

# Some central yet contested ideas of liturgical theology

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## Introduction

What is the connection between liturgy and theology? For many leaders of or participants in liturgical practice and theological reflection, an immediate response might be that liturgy flows from theology. As we believe, teach and confess, so we sing, pray and preach. The direction of influence is from theology to liturgy. But does influence flow in the other direction as well? Does liturgical practice inform theology? For those ecclesial traditions grounded in the principle of *sola scriptura*, this might appear to be placing the cart before the horse. Surely the starting point is the bible, then our theology or confession, and finally our expression of that in prayer and praise. But is it not also the case that the songs and hymns one sings, the prayers and liturgy one prays, and the liturgical space and movement one experiences, can gradually influence a person's view of God, the church and the world?

It is the task of yet another adjectival form of theology, *liturgical theology*, to reflect on these questions. This paper originally took the form of the 2011 opening academic address at Australian Lutheran College. There I noted that theology did not cease once students left the classroom and entered the chapel—it simply changed gears. Christology, pneumatology, and ecclesiology are not cast aside but have become implicitly woven into the various acts of praying and singing, hearing and responding. As mental intensity and conscious deliberation are put to one side, and as familiar rhythms and liturgical patterns take over for a while, we discover that we are no longer doing theology as much as it is doing us. Imperceptibly we are being theologised into that unwieldy and miraculous entity we call the body of Christ. And while this takes place in the daily worship of an academic community, the primary location that such liturgical theology is 'suffered' is in the full sacramental and liturgical assembly we call church. It is in the local congregation that liturgical theology takes place week by week as God's people are reconstituted as the body of Christ around word and sacrament.

In this paper I would like to unpack the term 'liturgical theology' and the way it helps us explore the relationship between the church's worship and its theology. I will do this in two steps. In the first, I will discuss a key methodological approach of liturgical theology—that of treating liturgy as source for theology. The second step will be to elaborate some central features of liturgical theology by way of three Latin terms—*lex orandi*, *ordo* and *theologica prima*. In the course of the paper I will introduce the views of some pioneers and recent proponents of liturgical theology as well the opinions of some dissenting and critical voices.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, Aidan Kavanagh, Gordon Lathrop and David Fagerberg are the key representatives of liturgical theology discussed in this paper. Space prevents an individual treatment of those studies critiquing liturgical theology, but I have drawn on the observations made by Paul Bradshaw, Michael Aune, Paul Marshall, Melanie Ross and James Waddell, whose articles are listed in the references. Maxwell Johnson's article brings together many of these concerns.

## Liturgy as a source for theology

A distinctive feature of liturgical theology is its method; it draws on real and historic liturgies as a key source for doing theology. Rather than starting with a prior theory or theology of worship and then asking how the liturgies of the church fit the theory or support the theology, liturgical theology allows actual liturgical sources to guide the task of theology.<sup>2</sup> Another way of describing the connection is that liturgy is the primary context for theological endeavour, the soil in which theology grows, or as Alexander Schmemmann put it, 'the ontological condition of theology' (1990: 18).

What kind of liturgical sources are we talking about? High on the list—maybe on top of it—are the prayers and actions of the church's **Eucharist**, the holy communion liturgy, as celebrated in numerous liturgical rites over 20 centuries. From the earliest church orders such as the *Didache* and *Apostolic Tradition* to the dominant liturgies of Constantinople and Rome, from the assertively Protestant evangelical communion rites of the Reformation to the catholic-evangelical shape of recent eucharistic prayers—this is the seedbed of liturgical theology. A further source comprises the various rites of **initiation**, those sequences of prayers, rituals, teaching and pastoral formation culminating in baptism and confirmation. We think also of the arrangement of psalms and prayers constituting the church's practice of **daily prayer**, and the great treasury of hymns that originated from it, continually added to by hymns and songs in every generation. Rites associated with various **orders** of ministry and pastoral acts for every stage of a believer's life also constitute a source for liturgical theology. In addition to these primary materials, the liturgical theologian also considers the rich heritage of **sermons and commentaries** seeking to explain the church's liturgy to converts and clergy alike.<sup>3</sup> Liturgical sources also include **non-textual** and symbolic material such as ritual and gesture, the arrangement of liturgical space, movement, iconography, vestments, sacred furniture and vessels. Highly important is **liturgical time**, structured as it is around the church year and punctuated by times of fasting and feasting, the calendar of the saints, and the natural rhythms of day, night, and season. All this real liturgical material, be it past or present, catholic or evangelical, eastern or western, orthodox or even heterodox, is source material for liturgical theology as it thinks about God, the church and the world.

