

## Teaching Liturgy in the Seminary: Dimensions of the Task

Jeffrey A. Truscott

The twentieth century was a time of change for the Christian church and its worship. The “liturgical movement” of the Roman Catholic Church, which had roots in the previous century, advocated a return to the early liturgical sources as well as a focus on the role of the entire worshipping assembly. The movement’s work culminated in the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council. Liturgical renewal efforts among Protestants, which likewise had nineteenth-century origins, influenced the rites of new worship books that appeared in the last half of the twentieth century. The “folk worship” movement of the 1960’s and 1970’s produced various masses and services for Roman Catholic and Protestant churches respectively. In the 1980’s and 1990’s, the church growth movement in the United States championed services designed especially for non-churched or “de-churched” persons. Formulated on the principle that traditional Christian music, language, and symbols bewilder and even alienate non-churched persons, these “seeker services” attempt to make worship appealing by using “top 40”-style music, as well as Christian comedians, interviews, and video clips.

Of course, these developments in worship provoked reactions. Attempts by Protestant liturgists to produce liturgies reflecting patristic patterns was challenged by advocates of Reformation-era patterns. *Lutheran Book of Worship’s* use of post-baptismal rites emphasizing the gift of the Holy Spirit, which was inspired by early Roman/North African baptismal practices, was viewed by critics as a denial of the traditional Lutheran teaching that the baptismal washing itself mediated the gift of the Holy Spirit. The contemporary/alternative worship movement’s focus on “appealing” worship has been criticized as a “dumbing down” of worship. Thus there are presently many views about what worship should and should not do. These conflicting expectations have

resulted in the so-called “worship wars,” that is, bitter disagreements about the meaning and role of Christian worship.

Seminaries, of course, are caught in the crossfire. While a critical focus on worship is always welcome, it may be that the latest conflicts will only intensify a natural tendency to reduce liturgics to a “how-to” course. In other words, liturgics is now under more pressure to become, for example, “How to do worship that *grows* the church.” But this kind of reductionism ultimately does a disservice to the church, for seminary liturgics is and should be more than a “how-to” course.

Although practical application is its goal, liturgics is nevertheless an academic discipline, and like other disciplines (history, systematic theology, and biblical studies) it adheres to certain methods, in particular, the historical, theological, exegetical, and practical. Thus liturgics is an “integrative” academic pursuit. My purpose here is to describe the significance of each of these methods and how each is necessary for equipping seminary students for the ministry of Word and Sacrament.

To begin with, liturgics is *historical*. It seeks to answer the questions: How has the church worshiped over the centuries? What major structures and forms has it employed and how have they evolved? How have theological controversies, political upheavals, and intellectual movements influenced the shape of liturgical structures? Moreover, liturgics seeks to demonstrate how current rites exhibit continuity and discontinuity with the rites of the past. This historical inquiry is necessary for two reasons. First, it provides an understanding of why certain rites are part of a tradition. Lutheran liturgics, for example, considers why we, unlike other Protestants, have practiced “emergency baptism” and how this rite relates to our understanding of original sin.<sup>(1)</sup> Second, historical inquiry enables us to evaluate claims that appeal to historical examples. We often hear it said that Luther’s hymns are based on medieval drinking songs, or that Luther composed hymns in order to encourage worship attendance. These claims are made in order to bolster the argument that the contemporary church should set sacred lyrics to popular melodies, in order to attract new members to the church. But the reality is that while some of Luther’s hymns resemble popular tunes of his time, Luther’s hymns were his own creations, and they employ the learned musical forms of the late Middle Ages.<sup>(2)</sup> Also, Luther clearly stated that he composed hymns in

order to proclaim the Gospel<sup>(3)</sup> — he says nothing about making worship appealing. Hence, the data of historical inquiry is relevant to ongoing discussions about worship!

Historical inquiry is also necessary for fostering a critical perspective on current rites and emphases in worship. Sometimes a theological focus, while valid, can be over-emphasized to the detriment of the liturgy. The centrality of the proclaimed Word for Lutherans has, arguably, tended to make Lutheran liturgy pastor-centered and speech-centered. The role of the entire assembly in the liturgy and the place of symbols and actions has been somewhat overlooked by Lutherans. Significantly, Gregory Dix's study of ancient rites led him to conclude that liturgy was basically an *action* by the entire worshipping *community*.<sup>(4)</sup> Undoubtedly, his work has helped to moderate the traditional pastor/speech-centeredness of Protestant worship.

