LITURGY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

RICHARD C. OUDERSLUYS

The impulse to say something about liturgy in the New Testament proceeds from something more than a personal interest in the subject. For one thing, the discussions which have emerged in our Reformed Church in America in connection with the attempt to revise our own liturgy, have strengthened this impulse. Some of these resultant discussions show that it is possible to entertain grave misapprehensions regarding the worship of the early church. It appears that some in our church circles are quite well informed about St. Paul's unhappy experience with the "Schwärmerei" at Corinth. Almost too well informed, one is tempted to add, because evidently some want to regard this utterly spontaneous, charismatic worship of the Corinthian church as fully characteristic and normative for the whole primitive church. Such is not the case at all, and someone should say so. If there are no objections, I herewith volunteer my services for the cause.

The impulse to treat this subject became a settled determination on the occasion of the publication of Professor Ilion T. Jones' new work on worship, a book which I conceive to be not only inadequate at several points but actually misleading at other points. Desiring to stress some features of New Testament worship which apparently escaped the attention of Professor Jones, it occurred to me that this might be a fitting opportunity to report on other liturgical studies of the New Testament as well. The latter have multiplied in number within the recent years, and the large number of studies will make necessary a rigidly selective treatment, but perhaps even a selective reporting and summarizing may prove worth while.

1 A Historical Approach to Evangelical Worship, New York, 1954. The book is seriously inadequate in its treatment of the New Testament data on worship, and defective in its understanding of the Reformed theology of worship. At many points the author shows sympathy with "Fundamentalist" views of worship, and for a Presbyterian, a strange lack of appreciation for his own rich liturgical heritage.
Turning now from the motivation of our subject to the consideration of methodology in treating it, let us begin by noting what we mean by "liturgy" in the New Testament. The word in its Greek form, leitourgia, came into the New Testament with Old Testament associations. It was used in the Septuagint to denote the work of the priests and Levites in the tabernacle and the temple (Num. 8:22, 25; 18:4; 2 Chron. 8:14). In the New Testament the word and its cognates retain practically the same meaning. Liturgy then, is the term we give to that which men do and say by way of service and worship of God in the assembly of the congregation (Acts 13:2; 2 Cor. 9:12; Phil. 2:17, 30; Clement, ad Cor. 41, 44). The "Liturgy of the New Testament" which we propose to discuss in this study, then relates to the content and form of the worship of the primitive church, and is to be distinguished from private acts of devotion and worship practiced by individual Christians. It is proposed here to examine the nature, content and constancy of the liturgy of the early church, and to show that this worship was not formless and unorganized, but orderly, constant in the main essentials and always consistent. Two methods of approach commend themselves in a study of this nature. The one is to note and summarize what the New Testament writings say about the shape of the liturgy of the church, and the other is to note and summarize the data on how the liturgy of the church affected the shape of the New Testament writings. The former approach is the more customary, the latter, perhaps, the more needful; but both will be employed in order to throw into bold relief the liturgy of the New Testament church.

I

The first method of approach to our subject has already been characterized as the customary one. By this we mean that the careful and scholarly collation of all the pertinent references in the New Testament to early Christian worship has been done many times. Most of the pertinent references may be found in any one of the better handbooks on the history of Christian worship. This being so, it is hardly necessary to make at this time a new and independent collection of these data. The summary made by Dr. W. C. Maxwell contains most of the relevant New Testament material, and because of its brevity and convenience it is cited herewith:

"First, that which grew out of the Synagogue: Scripture lections (1 Tim. iv: 13; 1 Thess. v: 27; Col. iv: 16); Psalms and hymns (1 Cor. xiv: 26; Eph. v: 19; Col. iii: 16); common prayers (Acts ii: 42; 1 Tim. ii: 1-2) and people's Amen's (1 Cor. xiv: 16); a sermon or exposition (1 Cor. xiv: 26; Acts xx: 7); a confession of faith, not necessarily the formal recitation of a creed (1 Cor. xv: 1-4; 1 Tim. vi: 12); and perhaps almsgiving (1 Cor. xvi: 1-2; II Cor. ix: 10-13; Rom. xv: 26).