To get an idea of what this kind of theologising looks like in practice, we look to one of the pioneers of modern liturgical theology, Alexander Schmemmann, the Orthodox priest and theologian who died in 1983. Schmemmann's book *The Eucharist* is a work of liturgical theology emerging from his reflection on the Divine Liturgy in the Orthodox tradition. Because the Divine Liturgy is fundamentally Eucharistic—that is, an act of thanksgiving—Schmemmann's theology of humanity, sin, Christ and the Church is also eucharistic. Eucharistic liturgy guides Schmemmann's eucharistic theology.

For example, Schmemmann reflects on the solemn doxology with which the liturgy begins: 'Blessed be the kingdom of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit'; or the words at the beginning of the holy oblation: 'Let us give thanks to the Lord'. Such liturgical acts of blessing and thanking express the theological truth that humanity exists to bless and thank God. We are not just *homo sapiens*, but *homo adorans*, blessing and thanking beings. But if humanity is created to be eucharistic, then what is sin but a non-eucharistic existence, the refusal to give thanks? However, Christ's gift to the world is that he gives us his own perfectly

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<sup>2</sup> It is this methodological approach which distinguishes 'liturgical theology' from what David Fagerberg (11–13) refers to as a 'theology of worship' or 'theology from worship'. In a theology of/for worship historical liturgical forms do not serve as a source of theology; if they are referred to at all, they serve to illustrate some aspect of a theology worked out on other (exegetical, dogmatic, confessional) principles. Vilmos Vajta's *Luther on worship* and Peter Brunner's *Worship in the name of Jesus* are examples of a 'theology of' and 'theology from' worship respectively.

<sup>3</sup> Examples of liturgical commentary aimed at converts are the mystagogical writings of Cyril of Jerusalem, Ambrose of Milan, John Chrysostom and Theodore of Mopsuestia. Liturgical theology for the clergy would include the genre of 'mass commentaries' that flourished in the Western church in the high Middle Ages and which aimed to unpack the spiritual sense of the Mass.

eucharistic life, thus restoring our capacity both to receive from God and give thanks to God for all things.

Another way that liturgical thanksgiving informs Schmemmann's theology of thanksgiving is shown in the offering rite. For Schmemmann, the physical expression of thanksgiving shown by the movement of bread and wine towards the altar symbolises *our* movement towards our true end, our ascension with Christ into the kingdom. He writes: 'And as the procession moves it bears the bread and wine to the altar, and we know that it is Christ himself who takes all of *us* and the totality of *our* life to God in his eucharistic ascension' (1998: 36).

Yet liturgical theology, especially in its more recent manifestations, has also attracted considerable criticism. One such criticism is that the claims of liturgical theology sometimes rest upon poor or selective history. Liturgical data that does not support one's theology is sidelined as an aberration or exception. Furthermore, while claiming to work from *the* liturgical tradition, theological or confessional commitments can narrow down considerably what the tradition is believed to be. Closely related is the temptation to romanticise the liturgy of one's favourite era—be it 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> century Constantinople or 16<sup>th</sup> century Wittenberg—or to give certain liturgical traditions too much representative weight. To such warning bells liturgical theology must attend. But the question for many readers of this journal might possibly be this: doesn't liturgical theology displace the Scriptures as the primary source for theology? How can a fallible and changing human construction, the liturgy, be more foundational than the word of God?

