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## Liturgy and Proclamation

*Paul Avis*

In this paper I am aiming to meet the challenge of bringing together two themes that are often held apart: the *liturgy* of the church (its ordered worship, with the sacraments at the centre) and the *proclamation* of the church (its *essential* message, the gospel). It is sometimes the case that professional liturgists are not particularly zealous about proclaiming the gospel in the world and also that specialists in missiology are not particularly interested in liturgy. I will be arguing that liturgy and proclamation belong together and should always go hand in hand. First, I will be exploring the biblical basis of the calling and mission of the church to proclaim Christ and the gospel, to make them known in a public way to the whole world. Second, I will be examining how the church's liturgy fits into its calling to proclaim, attempting to show what the liturgy has to do with proclamation and how it serves as a vehicle for it. Finally, I will be raising the question for reflection and discussion of how the church can proclaim the Word (the gospel) more effectively and more publicly through its worship and liturgy. I begin with a key biblical text on proclamation: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light" (1 Peter 2:9; cf. Exod 19:6).

If we ask what is the purpose of God's calling of Christians out of darkness, through faith and baptism, into God's marvellous light, the answer comes, "In order that (*ὅπως*, *hópōs*) you may proclaim." A divine intentionality and mandate are expressed here. To proclaim God's mighty acts in salvation history belongs to God's purpose and plan for all Christians. For sure, we want with all our hearts to play our part in God's loving and just purpose for the world, for all God's children. Whether as clergy or as lay Christians, we have been called by God and inwardly moved by the Holy Spirit to a ministry of proclamation (Greek: *kerygma*; German: *Verkündigung*). The call of God to proclaim the gospel takes many forms and expressions, the key ones being the ministry of the Word, the sacraments, and pastoral care, including loving care in the name of Christ for the needs of humanity and the environment. In the first half of the paper, I will look at proclamation in terms of the biblical theology of the Word of

God. In the second half, I will consider the church's worship and liturgy as a primary mode of proclamation.

### **1. Called to proclaim the Word of God**

The commission laid upon the apostolic community by Jesus Christ at his Ascension (Matt 28:16–20; Luke 24:47–48) is to proclaim the gospel and to teach the faith: in other words to minister the Word. So, as disciples today – clergy-disciples and lay disciples – we are all *servants* of the Word. But before that, and to make that possible, we have to be *hearers* of the Word, those to whom the Word has been revealed and those who have received it with open arms and internalised it. We are recipients, with the whole church, of the Word, that is of divine revelation. The usual biblical expression for divine revelation is “the Word of God”. The expression “the Word of God” includes the proclamation of the church, which thus has a revelatory power and function.

To be called to proclaim Christ is an incredible privilege, but it is also a crushing responsibility. Of course, we feel completely inadequate. With St Paul (2 Cor 2:16) we cry, “Who is sufficient for these things?” At such times, let us always remember that it is, first and foremost, the work of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Word of God in the world. The Spirit teaches of Christ (John 14:26). The Spirit of God is the great proclaimer. And the Spirit of God is at work far and wide in every human heart and life. There is no place and no life that is untouched by the Holy Spirit. But the Holy Spirit normally works through human instrumentality and agency, which is always unworthy and inadequate. It is only our faith and trust that the Spirit goes before us and is always and everywhere preveniently at work that makes Christian ministry possible.

The Word of God comes to us in a threefold form: first, Jesus Christ himself, the incarnate Logos (John 1:1–2, 14; Heb 1:1–4); second, the Holy Scriptures; and third, the church's proclamation. All three are forms or expressions of the Word of God. The third form, the church's proclamation, is our main concern here. When we hear the term “proclamation”, we might immediately think of speaking some words rather loudly in church or another public place. But proclamation is not megaphone evangelism, and it is broader than preaching. The Word is more than words. The celebration of the sacraments and the ministry of pastoral care and compassionate service to humankind should also be seen as forms of proclamation. This presentation explores the theology of the Word of God as it feeds into the task and

challenge of church proclamation – above all, lifting up Jesus Christ and his saving work. As the processional hymn puts it: “Lift high the Cross, the love of Christ proclaim / Till all the world adore his sacred Name.”

## 2. The Threefold Word

Taking our cue from Karl Barth’s structural concept of the Threefold Word of God in the first volume (in two parts) of his *Church Dogmatics*, let us consider this three-foldness of the Word a little more closely, before we home in on the third form, church proclamation.<sup>1</sup>

(1) The primary form of the Word of God is none other than Jesus Christ, the *Logos* that was and is with God and was and is God (divine) and became incarnate once and for all in Jesus Christ (John 1:1–2, 14). In Thomas Aquinas’ hymn, we have the profound words, “The heavenly Word proceeding forth / Yet leaving not his Father’s side.” This is a beautiful summary of the ways that the Word (*Logos*) and Wisdom (*Sophia*) are described in the Hebrew Bible, the Greek Apocrypha and the New Testament, especially the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel: Word and Wisdom are sent by God and from the Godhead into the world on a mission. Jesus Christ is the personal Word, the Word that, as the Prologue of John’s Gospel tells us, is spoken into the heart of creation and expressed in a truly human life. Interestingly, although the language of the Johannine Prologue concerns the Word, the content – what is declared – is (also) that of divine Wisdom. The Epistle to the Hebrews says that God, who has always addressed humankind through the prophets, has now spoken to us through a Son. God’s best Word to us is a person. That thought might prompt the question: How can a person be also a Word? I would answer that a person can be also a Word when that person is the supreme embodiment in a human life of a message, a meaning, and a truth. In Jesus Christ, God speaks fully and finally (Heb 1:1–3). Jesus Christ, truly divine and truly human, is the first and final form of the Word and the definitive manifestation of divine Wisdom (1 Cor 1:30; Col 2:3).<sup>2</sup> Of course,