Secondly, commonly joined to the above, the Celebration of the Lord's Supper,

Dr. Maxwell does not mention in the above summary either baptism or ecstatic speaking, and probably for valid reasons. Some scholars are inclined to the view that baptism was at first performed in connection with the missionary preaching and only later incorporated into the worship of the gathered community. More recently, Cullmann has argued convincingly that baptism was from the first a separate, single act of worship of the gathered community, not associated with or in the setting of the Lord’s Supper. Ecstatic speaking was most probably not characteristic of the entire church. Now in this summary cited from Dr. Maxwell, we should be prepared to see the usual and orderly lines along which the worship of the primitive church proceeded. There were variations, to be sure, between church and church. The New Testament contains no actual liturgies, and this is sufficient proof that the worship of the church was not a mechanical and stereotyped ritual. There was in the church, however, a customary ordering of worship, the observance of fixed forms and sequence. The New Testament knows nothing of the antithesis, charismatic versus liturgical worship, so often emphasized in evangelical circles. The early church brought together successfully the freedom of the Spirit and the restrictions of liturgy. “It is precisely in this harmonious combination of freedom and restriction that there lies the greatness and uniqueness of the early Christian service of worship.” This understanding of early worship commends itself when the New Testament data are placed in proper relation both to what preceded and what followed the apostolic age.

The antecedents of Christian worship were naturally those of the Jewish synagogue and temple together with the prophetic ideals of worship set forth in the writings of Isaiah (ch. 6) and Ezekiel (chs. 40-48). The influence of the synagogue liturgy on the form of early Christian worship is generally admitted. The central elements of synagogue worship, the reading of the lessons, the sermon based on the lessons, the prayers, the congregational “Amen,” the saying or singing of the Psalms, the prayers,

---

the recitation of the Shema and the Decalogue, the Shemoneh Esreh or the Eighteen Benedictions, constituted a liturgy in which both Jewish and Gentile Christians could easily join. It is not surprising in the least, to discover the greater number of the above elements of synagogue liturgy mentioned in the Pauline letters together with other very obvious liturgical formulæ. 7 The degree to which the temple liturgy influenced early Christian worship tends to be a more debatable matter. Generally speaking, the majority of handbooks on worship underestimate it. 8 It should not be overlooked that the synagogue liturgy was taken over from that of the temple and was oriented toward the service of the temple. 9 Moreover, such elements of temple liturgy as the daily morning and evening hours, the blessing of the priest, the Amen, Alleluiah and doxologies, the prayers and the use of the Psalter as a hymn-book, do appear in descriptions of early church worship. 10 Needless to say, the sacrificial ritual and system was discarded by the church. The author of the letter to the Hebrews makes it a point to declare that this system had only a symbolical, typical significance which was completed and fulfilled by Christ who "appeared once for all at the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself." 11 The service of the Upper Room became for the church the fitting commemoration of this perfect sacrifice of Christ. So much then for the antecedents of Christian worship.

We turn next to the period following that of our New Testament. In the first quarter of the second century, we encounter two interesting descriptions of Christian worship. The one is found in the Didache which provides Eucharistic prayers (chs 9, 10), directions for Sunday worship (ch 14), etc. The other is contained in the well known letter of the younger Pliny, the Roman governor of Bithynia and Pontus, written to Trajan c. A.D. 112, which states:

"(The Christians we examined) claimed that their entire offence or their entire error was confined to this that they gathered regularly on a fixed day before sunrise to sing antiphonally a song (carmen) to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by an oath not to commit this or that crime but rather to commit no theft, no murder, no adultery, not to break their word, not to deny possession of something entrusted to them. Then it is their custom to disperse and then reassemble to share a common meal together, but an ordinary and innocent affair . . . ." 12

8 Ilion T. Jones says, "It is generally agreed that Temple worship had little influence on either Christ or his early followers" op. cit., p. 67; and even Maxwell remarks, "the Temple worship left little mark upon Christian worship . . . ." op. cit., p. 2.
10 A collation of N.T. passages having any possible bearing upon worship will be found in Cabrol and Leclercq, Reliquiae Liturgicae Vetustissimae, (1909) 1, pp. 1-51.
11 Hebrews 9:26:
12 For convenience, the translation reproduced here is from Oscar Cullmann, Early Christian Worship (1953), p. 22.
One notes in the above description, antiphonal or liturgical singing after the Jewish fashion, a fixed day of worship which may be taken as Sunday, an oath not to commit certain crimes which may well be a reference to the recitation of the Decalogue, and a reference to a common meal which may have been just that or possibly a sacramental meal. Moving ahead another twenty-five years, we encounter a third description of worship in the *First Apology* of Justyn Martyr (ch. 47), the relevant portion of which is as follows:

"On the day called after the sun a meeting of all who live in cities or in the country takes place at a common spot and the Memoirs of the Apostles or the writings of the Prophets are read as long as time allows. When the reader is finished the leader delivers an address through which he exhorts and requires them to follow noble teachings and examples. Then we all rise and send heavenwards prayers. And, as said before, as soon as we are finished praying, bread and wine mixed with water are laid down and the leader too prays and gives thanks, as powerfully as he can, and the people join in, in saying the 'Amen'; and now comes the distribution to each and the common meal on the gifts that have been brought and to those who are not present it is sent by the hands of the deacon..."  