To this objection one can begin with two basic observations. The first is that many liturgical forms are themselves almost nothing but Scripture. If not composed of direct quotations, the texts, prayers and responses of the liturgy are biblically saturated. The second is that liturgy is the very framework which ensures the Scriptures are read, preached on, and sacramentally enacted. Taken together, liturgical theology maintains that reflecting on the liturgical tradition is a specific way of meditating on Scripture, as demonstrated by the profusion of liturgical commentaries at various points in history.<sup>4</sup>

Taking a cue from the philosophy of language, we could say that liturgical theology plays both a semantic and a pragmatic role in relation to scripture.<sup>5</sup> It explores Scriptural meaning (semantics) but it also enacts those meanings (pragmatics). The liturgy is an act of Scriptural interpretation in the way that it places biblical texts side by side, there to interpret each other and us. In the daily office,<sup>6</sup> for example, psalms of David are bracketed by verses to or about Christ as we exercise our royal priesthood in prayer for the world. In the eucharist, the 'holy, holy, holy' of Isaiah's vision is juxtaposed to the cry of 'blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord', as Jesus, the Holy One, rides into our midst sacramentally. This last example demonstrates that as well as interpreting Scripture, liturgy also enacts it. Scripture set in liturgical form becomes a sacramental word. What the words say on the page, liturgy does in the assembly. When blessing is bestowed, when bread is distributed, when peace is shared, the biblical accounts narrating these same things become present and available. If the liturgy enacts Scripture in this way, the Word is once again made flesh and dwells among us, full of grace and truth.

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<sup>4</sup> As Claude Barthe puts it: 'The search for the spiritual meaning hidden behind the *letter* of the ceremonial, the decoration of the building, the sacred vestments...is in reality nothing more than a continuation of the search for the *spirit* hidden behind the *letter* of sacred texts...' (181).

<sup>5</sup> A semantic approach to language is concerned largely with meaning understood as reference. A pragmatic approach, such as speech-act theory, investigates the performative qualities of language, that is, how it does things.

<sup>6</sup> For example, services of Matins or Vespers.

## Three Latin tags: *lex orandi*, *ordo*, and *theologia prima*

### 1. *Lex orandi*

Considerable reflection on the relation between liturgy and theology has been generated by three terse and somewhat enigmatic Latin phrases. The first of these is often abbreviated as *lex orandi*, *lex credendi* (the law of prayer, the law of belief). The idea here is that liturgy (the law of prayer) and theology (the law of believing) are continually influencing each other. That the church's belief influences the way it prays liturgically might seem fairly obvious. But as mentioned in the opening paragraphs, liturgical theology is particularly interested in exploring the way in which the church's rule of prayer establishes and regulates that which it believes. The following historical examples demonstrate this priority of the church's *lex orandi*.<sup>7</sup>

In the late second century, Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons, appealed to the eucharist to 'prove', or at least demonstrate, the importance of the flesh in Christian belief. Since even his Gnostic opponents admitted that the bread was the body of Christ, how could they then downplay the material world? Was not the eucharistic transformation itself God's sign of approval of the material world, and an anticipation of the resurrection of our flesh? For Irenaeus, the church's earthy sacramental worship confirmed the church's belief in creation, incarnation and resurrection. And so he maintained: 'our doctrine agrees with the eucharist, and the eucharist confirms the doctrine'. Here the *lex orandi* plays a leading role. Several centuries later Augustine drew on the church's baptismal liturgy to confound those who denied the reality of original sin. The very fact that the church exorcised infants, baptised them and led them immediately to the eucharist, demonstrated their captivity to the devil and utter helplessness apart from the grace of God. Although Augustine based his argument on scriptural exegesis, the *lex orandi* was nevertheless a key part of the argument.