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, eds Geoffrey W. Bromiley/Thomas F. Torrance, 4 vols (Edinburgh-London-New York: T&T Clark, 1936–1969), vols I/1 and I/2. See also Thomas Christian Currie, *The Only Sacrament Left to Us: The Threefold Word of God in the Theology and Ecclesiology of Karl Barth* (Cambridge: James Clarke; Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> See more on this in Paul Avis, *Revelation and the Word of God* (London-New York: T&T Clark, 2024), especially the last chapter: ‘Jesus Christ the Revelation of God’.

however, we would not know Jesus Christ at all without the second form of the Word of God, Holy Scripture. Without the Scriptures, we would be without the saving knowledge of Christ.

(2) Therefore, the second form of the Word of God is the Word within the Holy Scriptures, which continually speaks through them. The Scriptures testify to God's revelatory communication to the world, God's speech and acts in history (to use the dominant biblical metaphors). Above all, the Scriptures testify to the incarnation of the Logos, God's definitive speech and act to and for the world. God freely chooses to speak continuously through the Scriptures to human hearts and minds. At the same time, it is equally important to recognise that the Scriptures communicate the Word in a human, culturally mediated and socially refracted way. The Scriptures convey the Word in a socially, culturally and politically conditioned way; no other way is possible. Whatever we know is always shaped by the mind and experience of the one who knows and by their social context. Our knowledge is filtered by our mental furniture and our social environment. The Scriptures are emphatically vehicles of the Word (Logos), communicating and conveying the Word, but without being identical with the Logos that (as John 1:1–2 tells us twice over) belongs "with God". The Scriptures are creaturely artefacts, the work of human hands, though God-inspired (2 Tim 3:16). The Scriptures are sacramental of the Word, just as the bread and wine of the Eucharist are sacramental of the body and blood of Christ, signifying and conveying Christ, without their natural properties as bread and as wine being removed.

(3) The third form of the Word of God is its human communication, the proclamation of the Christian gospel by the church and every member thereof. The Reformation held firm to this conviction. It confessed (in the Second Helvetic Confession, 1566): "The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God" (*Praedicatio verbi Dei est verbum Dei*).<sup>3</sup> It is a mighty

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<sup>3</sup> Philip Schaff (ed.), *The Creeds of the Evangelical Protestant Churches* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1877), 237. See also the comments of Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, trans. Grover Foley (London: Fontana, 1965 [1963]), 178. To make this affirmation about the church's proclamation is certainly not to embrace the Puritan doctrine that preaching was the "only ordinary means of grace", which was opposed by Richard Hooker as giving too much glory to the wit of man. Richard Hooker, *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiasticall Politie* (London: I. Windet, 1594) V, xxxi, 50.

high view of preaching to identify it with the Word of God. But there is a further step and claim to be made. The proclamation of the church cannot be separated from the church itself, because it is an act of the church, and that fact makes the church the saving Word spoken by God into the world. The church in its action is the speech of God addressed to the world. We may well hesitate to link our rather feeble efforts in the pulpit, in pastoral counselling, and in catechesis (e.g. confirmation preparation) with the Word of God – the Word that was spoken at creation (Gen 1:3), that came to the prophets, that was incarnate in Jesus, proclaimed by the apostles, and inscribed in the Scriptures. We may well think, “That is claiming too much; it is presumptuous and smells of human pride.” Nonetheless, if our preaching, teaching, and witness speaks of Jesus Christ, the Logos of God, if it conveys his gospel and if it is infused with the Scriptures, then it belongs with the Word of God. If it is not those things, then it is hot air and empty words, and not what we should be doing: “Get out of that pulpit!” If our preaching is devoted to those themes – filled with Christ and the gospel – it is certainly an expression of the Word. That is not a matter of presumptuousness but of faithfulness and obedience.