Ultimately, historical inquiry about the liturgy is more than an attempt to inculcate a fascination with ancient rites. Rather, this inquiry seeks to ground the church's self-awareness in its own history, so that the church might find "fresh" perspectives from the past that enable effective ministry in the present. Indeed at various times and places, Christians have found their liturgical history extremely useful. By recovering sixteenth-century Lutheran liturgies and practices, Wilhelm Löhe (1808-1872) was able to bring sacramental and theological renewal to churches in Europe and the United States during a time of theological and spiritual decline.<sup>(5)</sup> The late twentieth-century church has seen in the ancient catechumenate a relevant model for adult Christian initiation, since the contemporary church, like the Constantinian church, must provide spiritual formation for significant numbers of persons with little or no experience of or in the church.<sup>(6)</sup> The study of liturgical history is thus necessary for the church's mission in the world.

Next, liturgics is *theological*. That is to say, it is concerned with the *theological meaning* of rites. Liturgics therefore inquires about the *theology of Baptism* in Luther's 1526 rite or that of the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, or the *theology of Eucharist* in the sixth-century Roman Canon. This aspect of liturgics is important for three reasons. First, it enables students to distinguish between views of the sacraments, which is important for pastoral ministry in religiously pluralistic contexts such as those of the United States and Japan. Second, theological reflection is necessary for the meaningful

practice of the liturgy. So, for example, a consideration of Baptism as a “washing away of sin” or a “drowning,” leads to the conclusion that Baptism with a few drops of water is inadequate — not because such a practice constitutes a deficient sacrament, but because it fails to do justice to the meaning of Baptism.<sup>(7)</sup> Naturally, a gulf between meaning and practice leaves the assembly wondering about the authenticity of the church’s worship! Third, theological reflection helps to avoid oversimplification, which is important since the sacraments are multivalent. In the New Testament itself, Baptism is described in terms of: death and resurrection with Christ (Rom. 6:3-6), new birth through water and the Holy Spirit (John 3:5, Titus 3:5), clothing with Christ (Gal. 3:27), repentance (Luke 3:1-17, Acts 2:38), and the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38). Christians in individualistic cultures (like that of North America), tend sometimes to reduce Baptism to the forgiveness of sins only (viz., *my* individual sins). While the baptismal theme of forgiveness is valid and important, it needs to be complemented by another significant biblical theme, namely, Jesus’ Baptism in the Jordan.<sup>(8)</sup> The Jordan event points to Baptism as a rebirth and reception of the Holy Spirit who empowers us for mission to the world. In short, by suggesting the “horizontal” dimension of Baptism, the Jordan theme offers a potential corrective to an individualistic, “me-and-Jesus” piety. In sum, theological reflection, like historical inquiry, can potentially generate a renewal of both liturgical understanding and practice.

The theological component of liturgics, of course, considers what rites express about our belief in *God*. For example, an examination of West-Syrian *anaphorae* (eucharistic prayers) reveals a structure that affirms the doctrine of the Trinity, since such prayers praise the Father for creation, thank the Father for the life, death, resurrection and ascension of the Son, and petition the Father to send the Holy Spirit to enable the meal to be a sharing of the body and blood of the Lord Jesus. In other words, liturgics approaches rites with the understanding that they constitute *theological* documents. This being the case, liturgics seeks to ground theological reflection in the liturgy. Thus it is appropriate to talk in terms of a *baptismal* ecclesiology, that is, to describe the church as the community of those who have died to the world and been raised again with Christ in Baptism, and having been reborn of water and the Holy Spirit, are empowered to witness to the Reign of God revealed and embodied in Jesus. A liturgical

theology such as this integrates the liturgy into the church's reflection about its life and mission and thus offers a needed challenge to the reductionist/individualistic view of the sacraments as momentary incursions of grace.