But it is Prosper of Aquitaine, the ardent promoter of Augustine's theology, who especially captures our attention. His appeal to the *lex orandi* served to uphold the necessity of God's grace in the face of Semi-Pelagian moralism: the very fact that the church made supplication for infidels, idolaters, heretics, Jews, schismatics and the lapsed, showed that no human capacity can bring about salvation. The church's liturgical practice (its intercessions) formed the basis for the church's faith (the need for grace). Prosper is especially worthy of consideration as it was he who coined the *lex orandi*, *lex credendi* phrase in the first place. What Prosper wrote in full was *ut legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi*: 'that the order of supplication may determine the rule of faith'. It is at this point that the critic of less disciplined forms of liturgical theology makes an important observation.<sup>8</sup> For the very passage in which this phrase occurs reveals that Prosper is not giving liturgy some kind of *carte blanche* over doctrine wherever and whenever.<sup>9</sup> For Prosper, the *lex orandi* refers not to liturgical practice in general, but only to a specific biblical passage, namely, St Paul's injunction in 1 Timothy 2:1,2 to pray for all people. For Prosper 'the law of prayer' referred to St Paul's admonition 'to pray'. In this context Prosper's famous liturgical maxim acquires the following sense: 'let the Apostle's injunction to make supplication determine what is to be believed, namely, that we need saving grace'. The whole point then is that the *lex orandi* never meant liturgy that stood alongside Scripture, but liturgy that was scripturally based.

This qualification of the *lex orandi* can lead us straight to the other side of the coin, that of the *lex credendi*, the law of belief. Here it is equally clear that the church's faith, doctrine and confession have determined how the church has prayed. Again, two small case studies adequately illustrate this.

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<sup>7</sup> The historical examples touched on in this section are discussed at length in chapters 7 and 8 of Geoffrey Wainwright's book, *Doxology*.

<sup>8</sup> What follows is fully developed in Paul de Clerck's article listed in the reference section.

<sup>9</sup> Of course, putting it in such a way is a caricature of liturgical theology.

In the fourth century the church's doxology read: Glory to the Father, *through* the Son, *in* the Holy Spirit. This is quite orthodox and expresses admirably the Trinitarian economy. But the trouble was that it could be appealed to by Arians in support of a theology that denied Christ's divinity. These Arians could quite happily say 'Glory to the Father *through* the Son' because they felt it supported their notion of the Son's less-than-divine status. In order to avoid this doctrinal subterfuge, the church adopted the less dynamic but safer form of 'Glory to the Father *and* the Son, *and* the Holy Spirit', ensuring liturgically the equality of all three divine persons.

The liturgical rupture occasioned by the Reformation provides a more drastic example. As is well known, Luther took to the Roman Mass with abandon, so much so that the more liturgically sensitive have complained that Luther's revision of the Mass was nothing less than a hatchet job. But as Bryan Spinks' 1982 study has shown, Luther's liturgical revision was anything but arbitrary. On the contrary, all his revisions can be understood in the light of that one, central doctrine—justification by grace through faith for Christ's sake. It was by the standards of this evangelical theology that all unwelcome notions of sacrifice and offering were rigorously cut out. Here it is very clear that the *lex credendi* called the shots.

## 2. *Ordo*

While the *lex orandi*, *lex credendi* distinction has sometimes split along confessional lines,<sup>10</sup> the notion of *ordo* has demonstrated a capacity to unite disparate liturgical traditions. The *ordo* refers to the basic liturgical structure of a rite, its overall pattern, and its connection with the broader life of the church. One of the most important tasks of historical liturgical research has been to ascertain just what *is* the *ordo* of a church's tradition—its origin, its development over time, and its current form. Once this historical work is done, liturgical theology can then elucidate the meaning and theology of the *ordo*, as well as offering proposals for its renewal. As a result of these historical and theological investigations, many churches today recognise an ecumenical eucharistic *ordo* which looks something like this:

Gathering – WORD – Prayer/Offering – MEAL – Sending
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The identification of this basic structure has not only provided common ground for ecumenical discussion, it has also enabled individual churches to examine afresh their own liturgical life. Numerous questions arise when actual church practice is set against the *ordo*: Is it apparent that the fundamental pattern of the church's *ordo* is Scripture and meal, or is the latter still regarded as a time consuming attachment? In what sense do those originally preparatory rites—confession and absolution, the Introit, Kyrie, and Gloria—actually function as preparation for the Word? Does our arrangement of space, ritual, and furnishing indicate the importance of the key parts of the service? Does the *ordo* encourage people to sit in rapt attention when the Scriptures are read? Is eucharistic praying seen as an essential aspect of the celebration of the meal? Does our communion liturgy acknowledge that an actual meal is being celebrated, albeit a ritually abstracted one? Do our concluding rites enable our liturgy to continue in the world? How do hymns or songs and liturgy relate to one another? These are just some of the practical questions arising from a consideration of the *ordo*.