In case this claim still sounds to some ears too reminiscent of a rather extreme Puritan exaltation of preaching over against the sacraments or even over against the simple reading of Scripture, let me quote the Roman Catholic dogmatic theologian Michael Schmaus (1897–1993) to show that the Church as Word is not solely a Reformation insight. In his six-volume work *Dogma*, Schmaus insists that the proclamation of the Word by the church is itself the very Word of God. Schmaus states that the church itself has the character or quality of “word”. The church is primarily the church of the Word. The sacramental signs are included within the Word because it is the Word that gives form to the sacraments. The church’s primary task is proclamation. Schmaus writes: “The use of signs [that is sacraments and sacramentals] is part of the Church’s task of preaching the Word, not *vice-versa* (...) the proclamation of the word (...) includes everything else.” How is this so? Because it is the proclamation of the risen Christ that makes Christ (the Word incarnate) present in the midst of his people. The proclamation of the Word of God creates an encounter with the living Christ; it is a saving event for all who receive it in faith. Fundamentally, Schmaus affirms, the proclamation of the Word is an expression of the sacramental nature of the church and is itself sacramental, that is to say a visible and audible means of grace. He draws attention to Paul’s

thought-provoking order of priority in 1 Corinthians 1:17: “For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel.”<sup>4</sup>

There is undoubtedly a huge challenge in thinking of our preaching and teaching as “the Word of God”, but we are called to rise to the challenge. However, there is an equally daunting challenge in linking the church as such, the church as a body and as an institution, with the Word. What is the relationship of the church corporately with the Word of God, with Jesus Christ?<sup>5</sup> Bernard Lonergan, SJ, once wrote: “The Church is a redemptive process.”<sup>6</sup> That is a thought-provoking claim. Do we dare to go that far in what we affirm of the church, given the chequered record of the church in history, its failings, sins, and crimes? We may well hesitate and hold back from making such grandiose claims. I believe that we can affirm that the church is God’s Word to the world only with great diffidence and in profound humility. The church is a redemptive process only in so far as Jesus Christ, the Logos, the speech of God to humankind, fills his church and reigns in it, drawing it constantly into his perfect kingdom of truth and love. The reformed church must be always reforming according to the Word of God (*Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei*).<sup>7</sup>

### 3. The Word in proclamation

As a further step towards our topic “Liturgy and Proclamation”, let us note some biblical aspects of the Word of God in the form of proclamation. The proclaimed Word of God is primordial, before anything; historically speaking, it is the primary form of the Word. The Word of Yahweh came

<sup>4</sup> Michael Schmaus, *Dogma 5: The Church as Sacrament*, trans. Mary Lederer; ed. T. Patrick Burke (Kansas City-London: Sheed and Ward, 1975), 17–18. Karl Rahner has the same emphasis.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Avis, *Jesus and the Church: The Foundation of the Church in the New Testament and Modern Theology* (London-New York: T&T Clark, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> Bernard Lonergan, SJ, *Method in Theology*, 2nd edition (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973), 335.

<sup>7</sup> The Constitution on the Church of the Second Vatican Council seems to echo this language: “Ecclesia in proprio sinu peccatores complectens, sancta simul et semper purificanda, poenitentiam et renovationem continuo prosequitur” [“the Church, embracing in its bosom sinners, at the same time holy and always in need of being purified, always follows the way of penance and renewal”] (*Lumen Gentium* 8). See further on this theme Paul Avis, *Reconciling Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2022), 106–128.



to the Hebrew prophets. Second Isaiah spoke of the Word not returning empty to its sender but accomplishing its mission (Isa 40:8–9; 52:7; 55:10–11; 61:1–2). John the Baptist “proclaimed” a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins before the Messiah would come (Mark 1:1–3; Luke 3:1–6). Jesus “proclaimed” the imminent coming of the reign of God in himself and his ministry (Mark 1:14–15; Matt 4:23; Luke 4:16–21). Thus Isaiah, John the Baptist and Jesus himself all proclaimed the breaking in of God’s Word into the world. The apostles followed in their wake.

The proclaimed form of the Word – the preaching of the gospel – chronologically preceded the writing and canonical formation of the New Testament books and helped to create them. In the birth of the church of Christ, the apostolic proclamation is primary. While, in the Greek New Testament, *kerygma* is the content of the proclamation, a *kerux* (herald) is the one who proclaims, and the action of proclaiming is the verb *kerusso*. The preaching of Jesus is described as *kerygma* in the Gospels (Matt 12:41; Luke 11:32). In Romans 16:25, Paul uses a cluster of synonyms for his proclamation (*kerygma*): gospel, revelation, mystery, prophecy. The proclamation (*kerygma*), which is foolishness in human eyes, is what leads to faith and salvation (1 Cor 1:21). Paul’s speech (*logos*) is equated with his proclamation (*kerygma*) (1 Cor 2:4). In the Pastoral Epistles, “herald”, “apostle”, and “teacher” are juxtaposed in the mouth of Paul and treated as virtual synonyms (2 Tim 1:11); and God’s Word (*logos*) is said to be “revealed” through the *kerygma* (Tit 1:3). At the altar to the Unknown God on the Areopagus, Paul “proclaims” the true identity of the deity whom the Greeks worship in ignorance (Acts 17:23).