Of course, liturgics does not understand the liturgy to be only an *expression of* theology. To the contrary, liturgics recognizes that liturgy *is* theology, i.e., it is *enacted* theology. Liturgics, in fact, distinguishes between *primary liturgical theology*, which is the actual doing of the liturgy, and *secondary liturgical theology*, which is reflection on the liturgical experience. As Frank Senn puts it:

. . . gathering in an assembly, praising God, confessing sins, proclaiming the word, professing the faith, praying for the world, administering the sacraments, and going forth into the world as a witness to the gospel and servant of Christ are all theological as well as liturgical acts. Such acts are examples of primary theology because, as Alexander Schmemmann asserted, they constitute the very condition of doing theology. One does not have a knowledge *of* God (in contrast with a knowledge *about* God) without an experience of God.<sup>(9)</sup> [emphasis original]

As Senn points out, this understanding is important because it reveals that “liturgy is not just an aesthetic form by which people express their faith [that] is derived from some other medium, but that doing liturgy is constitutive of faith and therefore foundational for theology.”<sup>(10)</sup>

Liturgics is also *exegetical*. That is, it seeks to interpret the meaning of a rite both by textual and structural analysis — by examining the words of a text and the text's place within the rite. Liturgical exegesis is essential for sound liturgical practice. An examination, for example, of the Offertories in *Lutheran Book of Worship*, namely, “Let the Vineyards be Fruitful”<sup>(11)</sup> or “What Shall I Render to the Lord” (Psalm 116:12, 17 [13], 18, 19) and the Offertory Prayers,<sup>(12)</sup> reveals that these texts not only interpret the meaning of the offering of bread and wine (along with the monetary gifts), but that they also anticipate the Great Thanksgiving and interpret the eucharistic action. This is evident from phrases in the Offertories such as “grace our Table with your presence” and “I will take the cup of salvation.” The Offertory Prayers also point to the eucharistic action insofar as the one “who offered/gave himself for us — Jesus Christ” offers himself to us again in the Eucharist. Thus, the juxtaposition of the

Offertory/Offertory Prayer and the Great Thanksgiving in *Lutheran Book of Worship* suggests that the Eucharist is an offering of thanksgiving and praise in which Christ offers himself to us again.<sup>(13)</sup> This exegesis would imply that practices like placing the intercessory prayers<sup>(14)</sup> or a choir anthem after the Offertory Prayer (practices that I have witnessed), obscure the connection between the Offertory/Offertory Prayer and the Great Thanksgiving. In the end, the sequential order of rites within a liturgy ought to be followed out of a deep appreciation for the *relationship* between rites, something that is inculcated through strong liturgical exegesis. Such adherence should not simply be a matter of “doing it by the book” or “by the rubrics.”

This brings us to the matter of the rubrics. Undoubtedly, many Christians are concerned that liturgical rubrics can be used legalistically, and thus stifle freedom and creativity in the liturgy. Such concerns are certainly justified and, for sure, the aim of liturgics is not merely to produce good rule followers, but to help students understand the liturgical and theological *reasons* for rubrics. Furthermore, because the Christian church has a rich and diverse liturgical history, liturgics will (ideally) discuss how certain things can be done in a variety of acceptable ways (e.g., where to place the eucharistic vessels on the table). Yet, many rubrics indicate ways of varying a rite, especially in order to accommodate local circumstances. That being the case, not attending to the rubrics can be detrimental to the cause of freedom and variation in the liturgy!<sup>(15)</sup> Thus liturgics needs to take a moderate approach regarding rubrics: advocating neither strict adherence nor arbitrary disregard.

Finally, liturgics is pastoral. “Pastoral liturgics” is concerned with the concrete practice of liturgy *in the life of the church*. It is grounded in the understanding that liturgy is the action of an assembly of Christians who gather to represent the world to God and God to the world. Since, by virtue of Baptism, all members of the assembly are “priests” charged and empowered with performing priestly (representative) acts, all of them participate actively in the liturgy. Within the assembly, a diversity of liturgical roles (viz., presiding minister, assisting minister, lector, musician, lay member of the assembly) is present, not merely for diversity’s sake, but because Christ has gifted the church with unity in the diversity of its members and leadership (Eph. 2:14-16 and 4:11-13) which ultimately points to the unity in the diversity of the persons in

the Holy Trinity.