For liturgical theology, however, such questions are also deeply theological, because they reflect our understanding of God, the church, and its mission in the world today. Deep theological reflection on the *ordo* is precisely what the Lutheran liturgical scholar, Gordon Lathrop, attempts in his highly influential volume *Holy things* (1993). For Lathrop, the *ordo* of worship is characterised by a series of juxtapositions, ritual elements paired and held in tension. The basic juxtaposition is that of Word and the Meal, as indicated above. The Word, however, is a further juxtaposition of Reading and Preaching, framed by the juxtaposition of

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<sup>10</sup> The Catholic and Orthodox traditions have instinctively appreciated the *lex orandi*; by contrast, traditions stemming from the Reformation have been predisposed to assert the priority of the *lex credendi* over the *lex orandi*.

Gathering and Prayer. The Meal is a pairing of Thanksgiving and Eating/Drinking, framed by Setting out food and Giving away food. The resulting schema takes the following form:

Gathering WORD (Reading and Preaching) Praying	Setting out food MEAL (Thanksgiving and eating) Giving away food
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Lathrop’s contention is that this juxtaposition, the placing of one thing alongside another, is theologically revealing: ‘The religious meanings of ancient scriptures are found to have surprising new referents when set beside a meal of thanksgiving in which Christ’s death is experienced as life giving’ (50). In other words, when something like a meal, a common human activity, is joined to recital of God’s creative and saving deeds...and this is further placed alongside the remembrance of Jesus’ death and resurrection...and further joined to intercessions for the world...and finally connected with acts of charity and hospitality...then the *ordo* serves to reveal the gracious work of God in our midst. Lathrop’s work is profound, eloquent, but also practical. For as well as seeking to articulate the meaning of the *ordo*, it also invites the reader into a deeper participation of this *ordo*, and proposes its renewal for our times.

Nevertheless, Lathrop’s work has been vigorously critiqued. Is Lathrop’s reliance on a very limited number of ancient texts<sup>11</sup> enough to establish a paradigmatic and universal *ordo*? Does, in fact, this *ordo* exist as a historical reality, or is it an idealistic construction of the author’s mind? Some have questioned how universal an *ordo* really is that ignores the radically different patterns and psychology of worship one might find in the various ‘free church’ traditions, for example. Liturgical theology also needs to respond to challenges such as these.

### 3. *Theologia prima*

The third Latin descriptor, *theologia prima*, seeks to place liturgical theology firmly in the pew. Here the conviction is that worship—more precisely, liturgy—is not a break from theology, but it is the *primary form* of theology. David Fagerberg writes:

It is not as if believers have inchoate experiences which must in turn be formulated by academics to be real theology, nor as if primary theology is amateurish thinking which is better expressed by professionals, nor as if secondary theologians are privy to data which they must transmit to the less informed because theology only occurs in this systematic form. (16)

But what does such theology look like? Drawing on his mentor, Aidan Kavanagh, Fagerberg outlines three moments in the liturgical event: ‘First, the assembly encounters the Holy One; second, by consequence of this encounter the assembly is changed; third, the assembly must adjust to this change, and it is this adjustment which he defines as theological’ (16). In other words, we go to church, something happens, and as a result we engage with God, the church and the world differently. That’s primary theology.

