are named and prayed for at the font. They may touch the water or have hands laid on them. And then, when events occur that prompt deeper ritual confirmation of baptism – e.g. a re-commitment to Christ after getting sober – catechesis can prepare that person for a fuller baptismal remembrance when his or her anniversary date comes 'round the calendar.

The Living Word

A final word about the Word. As with baptism, I am puzzled by the absence of *preaching* as a topic when sacramental and liturgical worship is under consideration. In the Reformed tradition, preaching is sacramental in at least two ways:

- when it is understood sacramentally – as the living Word of God (rather than merely words *about* God);
- when it is understood mystagogically – i.e., when the subject of preaching is the sacraments themselves.

Sacramental worship in our tradition, it seems to me, should lift up both these meanings.

I am skeptical when preachers insist that the sort of robust biblical preaching necessary to articulate the promises of God signified and sealed in the sacraments takes twenty minutes, forty minutes, whatever. Forty minutes of exposition of scripture may indeed be sacramental. It may also be distressingly less than that. What preaching calls for is an imaginative, contextually-sensitive testimony of what God has done, is doing, and will bring to completion – a testimony so vivid that God's living presence is keenly sensed, even as it is sensed at the font and table. Such testimony is not tied to a timetable. I do wonder, then, given the challenges of

² For people who don't know their baptism day, one could either select for the purposes of yearly celebration a date eight days after one's birthday (recalling the day of circumcision and presentation at the temple), or three months after, marking one's date of conception (recalling a richer Church history of marking saints' celebrations not on the dates of their birth, but on the dates of their death, and hence rebirth to eternal life). It was thought that the day a saint died was the same date on which that person was conceived. What wonderful symbolism for baptism!

introducing sacramental practice in sometimes resistant congregations, whether or not churches in the Reformed family wishing for richer sacramental practice would do well to focus on shorter and better sacramental preaching – preaching to the table and to the font, and sometimes *about* the table and font, inasmuch as these point, ultimately, to Christ

Trimming the Sails

Even as we seek to amend or improve our worship practices, let us do so in a spirit of humility and expectation. I find a sailing metaphor helpful: our task weekly is to cut and raise as much sail as we possibly can, and then to trim those sails to the best of our ability. These are tasks that require substantial effort and expertise. But the Spirit blows where it will, either in a steady wind, or unpredictable gusts. We do not engineer, but together enjoy a contagious spiritual vitality when we worship as though it depended on us, precisely because it does not.

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From A Friend of the Reformed Family

In the spring, 2009, issue of the journal *Liturgy*, six pastoral leaders in the Reformed tradition describe their work with congregations that have responded in various ways to the growing interest in the sacraments in Protestant churches. The pastors range in location from rural Arkansas to New York City and the congregations in size from 240 to 3500 members. In each essay pastors offer testimony to their journey with a specific congregation in implementing the ministry of worship and sacrament. Some of the pastors describe how they led their congregation through a process of liturgical and sacramental renewal. Others describe how a vibrant liturgical practice they discovered already at work in their congregations led to their own renewed dedication to sacramental ministry. The stories of these pastors and congregations vary widely, yet Peter Bower, the guest editor for the issue, identifies a common thread that runs through the essays: “by changing their praxis,” congregations “discovered how hungry they were for weekly Eucharist.”

As testimonies, the essays share the narrative arc of the conversion story: We once were lost (or not-so-sacramental), but now are found (we have a

deeper, richer, more meaningful experience of God and/or community). Also, as testimonies, the stories are rather resistant to critique. It sounds snarky to question a practice that someone finds meaningful, and elitist when that question comes from an academic. Yet, while I have no doubt that God can use all sorts of practices for God's glory that I might find problematic, I would want to hold up some issues for our discernment of sound liturgical practice that these essays raise for me.

First, is the "meaningfulness" of a liturgical practice sufficient for justifying it? Can a practice be meaningful (moving? enjoyable? mentally engaging?) in the short term, but damaging for authentic practice in the long term? Let me cite an example from one of the essays about which I have such a concern. In an amazing account of the Cathedral of Hope (UCC), Jo Hudson describes a practice among persons who watch the worship service on the internet as a recorded webcast that remains on the website for a full week. Hudson remarks: "Since beginning this cyber-ministry, several people have contacted the church to say that they watch the service faithfully, and a few have said that, at the time of communion, they...take a piece of bread, lift it, thank God for the gift, break it and eat it, and do the same with the cup, as it is consecrated for them on-line." On the one hand, this is a provocative example of popular religion at work in the digital age. On the other hand, should such a practice be encouraged? In recent months, the United Methodist Bishop of the Nashville Area has forced a congregation to remove an "on-line" communion service from its church website, after an article on this church appeared in *Newsweek* ("Click in Remembrance of Me," *Newsweek*, Oct. 5, 2008). The practice of virtual communion (which has been developing for decades, at least since the use of television as a medium for religious services), goes to the heart of what constitutes Eucharist. Is Eucharist a meaning that we ascribe to something, or is Eucharist some *thing*, which has meaning? Does physical location of an actual worshipping community with its full range of ministers (clergy and all the laity) matter? Does the doctrine of God incarnate in Jesus Christ (in a concrete, local, human body in real time) have any relevance for our practice of the Eucharist? It seems to me that these and other questions deserve some attention before Reformed congregations begin advocating this practice.

Second, does the Eucharist obligate us to follow Jesus and form us into His body, or is it more generally about the practice of hospitality, an open community of affirmation for a less specific religious life for which Jesus' story serves as one good

example? This question came up for me in Jacqui Lewis' essay on Middle Collegiate Church in New York City. She cites the example of the young man who plays the drums for their gospel choir and who is Jewish (presumably a religious as well as an ethnic designation). He also comes to receive the Eucharist in her church, with the implication that he does this without the first step of baptism and even without necessarily seeking to be a disciple of Jesus, though some sense of awareness of God's graciousness toward all persons does seem to prompt the movement to the table. Fifty years ago many Protestant Christians thought of the Lord's Supper as a penitential rite. Have we gone to another extreme? Is the Eucharist now a rite of personal affirmation? What sequence or even connection, if any, is there between Baptism and Eucharist, if hospitality becomes the *sine qua non* for the Eucharist?

Third, I found myself especially drawn to Chip Andrus's essay on his Presbyterian Church in Harrison, Arkansas, a congregation that is embracing an "ancient-future" model of church and worship. Andrus writes a testimony of how this fundamentally catholic approach to worship is leading his congregation to begin to interpret their lives from the standpoint of the historic liturgical symbols and imagery. I get the strong sense that Andrus's liturgical reforms are successful largely because he has so skillfully implemented them, though he appealed to the Sacramental Practice and Study Report of the Presbyterian Church (USA) as an authority for the liturgical reforms in his congregation. But, this raised another question: What are the authorities for liturgical reform and how do leaders appeal to them to overturn established congregational patterns? Does it really come down to personal skill and likability?

I hope these questions are not too snarky! I hope, too, that they do not obscure the fundamental point in all of the essays. There is an increasing desire for sacraments among Reformed congregations, whether this desire may manifest itself as a re-appropriation of ancient patterns, as an innovative challenge of tradition, or through liturgical bricolage. God does seem to be up to something here.

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