When we summarize the information from our sources we discover the following outline of worship:

- Hymns and singings, including antiphonal singing
- Confession of sins
- The Lord’s Prayer
- The Ten Commandments or other Baptismal vows
- The Lessons, evidently read from the Gospels or the Prophets, as long as time allowed.
- Common prayers
- The Sacrament of the Supper
- The Prayer of Consecration: evidently these prayers were already fixed at this time since they are given in full by the Didache.
- The Amen response of the congregation
- Voluntary contributions, offerings for the relief of the poor
- Concluding prayers of thanksgiving and dismissal

When one examines both the Jewish precedents and these later Christian orders, the impressive thing is the amazing continuity in the main essentials with the data of our New Testament. Worship in the primitive church was obviously not of the informal, spontaneous, prayer-meeting or testimony-meeting kind. The excesses of freedom in the worship of the Corinthian church were evidently abnormal, and no doubt for that very reason, received such forthright censure from Paul. We conclude that the New Testament church successfully held in harmony freedom of the Spirit with liturgical restrictiveness. Scripture lections, Psalms and prayers, sermon or exposition, the people’s "Amen," and sacraments were customary and normal among all Christian gatherings for worship. These constituted the liturgy of the New Testament church. Other acts of worship outside these mentioned above, serve to remind us of how full and rich was the worship

---

of the early church, and these items serve to rebuke us who tend so easily to mistake barrenness of worship for simplicity.

II

We turn now to the second approach to our subject, namely, the examination of how the liturgy of the church affected the shape of some of our New Testament writings. That they were so affected seems evident even from a cursory reading of them. The requirements of liturgy explain not only the well-known doxology at the end of the Lord's Prayer, but also the fuller Matthaean version of it as compared with that of Luke. Christian psalms and hymns are numerous in our New Testament writings (Luke 1:46-55, 67-79; 2:29-32; Ephes. 5:14; I Tim. 3:16; Rev. 5:9, 10, 12, 13; 12:10-12; 19:1-2, 6; etc.). The numerous doxologies and confessional formulae of various New Testament passages argue for a like liturgical influence.

A much more extensive and significant influence of liturgical factors in the making of our New Testament is claimed by the scholars. Many years ago the eminent English scholars John Mason Neale and Joseph Edward Field argued for an impressive relationship between the apostolic liturgy and the Epistle to the Hebrews. Dr. Paul Levertoff has advocated the influence of the liturgical seasons of the synagogue upon the sequence of events in Matthew's gospel. Dr. Philip Carrington has contended for a similar influence on the arrangement and sequence of Mark's gospel. Professor F. L. Cross has suggested that the First Letter of Peter reflects the Paschal Liturgy or Easter-eve service of the church. This service, it may be recalled, continued uninterrupted the entire evening and included the various stages of the new life of the believer, from baptism through communion. For many years scholars have debated the liturgical factor as an exegetical key to the Johannine writings, and just when the debate was subsiding, Professors Cullmann and Stauffer reopened it with new vigor. Stauffer characterizes John as pre-eminently a liturgist, and in speaking of John's gospel he says, "it was written for liturgical purposes; its main sections had in all probability long been used in worship before the aged John committed the whole corpus in literary form to the care of his congregation." In fact, Stauffer refers to this liturgical purpose of John as a sufficient explanation for almost all the unique features of the gospel: 'its liking for sacramental formulae, the solemn 'I' sayings, the Johannine 'we', the veiled references to the beloved disciple, the enigmatic expres-

15 The Primitive Christian Calendar (1952).
version of 19:35, and finally, for everything that has been said about the unhistorical character of the fourth Gospel and against its apostolic origin."  

Professor Cullmann has contributed measureably to the sacramental interpretation of the Fourth Gospel with his significant discussion, *Early Christian Worship*. He discovers in this gospel an astonishingly large number of passages which give decisive place to baptism and the Lord's Supper. Now it is only fair to say that all of these afore-mentioned studies are variously estimated by scholars. Some present demonstrations which are convincing, whereas others are not satisfactory. In some cases one suspects a reading back into the New Testament of liturgical influence that cannot be found there until one has assumed that it ought to be there. The studies have been cited here without prejudice, however, as illustrations of possible relationship between New Testament liturgy and New Testament literature.