*Theologia prima* doesn’t obviate the need for secondary theology, *theologia secunda*. Systematic reflection on liturgy and worship still plays an indispensable role. But the point here is that even formal theological reflection begins with the liturgical act. Only when we have encountered God in word and sacrament, do we begin to ponder what that means. Only because we actually pray can we begin to think about what such prayer is. Only because we eat and drink in remembrance of Christ do we begin to formulate the meaning of eucharist and *anamnesis*.

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<sup>11</sup> To a large extent Lathrop relies on the liturgical *ordo* discerned in Justin Martyr’s *First Apology*, 61–67.

This dimension of liturgical theology has also attracted criticism. The liturgical scholar Paul Bradshaw (1998) takes issue with the overly formative role given to liturgy in faith formation. People do not come to church with their minds *tabula rasa*.

On the contrary, they come together with their religious attitudes and expectations already formed by secondary theology, as a result of the catechesis that their particular ecclesiastical tradition has given them over the years; and they usually participate in a liturgical rite that itself has been shaped and honed by secondary theological reflection in order to give expression to particular doctrinal convictions. (191)

Kavanagh and Fagerberg's picture of the 'average' lay person as primary theologian is highly idealistic according to these critics, and may even represent a projection of their own liturgical desire. Rather testily Bradshaw writes that 'those who are the strongest advocates of the theory that it is the natural piety of worshippers that should be accorded the most significant weight in liturgical theology are the ones most likely to be unhappy if this were to be put into practice' (192). Such a situation can only arise 'because theologians generally fail to take seriously enough the views of liturgy that are actually held by people' (193).

Be that as it may, one hopes that liturgy can still play a formative role in the faith and spirituality of its participants. In his book *Worship as theology*, Don Saliers discusses how worship develops the knowledge of God, others and the world, not just intellectually, but at the level of dispositions and affections. For example, the church's intercessions are potentially a school for compassion. Since 'Christ is in the midst of his people praying with and for them for the sake of the whole world', writes Saliers, 'intercession is written into every Christology worth its salt...' (131). Liturgical intercession is in fact Christology 101, a form of knowing Christ by solidarity with him, and a way of 'learning to regard the concrete world of human physical and social reality in, with, and through Christ' (132).

## Conclusion

It has probably become clear that the church has always engaged in liturgical theology—perhaps there was a time when this was the only kind of theology. But at the same time, liturgical theology has also come to denote a distinct theological enterprise, with its own theories and principles, advocates and critics. What has hopefully also emerged is the realisation that liturgical theology is not so much about worship, liturgy and ritual for their own sake, but about God, the church and the world. After all, 'liturgical' is the adjective and 'theology' is the noun. Such a theology doesn't so much look *at* the liturgy, as look *through* it, towards the work of God in Christ for the sake of the world.

This focus on the world is a good place to end. The Lutheran scholar of the liturgy, Frank Senn, describes admirably this outward, world-oriented function of liturgical theology, and it is worth quoting at length.

One can imagine the formative power of the liturgy to plant signs of its eschatological vision in the world. One can imagine that those who have traced on their bodies the sign of the cross will be prepared to bear the cross in daily life by rearing children, dealing with the shortcomings of spouses, tolerating the incompetencies of associates, and going the extra mile to meet the needs of relatives and friends. One can imagine that those who have confessed their sins and heard the word of forgiveness addressed to them will display a forgiving spirit towards others. One can imagine that those who have gotten out of themselves by praising God will be less focused on themselves in their dealings with others. One can imagine that those who have heard the will of God announced in the Scripture readings and unpacked in sermons will be sensitive to how their own actions comport with God's will for humanity. One can imagine that those who have confessed the faith once delivered to the saints in the creed will stand up for the faith in the ambiguous ethical decisions that confront them in their family relations, on their jobs, and in the polling places.

One can imagine that what has been prayed for in the intercessions will become an agenda for action during the week, such as supporting efforts on behalf of justice and peace, caring for the needs of the poor, visiting the sick, and comforting the bereaved. One can imagine that thanksgiving will give one a sense of mutual dependence and enlarge one's worldview. One can imagine that receiving the body and blood of Christ (since we are what we eat) will make us, in Luther's words, 'little Christs to our neighbours'. (160)

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