The earliest known Christian writings – Paul’s two epistles to the Thesalonians – are rich in the language of proclamation. The terms “gospel” and “word” are equated here, as are “gospel” and “proclamation” (*kerygma*) (1 Thess 1:5–6; 2 Thess 3:1). Not only so, but in these two short early epistles we find a set of virtual synonyms: the phrases “the word”, “the gospel”, and “the proclamation” are used synonymously. Paul rings the verbal changes, but the subject is the same. In these two epistles, the Word, the gospel, the proclamation, is said to be “received”; it also “sounds forth”, is “heard”, “obeyed”, and “spreads”. The Word as proclamation is active, dynamic, and effective, says Paul, precisely because it is always accompanied, inspired and empowered by the Holy Spirit (1 Thess 1:5). Overall, we may say that, in the New Testament, what is proclaimed by the apostles is “the Word” (*logos*) and the content of the Word is Jesus Christ. It cannot be otherwise if Christ himself *is* the Word (*logos*). If the church’s



preaching is to be apostolic, as it should be according to the Creed, it can be no less: we are called to proclaim Christ.

This third form of the Word of God, the church's proclamation of the gospel, presupposes the first and second forms, the incarnate Logos and the Scriptures, and depends wholly on them. The Word made flesh in the Person of Jesus Christ is the source and the focal point of both the written Word (the Scriptures) and the proclaimed Word (the gospel), and they both arise from this personal Word. The proclaimed Word is an articulation of God's eternal Word, Jesus Christ, as that is conveyed to the church through the Scriptures. Jesus Christ, the living Word, known through the Scriptures, remains the criterion and the judge of all claims to divine revelation both in the Scriptures and in the church's proclamation. The litmus test of the church's proclamation is Jesus Christ as he is testified to in the Scriptures.

This human, faithful speech about God finds its normative expression in the church's preaching or proclamation, but it is not limited to formal proclamation or to any "official" mode of communication. The third form of the Word of God is as multi-faceted as are the Scriptures themselves in all their amazing diversity and richness. The church's proclamation is not restricted to preaching from a pulpit but takes place through various communicative media and in diverse contexts: preaching and teaching, apologetics, worship and sacrament, pastoral care and loving service, social responsibility and working for justice in the name of Christ and humanity (public theology). For Martin Luther, the Word of God is primarily the oral, spoken, living Word, even more than the written Word, the text (Scripture or the sermon). Every Christian, says Luther, may share the gospel with their neighbour, especially to bring a Word of forgiveness and comfort, gossiping the gospel. Whether in preaching or conversing, God is speaking through the Word. Whenever we hear the sermon in church, Martin Luther tells us, the God of self-communication, the eloquent God (*deus loquens*), is addressing us.

Each of these three forms of the Word is rightly and properly called "the Word of God", but truly there is only one living Word (Logos), filling, animating, and energising both the Scriptures and the church's proclamation (as well as the natural, created world and the cultural sphere of knowledge and beauty, but that is another story). As Christians, as clergy and pastors, as scholars and theologians, our work is to be "about our Father's business" (cf. Luke 2:49), to be busied with the Word of God: adoring it in the incarnate Lord, studying it in the Scriptures, celebrating it and receiv-

ing it in the Eucharist, proclaiming it in multiple ways. The whole of the Christian life and ministry revolves around the Word of God and is placed entirely at the service of the Word. Christianity sets Jesus Christ, the Word of God, at the centre.

#### 4. Liturgy as proclamation

What marks out Christians in the world? Are we always morally better than others? No. Are we always talking about Jesus and the faith wherever we go? No, though probably we are not talking about him enough. I suggest that it is worship that marks Christians out from others. It is the practice of worship and the nature of that worship that defines us as Christians to ourselves and to others. Worship is a *practice*, an intentional, visible act or set of actions that are regularly repeated according to a pattern. Worship as a practice is an act of self-identification by believers and would-be believers with the Christian story. In worship, we seek to unite ourselves to the saving presence of Christ in the church, and with the biblical narrative of salvation-history (*Heilsgeschichte*) that presents him to us. Anglicans used to speak of worship as “divine service”, and the expression that the Orthodox Churches have for worship, especially the Eucharist, is “the Divine Liturgy”.

Stanley Hauerwas affirms: “Before all else, what makes us Christian, whether we are Protestant, Catholic, or Anabaptist, is our worship of God through word and sacrament.”<sup>8</sup> This statement makes the essential claim, but it does not include the distinctive character of *Christian* worship. We can make the Christian identity of our participation in worship even clearer by expanding Hauerwas’ statement to read: “Before all else, what makes us Christian is our worship of God through our Lord Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.” The celebration of the liturgy, addressed to the Father, through the Son, in power of the Holy Spirit, is the essence of Christian worship. But it is also the clearest indication that the church of Christ actually exists on earth and at the same time a sign of what the church stands for and witnesses to. It must be asked, however, how many of the millions of unchurched people in modern societies understand the point and purpose of the Christian worship that, as they probably realise if they think about it at all, goes on week by week in their local churches? They do not participate in it; some feel excluded from it; and both those

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<sup>8</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 76.

facts are – or should be – deeply troubling for all Christians. How can we help them to appreciate its potential value to them? Worship has become largely ghettoised, taking place “behind closed doors”, psychologically as well as physically.

