

## Position Paper

### IRTI Conference 'Liturgy and Ethics' New Brunswick NJ, USA, 25-28 June 2015

In the past decades, important contributions have been offered to rethink the connection between Christian ethics and liturgy. In the wake of liturgical movements and ecumenical convergences between traditions throughout the twentieth century, several *liturgists* put forward the interconnectedness of prayer, belief and morality. Through prayer and worship believers are formed over time in the deep affections that mark the Christian life (Don Saliers). *Systematic theologians* also showed remarkable interest in the relation between liturgy, theology and morality. Karl Barth had already expounded the Christian moral life through a clause-by-clause analysis of the Lord's prayer (*Das Christliche Leben*). More recently, representatives of Radical Orthodoxy considered that Christ is present through the text of the Word, the sacrament, and in the liturgical practice of the Church in which we participate, and that this is the way to understand the world. The Church does not have a particular ethic because the Church is itself ethic. From a different perspective, Christian *ethicists* like Stanley Hauerwas, Samuel Wells and others challenged conventional approaches of ethics as an autonomous discipline, arguing that it is Christian worship that shapes the moral life of Christians, making them part of a community of character. Liturgy is not just enriched by ethical explorations and vice versa. Liturgy becomes the locus *par excellence* of the theological ethicist's work. A complete alteration of Christian ethics may take place through the exploration of the liturgy.

Whereas the relation between liturgy and ethics has often been conceived as external and causal, all these contributions emphasize the internal and conceptual relationship between the two. As in the early church, liturgy is itself an act of discipleship, and as such it shapes the moral life. How we pray and worship is intrinsically linked to how we live. Christians can only understand their life properly in light of the liturgy, where Christian life is both formed and expressed, and more or less put in opposition to the 'cultural liturgies' of the secular world.

During the IRTI Conference 2015 these dimensions in current theological reflection will be explored against the backdrop of Reformed theological conceptions of liturgy, ethics and doctrine.

In the Reformed tradition, liturgy is seen both as God's action (God speaks and acts) and as our faithful reception of that action (we respond). Over against the clericalization of the church and the shift over to the Eucharist as the core of the liturgy in the days of the Reformation, the Reformers returned to the early church's view of liturgy as work of the community as a whole and reemphasized the service of the Word as the other main part next to the service of the Eucharist. To participate in the liturgy is not only to enter the sphere of God's speaking and redemptive acting, but also to respond to that speaking and acting in the celebration of the liturgy: in adoration, praise, thanksgiving, confession, blessing, intercession.

As an obedient response in gratitude to God, Reformed liturgy is narrowly tight up with the moral life, which touches all aspects of daily practice. Calvin, for instance, links the participation in the Lord's Supper to doing justice: "We shall benefit very much from the Sacrament if this thought is impressed and engraved upon our minds: that none of the brethren can be injured, despised, rejected, abused, or in any way offended by us, without at the same time, injuring, despising, and abusing Christ by the wrongs we do" (*Institutes*, 4.17.38). We could even say that the Reformers held a sacramental view of the service of the Word: in the sermon God himself speaks to us (Wolterstorff).

In the Reformed view, the response in daily life is seen as a continuation of the response in the liturgy. This also means that doing our work faithfully is not inferior to our response in worshipping. As a result, in some Reformed accounts the connection to liturgy as a whole was weakened: work in the world became the predominant outward response to God's action in liturgy. Others emphasized personal piety (*praxis pietatis*), encompassing the scrutinization of daily life and diligent study of the Scriptures with particular reference to its moral teachings, but without playing much attention to the broader formative and communal meaning of liturgy in all its aspects.

Against the backdrop of this short overview, several important questions arise that may be addressed during the conference, ordered in three subthemes.

### *1 Liturgy as Ethics*

A first cluster concerns fundamental questions about the ethical meaning of liturgy and systematic theological questions related to the knowledge of God, the doctrine of the church, the sacraments, creation etc. How do, theologically speaking, liturgy and the moral life relate? What precisely is or should be the connection between the liturgy of the church, doctrine and ethics? May the understanding of liturgical practices, as for instance the Eucharist, become the way in which the good for the common life is to be discerned? Is the church, as communion, itself an ethos? How does the strong emphasis on liturgy as the locus of Christian ethics relate to other theological ethical perspectives? How may character formation and cultivation of the virtues be intrinsically part of what happens when the community gathers to hear God's Word and respond in faithfulness? Is the Reformed tradition especially preoccupied with justice (Wolterstorff)? Can other characteristics such as *praxis pietatis* or Reformed social thought be made fruitful in thinking through the way liturgy shapes moral life?

### *2 Liturgy in Practices*

The second theme is devoted to the meaning of liturgical practice in its various parts and theological underlying principles for the moral formation of the Christian community and its individual members. If the ethical meaning of liturgy encompasses more than that the command of God simply reaches persons through the sermon and the Ten Commandments, how do worship and prayer, sacrament and ritual practices actually shape the moral life of Christians, both as individuals and as a community? What is the implication of systematic theological conceptions of, e.g., the nature of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper, the way God speaks and is present during the service, the eschatological dimension of the liturgy, etc. for how liturgy is conceived? What may be the ethical impact of the various aspects of liturgy such as saying grace, benediction, Kyrie and Gloria, reading and preaching the Word, intercession, participating in the Lord's Supper, singing hymns and Psalms, Baptism, confession and praying? How can these liturgical practices be informative to moral domains such as work and profession, politics and economics, care and medicine, family and civil society?

### *3 Liturgy and Cultures*

The third theme covers both questions of cultural context and variety of liturgy (liturgical cultures), and questions of the relation of the Christian ethos to the secular and post-secular world and its quasi-liturgies (cultural liturgies). What are the implications of local and global cultural contexts for how worship is conceived, including the way in which the good for common and individual life is discerned? Whereas 'cultural liturgies' implies a view on liturgy as defined by cultural performances, the notion of 'cultural liturgies' rather encompasses a reading of culture through the lens of worship. What are the implications of the shaping of our vision of the good life in Christian worship and liturgy for how we perceive dominant features of our culture(s)? How is this vision related to definite cultural institutions and their configurations, such as the

mall, the market, the state, the university, the sport arena, the concert hall, etc., which may be valued as formative quasi-liturgies trying to make us a certain kind of person (James K.A. Smith)? Should the church provide for a counter-cultural education of desire and imagination?

### **Preparatory Literature**

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