Pastoral liturgics seeks to facilitate the gathered assembly's performance of its representative role by focusing on matters of liturgical space, the use of symbols, gesture, and music — the concrete means by which the assembly engages in the liturgy. Liturgics is therefore concerned about allotting adequate room for processions to the altar or font, and placing liturgical centers (altar, pulpit, and font) where they enable liturgical ministers to be adequately seen and heard. Regarding symbols, a significant issue for pastoral liturgics in recent decades has been whether “symbols” are used in a way that clearly suggests the meaning contained therein. For example, is baptismal water used in sufficient amount so as to suggest a drowning or at least a thorough washing? Does the eucharistic bread really suggest that the sacrament is a *meal*? Regarding music, are tunes for hymns and psalm refrains within the range of the average congregation and is the rhythmic complexity kept to a minimum in order to promote congregational participation? The practice of liturgy, then, is not governed primarily by aesthetics (what “looks good” or is pleasing to the senses), but by a profound *theological* concern for enabling everyone in the assembly to participate fully and actively.

Notably, this dimension of the liturgy was lost during the Middle Ages. At that time the church became absorbed in metaphysical questions about the liturgy, such as *when* and *how* bread and wine became the body and blood of Christ. Such theologizing culminated in the theology of transubstantiation. At the same time, the ecclesiastical-hierarchical concern that priests perform the mass daily, along with a popular desire to endow masses for the dead and other intentions, led to the development of private masses (i.e., eucharistic services attended by the priest only). Thus the medieval Eucharist, reduced to a priestly act of confecting the body and blood of Christ, did not necessitate the presence of a congregation. Gone was the understanding that the Eucharist was a joyful gathering of Christians to thank God for the life and work of Christ and to share his body and blood in order to participate in his mission for the world. In sum, because the Eucharist was dominated by an obsession with theological/metaphysical concerns, the essence of liturgy as the worshiping assembly's *action* was lost. Hence, the pastoral perspective on the liturgy is needed for giving balance to and maintaining *the life* of the liturgy.

It now becomes clear that seminary liturgics must be more than: (1) a “how-to” course; and/or (2) an introduction to different “styles” of worship. Regardless of how well it is done, seminary liturgics as a “how-to” course risks producing: (a) rubricists who simply do what they are told, and/or (b) idiosyncratic liturgists who merely do what they like, because they lack a solid understanding of what the church has done in the liturgy and why. Additionally, seminary liturgics must be more than an introduction to different “styles” of liturgy, whether “high church,” “low church,” or an introduction to different approaches to worship (e.g., “contemporary” worship), which may or may not help Lutherans to be responsive to their doctrinal commitments. If liturgics were merely either of these, the implication would be that students are to *choose* a style or approach. This tack, again, encourages idiosyncrasy and perhaps implies that students are to impose their liturgical “styles” or approaches on congregations. Liturgics should instead educate students about the historic Christian liturgy, its reform by Lutherans, and the possibilities for local adaptation, rather than seeming to suggest that liturgical leadership involves personal “choices.”

The above discussion suggests two other goals for liturgics. First, students should be able to demonstrate good liturgical practice as presiding ministers. They should know how to use voice and gesture effectively, i.e., so that the assembly can hear and see and thus participate most fully. Students should be able to plan services in which all the parts fit together logically and coherently, and they should be able to teach lay people how to do the same. They should know how to use natural elements (water, bread, wine) in a way that makes sense to the assembly in light of the church’s biblical faith. As liturgical presidents, they should have a respect for other liturgical roles, and therefore avoid the urge to dominate the liturgy. Finally, they should be able to advise congregations on how to design liturgical spaces that best enable the participation of the assembly, or how to modify existing spaces for the same purpose.