The liturgy is an ordered act of Christian worship, namely the ascribing of infinite worth (it derives from “worth-ship”) to the one triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and a celebration and affirmation of “the things of God”, the Christian way of belief and practice within the community of the church. It is characteristic of humankind to accord supreme worth to certain values and ideals beyond natural functions such as eating and drinking, finding shelter and safety, bonding with a mate, reproducing, playing, and creating. As human beings we have ideals and values that motivate and energise us. We tirelessly work for those values and ideals, even without apparent benefit to ourselves. We may be driven by such admirable motives as: providing for our families; compassion for the needy and suffering; love of what is beautiful; the compulsion to create and construct, or to shape the world; a thirst to know the truth about the meaning of life; the need for sympathetic and supportive relationships; wanting to bring pleasure and joy to others; and more. Our most worthy motives lead us to strive for a better, more caring, and more beautiful world in which all may live in peace, security, and contentment. Unhappily, our most dubious motives lead, intentionally or unintentionally, to such damaging actions as: striving for power, wealth and fame at the expense of others; manufacturing a web of lies to hide our misdemeanours; trampling the poor and powerless underfoot to gain personal advantage; even delighting in cruelty for its own sake. Nonetheless, the fact remains that, as humans, we ascribe worthship or worship to entities outside ourselves and our immediate, mundane concerns.

The Reformed philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff states: “The deepest presupposition of the Christian liturgy is that God is worship-worthy.” Wolterstorff adds that, in worship, “we acknowledge the *unsurpassable* excellence of God.”<sup>9</sup> That is well said. However, worship is somehow warmer and more emotionally involving than simply ascribing unsurpassable excellence to God. Ascribing excellence needs to be supplemented by love and devotion. Love infused with strong attraction and a longing for emotional and physical union is called adoration. Worship has intellectual,

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<sup>9</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, *The God We Worship: An Exploration of Liturgical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 23–24 (italics original).

emotional, and physical dimensions. The worshipping attitude of mind, heart, and body includes elements of awe, reverence, and gratitude.<sup>10</sup> Awe is directed towards the glory of God in creation and redemption. Reverence is our response in the face of the holiness and perfection of God. Gratitude is evoked by God's costly love for sinful humankind. Awe, reverence, and gratitude need to be supplemented by trust and love. In trust or faith, we surrender our whole being to the one who gives us life from our conception in the mother's womb and now gives us new life in Jesus Christ. In faith and trust, we give ourselves back to God in thankful surrender (Rom 12:1). Both saints and ordinary Christians have testified to being "in love" with Jesus Christ in a mystical sense. All the attributes of God – glory, goodness, wisdom, justice, beauty, and love – we affirm to be complete in Jesus Christ. The spiritual and ethical character of Christ, as portrayed in the Gospels, evokes our love as Christians. In worship, we enter a realm of value that is infinite and inexhaustible. As St Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury, put it nearly a thousand years ago, God is "that than which nothing greater can be conceived."<sup>11</sup> So, in worship, we enter a realm of value that is infinite and inexhaustible. In worship, we can never come to an end: and that is one possible description of heaven.

## **5. What makes the liturgy kerygmatic?**

The human attribute of admiring a supreme worth that evokes adoration is taken to its highest power in liturgical worship. Liturgy is the ordered, structured worship of the church collectively. Liturgy is not only structured but scripted. Liturgy is scripted worship, and the script is for a performance that involves both speech and actions: there are rubrics to be followed, as well as texts to be spoken. Liturgy is a physical matter, as well as a matter of the heart. Liturgical acts involve physical movements and gestures such as: kneeling and standing; perhaps crossing oneself and genuflecting at key points; processing and other measured movements in space; closing the eyes (or keeping them open to gaze at the enactment of the sacred mysteries); receiving bread and wine in the mouth; pouring water over heads, hands, and feet; sometimes anointing with oil for consecration or healing; and of course speaking, singing, and chanting. Other physical expressions of worship include the devotional use of icons, flow-

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<sup>10</sup> Wolterstorff, *The God We Worship* (as note 9), 26–37.

<sup>11</sup> Anselm, *Proslogion*, Chapter 2.

ers, music, incense, and vestments. Another physical action that is usually taken for granted is *listening*, and we could add practising silence (within as well as without).<sup>12</sup> There is a proverbial saying: “Actions speak louder than words.” These outward liturgical words and actions are eloquent, they proclaim. They disclose our inward disposition of worship and therefore testify to the object of that disposition, “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”, revealed in the gospel. But let us ask again, who sees or hears all this? All too few, we know.

Liturgy (*leiturgia*) is literally the “work” of the people, so it is part of what the church exists to do. Worship belongs to the mission given by God to the church; it is what the church is “sent” for (amongst other things of course). Worship is the church being the church, the Christian community at its most typical and when it is most true to itself. If that is the case, the liturgy must reveal the nature of the church. The Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann defines worship as “the public act which eternally actualizes the nature of the Church as the Body of Christ ... [the act] which embraces, expresses, inspires and defines the whole Church, her whole essential nature, her whole life.”<sup>13</sup> The Reformed theologian Jean-Jacques von Allmen has an equally elevated view of liturgy; for him liturgy is the “epiphany” of the church.<sup>14</sup> Von Allmen is pointing to the revelatory effect of the liturgy; as the epiphany of the church, liturgy as proclamation becomes liturgy as revelation. Both of these liturgical theologians, Schmemmann and von Allmen, point to the revelatory effect of the liturgy. The liturgy *proclaims*. I would now like to draw out several aspects of liturgy that, taken together and viewed cumulatively, point to its proclamatory function.