One book where liturgical influence is most probable has not been mentioned until now, and that is the Apocalypse of John.  

This writing contains not only a larger number of Christian hymns than any other New Testament book, but also presents us with the concluding and unforgettable picture of early church worship. At the very outset of his book, the author prepares the mind of the reader for a discussion of Christian worship by reminding us that he saw his visions on the Lord's Day (1:10). Although exiled and kept from the Sunday services of his Ephesian congregations, the author worships with them "in the Spirit." What John proceeds to describe in his book is the kind of worship which was common to his churches and the essentials of which we have previously encountered in other passages of the New Testament. As a matter of fact, the Apocalypse serves as a bridge between the worship of the Jewish synagogue and temple and that depicted in the Didache and Justyn Martyr. Having this obvious importance for the study of liturgy in the New Testament, the book deserves some detailed consideration.

Two things immediately impress the reader of the Apocalypse. The first is the amazing correlation drawn between earthly and heavenly worship. The element of amazement is that the heavenly worship is pictured as a magnified form of the earthly worship. John's picture of worship in heaven is built on the familiar liturgy of his Ephesian churches.

---

20 So James Moffatt in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, and most of the scholars whose works were previously cited in note 19.
second impressive feature of the Apocalypse is that John uses the framework of liturgy to present the drama of the last times. Noting this presentation of eschatology within a magnificent liturgiology, Professor Cullmann remarks:

"Thus he sees the whole drama of the last days in the context of the early Christian service of worship which, so to speak, has its counterpart and at the same time its fulfilment in the coming aeon, so that all that takes place in the gathering of the early Christian community, seen from this side, appears as an anticipation of that which in the last day takes place from God's side." 21

Although many clues to the interpretation of the Apocalypse have been suggested, 22 the liturgical interpretation is the most inviting. It is my personal conviction that the liturgical framework of John's eschatology is more than a mere literary device. It appears to me that John is thoroughly persuaded that the world is moving on to a final day of perfected worship of God. He encompasses in his vision a day when the whole cosmos will be a temple of God, and eternity will be one great Sabbath. Then all God's people will be a kingdom of priests, serving him day and night in his temple. What a liturgy is unfolded before our eyes in this book! A liturgy that serves to picture heavenly worship, that serves to picture the drama of the last times, is something we ignore at our peril. Since detailed exegesis cannot be attempted in the brief time allotted to this lecture, we shall content ourselves with a general commentary on the more important passages, hoping at least to depict something of the movement and scope of John's liturgy. Out of a larger number of relevant passages, 23 we shall comment briefly on portions of chapters four, five, seven, and nineteen through twenty-two.

Chapter four introduces us to the worship of God, the Creator. After an invitation to worship (verse 1), we are ushered into a room where sits enthroned a silent, transcendent, eternal Figure. With typical Jewish reluctance to pronounce the name of God, the author contents himself with saying that he saw "One seated on the throne. And he who sat there appeared like jasper and carnelian, and round the throne was a rainbow that looked like an emerald" (verses 2, 3). Twenty-four other thrones are now mentioned, on which sit the elders clothed in white garments and wearing golden crowns as priests and kings. The number of the elders, reminiscent of the twelve sons of Israel and the twelve apostles, no doubt, represent the church of the Old and New Testament times. Also around the throne, on each side, are the four living creatures who sing the Trisagion of Isaiah:

22 Drama was the suggested background of framework by Albertus Pieters, The Lamb, the Woman and the Dragon (1937), and even more recently by John W. Bowman, The Drama of the Book of Revelation (1955). It has always seemed incongruous to me to interpret so Jewish a book as the Apocalypse on the background of Greek drama.
23 Rev. 4; 5; 7; 8:3-5; 10: 14:1-5; 15; 19:1—22:5.
"Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!"

The singing of the Trisagion is followed by the choir of elders who sing a hymn of praise to God as the Creator:

"Worthy art thou, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for thou didst create all things, and by thy will they existed and were created."