Second, students of liturgics should be good *apologists* for the liturgy. In other words, they should be able to demonstrate a knowledge of rites and liturgical matters, and be able to explain why the liturgy is necessary for the life and mission of the church. This apologetic role is necessary due to pastoral realities. Many long-time church members do not know or have forgotten much about the liturgy and its meaning,

and thus require ongoing liturgical catechesis. Additionally, as the society becomes more secular and the church (again) finds itself receiving many new converts with no previous church experience, it is especially crucial that pastors be able to provide solid liturgical catechesis. Religious pluralism, furthermore, necessitates that pastors be able to explain why some worship forms and materials are inadequate for Lutheran worship, viz., because they assume a pastor-centeredness that obscures the essence of the liturgy as an assembly's act, or because they fail to affirm trinitarian orthodoxy. Clearly, the apologetic and catechetical needs of the church — if nothing else — suggest that seminary liturgics involve more than practical instruction.

Throughout the centuries, the church's worship has succumbed to reductionism: the medieval church reduced the Eucharist to a priestly sacrifice; the Enlightenment-era church made worship a school for inculcating good moral behavior. The twentieth-century church, following the utilitarian method of the Enlightenment, has tended to make worship a means to an end, whether a pep-rally for social activism or a marketing tool for evangelism. The concomitant danger is that the seminary liturgics course will be viewed as a "how-to" course for making worship into whatever one's ideology dictates. But the task of liturgics is far too great for this reductionism to go unchallenged. My hope is that the church will recognize the immensity of the task of liturgics and develop commensurate expectations of its seminaries.

- (1) Lutherans since the Reformation have insisted on the necessity of Baptism for salvation. See Augsburg Confession, Articles II and IX, in *Book of Concord*, Theodore, G. Tappert, ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 29 and p. 33. This insistence led Lutherans to continue the practice of "emergency" Baptism, i.e., the immediate baptism of newborn children in immanent danger of dying. This practice became a badge of doctrinal orthodoxy and distinction for Lutherans.
- (2) For an excellent discussion of Luther and his hymnody, see Edward Foley, *Ritual Music: Studies in Liturgical Musicology* (Beltsville, MD: The Pastoral Press, 1995), Chapter 4.
- (3) See Martin Luther, "Introduction to the Wittenberg Hymnal" (1524) in *Luther's Works*, American Edition, Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehman, gen. eds. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, and St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965), vol. 53, p. 316. Henceforth, LW.

- (4) See Dix's *Shape of the Liturgy* (London: Dacre Press, 1960), p. 2.
- (5) See Frank C. Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), pp. 580-581.
- (6) See, for example, *Welcome to Christ: Lutheran Rites for the Catechumenate* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997).
- (7) See Martin Luther, *The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism* (1519), LW 35, p. 29.
- (8) For a discussion of Jesus' Baptism in the Jordan, see Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1999), pp. 11ff.
- (9) *New Creation: A Liturgical Worldview* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), pp. 4-5. See also Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), pp. 4-8.
- (10) Senn, *New Creation*, p. 5.
- (11) (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House; Philadelphia: Board of Publication, Lutheran Church in America, 1978), p. 66. The text of this canticle is: "Let the vineyards be fruitful Lord, and fill to the brim our cup of blessing. Gather a harvest from the seeds that were sown, that we may be fed with the bread of life. Gather the hopes and the dreams of all, unite them with the prayers we offer now. Grace our table with your presence and give us a foretaste of the feast to come."
- (12) *Ibid.*, pp. 67-68. The text of these prayers are: "Merciful Father, we offer with joy and thanksgiving what you have first given us — our selves, our time, and our possessions, signs of your gracious love. Receive them for the sake of him who offered himself for us, Jesus Christ our Lord" and "Blessed are you, O Lord our God, maker of all things. Through your goodness you have blessed us with these gifts. With them we offer ourselves to your service and dedicate our lives to the care and redemption of all that you have made, for the sake of him who gave himself for us, Jesus Christ our Lord."
- (13) Note that "eucharist" (from the Greek *eucharistia*) means "giving thanks."
- (14) Or perhaps I should say, continuing the practice of *Service Book and Hymnal* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House; Philadelphia: Board of Publication, Lutheran Church in America, 1958), p. 28.
- (15) Note, for example, how in the rite of Holy Communion in *Lutheran Book of Worship*, p. 62, psalms may be sung or said and the appointed verse may be sung by the choir, or the congregational Alleluia verse may be sung. The rubrics here (#11 and #14) allow for some creativity with the psalms and verses.