## 6. Attributes of the liturgy as proclamation

1. Liturgy is an *event*. If it is to be the *actualisation* of the church (as Schmemmann claims) or the *epiphany* of the church (as von Allmen puts it), liturgy has to be understood as more than words. The liturgy is an embod-

<sup>12</sup> See Juliette J. Day, *Hearing Our Prayers: An Exploration of Liturgical Listening* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2024).

<sup>13</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, trans. Asheleigh E. Moorhouse (London: Faith Press; Bangor, ME: American Orthodox Press, 1966), 12.

<sup>14</sup> Jean-Jacques von Allmen, *Worship: Its Theology and Practice* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1965).

ied, dramatic event, taking place in the real world, in time and space. It is performed, not merely spoken. Liturgy is an action as well as a discourse and is made up of acts as well as words and of symbols as well as sounds. The physicality of the liturgy is patent. Liturgy can be the *actualisation* and the *epiphany* of the church because it is an *event*.

2. Liturgy is a *social* event. To be the actualisation or the epiphany of the church itself, liturgy has to be understood as the ordered worship that is enacted or performed by the Christian community as a whole in a certain place and at a certain time. Liturgy is an intentional act of the church corporately. It is undertaken by the body, not merely by individual members of the congregation speaking and acting, even if they are doing so in unison, all together. Liturgy is obviously the act or speech of participating individuals too, but the worship of an individual alone cannot reveal the nature of the church as the body of Christ. Only an act of the church as such and the speech of the church as such can be an actualisation or epiphany – that is to say, a revelation – of the nature and purpose of the church.

3. Liturgy is an *ecclesial* event. The church is a divinely convened and divinely constituted society, the mystical body of Christ. So what is revealed in worship, in the liturgy, will speak of the true nature of the church. It will be an ecclesiological epiphany, opening up the deepest, mystical nature of the church and the church's place in the redemptive purposes of God. As an ecclesial event, the liturgy is not an event that is enacted by the clergy alone on behalf of a liturgically unqualified congregation; it is carried out by the whole church. The gathered Christian community – people and priest together – celebrate the liturgy, the bishop or priest presiding. The only earthly “celebrant” is the community. In a deeper sense, the liturgy is the action of Christ, our great high priest, in and through his body.

4. Liturgy is a *christological* event. An ecclesiological epiphany will necessarily be a christological epiphany. In revealing the mystical depths of the church, liturgy reveals Christ. This connection suggests an answer to a question that is particularly troubling in the light of recent sexual abuse scandals and the many other historical sins, misdemeanours and crimes in and of the church: How and where does the church most clearly, most purely, and most authentically manifest Christian truth and reveal the Saviour *of* the world *to* the world? The answer that I offer to this most difficult of questions is that Christ is most explicitly revealed in the liturgy, the primary form of the church's proclamation, when it is performed skilfully and selflessly – though I would certainly not detach the liturgy from the other manifold practical expressions of the church's proclamation, es-



pecially its compassionate ministry to the physical, moral, and spiritual needs of humankind and the witness of the lives of the saints.<sup>15</sup>

5. Liturgy is a *pneumatological* event. This follows from the truth that the liturgy is a christological event. Because the risen, glorified Christ endues his body, the church, with the Holy Spirit, liturgy is a *pneumatological* and *epicletic* event. The Holy Spirit inspires the ordered praise and prayer of the church (Rom 8:26–27). It is the Holy Spirit, as the Spirit of Christ, who enables the liturgy to reveal Christ. Again we must say: the Holy Spirit is the primary proclaimer. Christ is present and at work, through the Spirit, in the liturgical worship of the church as his body. It is the earthly expression of his continual self-offering to the Father, into which we, as worshippers, are drawn. “Lift up your hearts” (*Sursum corda*), the liturgy exhorts; in truth, our hearts are lifted up for us by the Holy Spirit. Every liturgical service calls upon the Holy Spirit to inspire the worship in the face of human unworthiness and inadequacy. In the Eucharist, at the liturgical moment of the Epiclesis, the church not only prays for the Holy Spirit to “come down” upon the bread and wine of the Eucharist, consecrating and transforming them so that they become to us in truth the Body and Blood of Christ, but also for the Spirit to fill the worshippers, the communicants, as a body, from within, where the Spirit already dwells. The metaphor of descent is not adequate on its own, because the Holy Spirit is already present and has gathered the worshippers together in the first place and has ministered to them through the Word, especially in the first part of the service (though not exclusively then). In fact, the tone of dependence on the coming, the “descent”, of the Spirit is set at the beginning, as worshippers gather, in the Collect for Purity: “Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit.” The prayer of the church is for a love more perfect than we can ever muster in our own strength.