When we turn next to the fifth chapter, we see that worship is also directed to God as Redeemer, and here the figure of the Lamb is central. The worship of the early church was not Jewish worship with a few added trimmings. We judge from the portrayal which follows that it was explicitly and thoroughly Christological. Chapter five introduces us to the Lamb who stands between the throne and the four cherubim and among the elders. He is a strange Lamb. He looks as if he had been slain, and yet he too is obviously divine for from him proceed the seven horns, the seven eyes, and the seven spirits of God. Moreover he is worshipped, and before him bow the four living creatures, the elders and every other creature, and they sing a new song:

"Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing.

"To him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might for ever and ever. Amen!"

Early worship, however, was not only Christological, but it was Word-of-God worship. Much is made in this chapter of a scroll in the hands of the One seated on the throne. Written within and without, it is sealed with seven seals, and no one seems worthy enough to open the roll and break the seals. Even John weeps that no one is found worthy to open this important scroll, but his weeping ceases at the announcement: "Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals." We have here an obvious reference to the reading of the Old Testament scriptures in the Sunday services of the early church. And let it be noted that these scriptures must be read Christologically or else they remain a sealed book. Christ alone is the key to the Old Testament. Professor Piper makes the suggestion that the sealed scroll of 5:1-3 should be placed in contrast with the open scroll of 10:8. The latter scroll John is commanded to eat and thereupon is empowered to prophesy. Professor Piper would interpret the two passages as indicative of the sealed character of the Old Testament as compared with the open character of the New Testament, and he remarks: "the New Testament is a self-explanatory work, the understanding of which could offer no special difficulty, whereas the Old Testament requires an extra

gift of interpretation.”26 The more important point here, however, is that Christ is worthy to open the scroll because he has won a victory and ransomed God’s people by his passion and death (verses 5, 9).

“Worthy art thou to take the scroll and open its seals, for thou wast slain and by thy blood didst ransom men for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and hast made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on earth.”

In connection with the singing of the Agnus Dei, just noted, John tells us that those who sang held eternal harps and golden bowls of incense, which, as John declares, are the prayers of the saints. The Word-of-God service included as important elements, prayers and hymns.

Chapter 7:9-17 introduce us again to the majestic figures described in the previous scenes, but conspicuous here are two new groups. There is first a glorious number, 144,000, taken and sealed out of every tribe of the sons of Israel. And then there is another great multitude which no man could number from every nation, tribe, people and tongue. The separate identity of the two groups is not our major concern at this moment. Whether Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians or the Church Triumphant and the Church Militant is not too crucial. Together the groups represent the worshipping congregation which sings the closing doxology of the service to God and the Lamb, and who accompany this with a final choral “Amen”:

“Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb. Amen. Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God for ever and ever. Amen.”

Before we conclude these few remarks about the liturgy of the Apocalypse, we should turn to the closing chapters (19:1-22:5), where we have depicted the proper climax of all Christian worship—the sacrament. In these chapters we have set before us a great, final Eucharist. Because John is describing here not only the sacrament as known to his churches, but also the heavenly Supper, and the final Supper of the final Church of the final time, his description does not permit of easy analysis. The imagery is mixed, his language tumultuous, as he tries to speak of that which is almost more than faltering human words can describe. Heavenly trumpets sound! Angels and martyrs play on their eternal harps. Heavenly choirs sing the Agnus Dei, the Trisagion, and a final Hallelujah chorus which resounds throughout heaven like a final chorus of Handel’s Messiah.27 And then what a Table, what a Supper! There will be gathered the fruits of the harvest of history. There will be gathered all of God’s People of all the ages, and all will be priests. His name shall be in the foreheads, and they will serve him day and night in his temple. About this last Table, of which all our tables are but anticipations, shall be gathered the final

26 Ibid., p. 15.
Church. No wonder that John says the angel commanded him: "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb."

In the last book of the New Testament, then, and for the last time, the liturgy of the early church has been set before us. This time, however, the Seer of the Apocalypse has placed the Scripture lections, psalms and hymns, doxologies and confessions, prayers and responsive "Amens," and the sacraments in a frame-work of heavenly, eschatological worship that dominates both his book and its readers. The significance of what he did does not easily escape us. From John we learn the profound meaning and importance of the liturgy of the New Testament church. True worship is always eschatological worship.

And so tomorrow or whenever again we make our way to the house of God for worship, whether to stand in the pulpit or to sit in the pew, let us be concerned to make our liturgy that of the New Testament church. Why? For what reason? For the reason that true worship is always eschatological worship, and we want to prepare our own hearts and minds and those of the congregations committed to our care for the liturgy of heaven.

"Here afford us, Lord, a taste
Of our everlasting feast."