6. Liturgy is a *Godward* event. When we come to church, we may assume that we are coming to do something for our benefit – and indeed we expect to receive God’s blessing and all Christ’s benefits through our participation in worship. But liturgy is not intended primarily to satisfy human needs or to express human aspirations and longings, though these are not excluded and are rightly present. As Wolterstorff points out, “Many members of the church think of it as a service organization catering to their religious or spiritual needs or desires. [They assume that] the clergy

<sup>15</sup> Compare Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (as note 1), I/1, 3.

enact the liturgy for the benefit of those who find it spiritually nourishing and edifying.”<sup>16</sup> It is all too easy for those of us who are clergy to collude with this expectation; and it is particularly hard to resist this temptation in a culture dominated by consumerism. However, in truth liturgy is offered primarily for the sake of the triune God: through God, to God, and for God. If it were not so, it would lose the nature of worship. The liturgy – above all the eucharistic sacrifice – is offered to the Father, through the mediation of the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit. Because worship connects us to God, it unites us to our greatest source of blessing and beatitude.

7. Liturgy is an *obligatory* event. As the *Book of Common Prayer* (1662) puts it, “It is very meet, right, and our bounden duty, that we should at all times, and in all places, give thanks unto thee, O Lord, holy Father, almighty, everlasting God.” Obligation is the core meaning of *religio*, from which of course we get the word religion. This is an unfashionable thing to say, for the association of worship with religion creates a problem for the modern sensibility. For many, religion is suspect, even toxic, while spirituality is widely approved. To be confessedly spiritual is admirable and worthy of respect; to be religious is suspect. Spirituality and religion are viewed as opposed, rather than connected; alternatives, not two sides of a coin. It is not surprising, therefore that (as Wolterstorff shows) some modern liturgies are coy about the duty aspect of worship. They are happy to say that worship is a good and right and joyful thing, as though to imply that some people like to worship and that is fine; it is “their thing”. These liturgies seem to hold back from asserting that worship is our duty, an obligation, an imperative: we *ought* to worship; it is the right and best thing to do. Perhaps that sounds to the liturgical revisers too much like forced worship, and of course we cannot be compelled to adore; it can only arise spontaneously from the heart. Nonetheless, as Wolterstorff points out, in some circumstances desire and duty can coincide: “One can be inclined to do what one is obligated to do; ideally, indeed, we would always be inclined to do what we are obligated to do.”<sup>17</sup> Sometimes we want to sink to our knees, “lost in wonder, love and praise”. Then we are doing what we ought to do, paying a debt of obligation, but in an entirely natural and unforced way. That is worship’s “dream ticket”, the perfect combination.

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<sup>16</sup> Wolterstorff, *The God We Worship* (as note 9), 11.

<sup>17</sup> Wolterstorff, *The God We Worship* (as note 9), 43.

8. Liturgy is a *dialogical* event. The God of the Bible, Old Testament and New, is presented (inevitably in anthropomorphic language) as a God who speaks, “listens”, “hears”, and “answers”, a God who calls and invites God’s people into the divine presence, gathering them for worship and for prayer, so forming the *ekklēsia* (assembly). God not only speaks, but listens; not only rules in sovereignty, but hearkens to the cry of God’s people. In all forms of worship, from the supposedly spontaneous to the elaborately formal, there is a conversation going on. Many biblical figures wrestle with God, bravely argue with God, and talk back to God. Peter boldly takes Jesus to task about his understanding of messiahship as involving rejection, suffering, and death. Some biblical persons even talk with God as with a friend and are designated as such (most notably Abraham). On our part it takes strong faith and courage to dialogue with God. Sometimes the heart is bursting and, like Jeremiah, we cannot contain our feelings of protest or complaint. The saints of the church also wrestled and pleaded with God. In what St John of the Cross called “the dark night of the soul”, they cried out to God and waited for the still, small voice of reply. On God’s part (so to speak) this listening, hearkening, and answering must be deemed a form of divine condescension, humility, mercy, and compassion. Wolterstorff suggestively calls it God’s vulnerability. At any rate, it is clear that “the enactment of the liturgy is the site of mutual address and listening between God and the people”, and, moreover, this is the very purpose of the enactment of the liturgy.<sup>18</sup> As always, and supremely in the Incarnation, God stoops to our level. Liturgy is an interface of the human and the divine, creature and Creator. In every part of the liturgical event, including the most ostensibly mundane – even taking up the collection – we stand before God (in Martin Luther’s key phrase, *coram deo*), as we are found in Christ and moved by the Spirit of God, to hearken, to respond, and to hearken again. But Isaiah’s vision (Chapter 6) reminds us that we not only listen and speak, but also see and understand, perceive and respond in faith (“I am a man of unclean lips ... Here am I, send me!”). God not only speaks (in and through human speech) in Scripture and sermon, but also communicates Godself with us visually, through sacred symbols such as water, bread and wine, icons, candles and flowers, music, vestments, and church architecture. In such ways, the good Lord communicates truths that are not easily put into words, even truth beyond words, but which touch our imagination at the deepest level of insight and pathos. These are

<sup>18</sup> Wolterstorff, *The God We Worship*, 66–67.

indeed, as the poet William Wordsworth puts it, “thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.”<sup>19</sup>

9. Liturgy is a *public-facing* event. Liturgy faces both ways: primarily Godward and secondarily towards the human world. Paradoxically, when we stand before God, we do not turn our backs on the world. We carry the human world in our hearts and prayers into the liturgical presence of God, to the heart of God in intercession and consecration. We should think of the church building as a public space, not as a private function room, and we should see the liturgy as a public statement, not an esoteric performance solely for the initiated. There is a seductive psychology in the church that amounts to the mindset “behind closed doors”. There is an unhealthy gravitational pull to form a holy huddle, a cosy clique, but to think of worship as a private matter, as our proprietorial concern, is to collude with the destructive privatisation of religious faith in modern societies. The privatisation in question is the widespread assumption that, because religious faith is so varied and contradictory, because it sometimes gives rise to fanatical beliefs and/or violent acts, and because it cannot be proven scientifically, it is a purely subjective and arbitrary matter and therefore has no place and no voice in the public square. In reality, because the liturgy is filled with revelatory meaning and is a mode of the proclamation of the gospel, it should be celebrated as openly and publicly as possible. Liturgy should not be perversely esoteric, but as accessible and hospitable as is possible, given that Christian initiation is a journey into mystery. Both metaphorically and literally, our church doors should be thrown wide open.

10. Finally, and building on the previous nine points, we can and must say that the celebration of the liturgy, especially the Eucharist, is a *keryg-matic* event. In narrating God’s gracious and just dealings with the world, according to biblical salvation history, culminating in the whole Christ event, the liturgy proclaims the *kerygma*, the New Testament term for the core Christian message. That statement is of course a tautology; it is saying the same thing twice, namely that the liturgy proclaims the proclamation. But both the verb (proclaims) and the noun (proclamation) are needed. Unquestionably, the liturgy shows forth Christ and the gospel in Word and sign, speech and sacrament. The liturgy performs its work of showing

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<sup>19</sup> William Wordsworth, ‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood’, in: Thomas Hutchinson (ed.), *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth* (London: Oxford University Press, 1920), 587–590.

forth Christ in eschatological tension, looking back in thankful *anamnesis* to his saving work on earth (as we say) and looking forward in anticipation and longing to the final revealing of his kingdom. Although the Eucharist is celebrated from day to day and from week to week and inevitably feels rather the same each time, it is not a timeless repetition or a static state of affairs; it is for now and for this moment in salvation history. For “Now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor 6:2; Isa 49:8). There is only one liturgy, one Eucharist, in every time and place. Any and every liturgical celebration is the instantiation in a particular place and at a particular time of the perpetual self-offering of Christ to the Father and of ourselves as reconciled creatures in him. Jesus Christ celebrates the liturgy in and through his body, the church, and we are caught up into that. As St Paul says, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim (*kataggellete*) the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor 11:26). For Paul and for us, the celebration of the liturgy is a kerygmatic – that is, proclamatory – event.

## 7. Finally

The Jesuit priest-scientist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who died in 1955, found himself carrying out his research in the remote steppes of Asia. As the burning sun rose above the horizon, he felt a longing to celebrate the Eucharist. He was without bread and wine, chalice and paten. So Teilhard took the whole earth as his altar, and its fruits and their juices as the elements. He embraced the world in his worship and thus consecrated it to God. He celebrated what became known as “The Mass on the World”.<sup>20</sup> The Christian liturgy is celebrated not only before God, but also in the face of the world. It is a key form of gospel proclamation. In consequence we should ask: what can we do – what practical steps can we take – to make worship more of an accessible, visible, public act? How can we enable those “outside”, the “unchurched”, to become more aware of what the church does and what it stands for? How can we reach out into the community to assist seekers to begin to participate in the most vital, the most rewarding event in human life, the worship of the ever-loving God through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit?

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<sup>20</sup> Published in Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn of the Universe* (London: Collins, 1973 [1961]), 1–10: 1–2.

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### *Zusammenfassung*

Der Auftrag des auferstandenen Christus an die Kirche ist, allen das Evangelium zu verkünden und den Glauben zu lehren (Mt 28:16–20). Der mehrdeutige biblische Ausdruck «Wort Gottes» fasst den geoffenbarten Inhalt der Verkündigung (*kerygma*) zusammen. Das Wort Gottes kommt zu uns in der dreifachen Gestalt von Jesus Christus (Joh 1:1–2:14), der Heiligen Schrift und der kirchlichen Verkündigung, und zwar in dieser Reihenfolge. Alle drei sind Formen des einen Wortes Gottes. Die kirchliche Verkündigung umfasst mehr als allein die Predigt: Das Wort ist mehr als Worte; die Verkündigung ist eine Reihe von Handlungen. Die Feier der Sakramente, der Auftrag der Seelsorge und der von Gerechtigkeit und Barmherzigkeit geprägte Dienst in der Welt stellen ebenfalls Formen der Verkündigung dar. In diesem Beitrag wird die Theologie des Wortes Gottes untersucht, wie sie in die Aufgabe und Herausforderung der Verkündigung einfließt, insbesondere die Verherrlichung Jesu Christi und seines Erlösungswerkes in der Feier der Liturgie hervorzuheben. Schliesslich wird die Frage gestellt, wie die Kirche dies wirksamer und öffentlicher tun kann.

### *Keywords – Schlüsselwörter*

Proclamation – gospel – liturgy – worship – Eucharist