

# CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

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Worship: The Divine Alchemy  
THOMAS COATES

Rectilinear or Typological Interpretation  
of Messianic Prophecy?  
WILLIAM J. HASSOLD

The Jerusalem Bible: A Critical Examination  
FREDERICK W. DANKER

Brief Study

Theological Observer

Homiletics

Book Review

Vol. XXXVIII

March 1967

No. 3

# WORSHIP:

## The Divine Alchemy

THOMAS COATES

In medieval lore, scientists sought to use the process of alchemy to transmute base metals into gold. Alchemy proved to be a pseudoscience, for men have devised no method to create the precious metal out of elements that are common and coarse. But in a higher sense, and in the spiritual realm, God achieves that which to man is impossible: He takes these base, ignoble elements, these earthen vessels—our stumbling words, our faltering prayers, our paltry gifts, our flawed works, our frail and sin-scarred lives—and transmutes them into gold, into offerings fit for the King. What is base He ennobles; what is broken He makes whole; what is feeble He makes strong; what is tainted He makes pure; what is sinful He redeems. By His own transforming grace the words of our mouth and the meditation of our heart are made to be acceptable in the sight of Him who is our Strength and our Redeemer. This

process of spiritual transmutation takes place in the divine alchemy of *worship*.

Archbishop William Temple has written: "To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God; to feed the mind with the truth of God; to purge the imagination by the beauty of God; to open the heart to the love of God; and to devote the will to the purpose of God." Indeed, those who live and work in the milieu of a theological seminary in particular need to experience the alchemy of worship as Temple has defined it. For those who deal constantly with the Word of God as teachers or as students—and whose "business" is theology—need themselves to confront God in His holiness, His truth, His beauty, His love, and His purpose. We all need to guard against the ever-present danger that our constant exposure to and employment of the subject matter of sacred theology may create in us a purely professional attitude toward the Scriptures, a "mechanical preoccupation with sacred things," a routine handling of the mysteries of God. If we summon others to worship and train others in the art of worship, we must first of all be worshipers ourselves. As we cause others to hear the divine summons, "Seek ye My face," we must ourselves respond to that summons in a truly personal way, "Thy face, Lord, do I seek."

Worship, in its broad sense, encompasses the total Christian life. "I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice,

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*On December 8, 1965, Thomas Coates, S.T.D., then of the faculty of Concordia Senior College at Fort Wayne, Ind., was the honorary recipient of the Doctor of Divinity degree awarded by the faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, at the seminary's annual Founders' Day Convocation. On that occasion he addressed the seminary faculty and student body on the topic: "Worship: The Divine Alchemy." This article reproduces his address, omitting the introductory paragraphs reflecting the occasion on which it was delivered. Dr. Coates is now serving the church as a professor of theology at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Tokyo, Japan.*

holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (AV: "reasonable service"), wrote St. Paul to the Romans (12:1). It is significant that the word *latreia* in this text is used as meaning both "service" and "worship." It is clear, therefore, that worship is not confined to one compartment of the Christian life. It is not merely a matter of uttering special words or assuming special postures or performing special acts. In its true and basic sense, worship involves the Christian's total commitment to God. His daily life in all its aspects must be an act of worship to God, a free-will offering placed on His altar.

This concept of worship as the total surrender of one's self to God is stated movingly in the eloquent words of John Calvin:

We are not our own; therefore, neither is our own reason or will to rule our acts and counsels. We are not our own; therefore, let us not make it our end to seek what may be agreeable to our carnal nature. We are not our own; therefore, as far as possible, let us forget ourselves and the things that are ours. On the contrary, we are God's; let us therefore live and die to Him. We are God's; therefore, let His wisdom and will preside over all our actions. We are God's; to Him, then, as the only rightful end, let every part of our life be directed.<sup>1</sup>

Worship must also be viewed, of course, in its *narrower* sense. In this context, worship has been described as "a dialog between God and the soul," or as "man's response, through Christ, to the nature and action of God." In this sense we may speak

of worship also in terms of a man's conscious, structured communion with God. In this relationship we come to God in a spirit of meditation, thanksgiving, supplication, confession, or intercession; and we receive from Him the spiritual blessings that we ask and need: the assurance of forgiveness, the awareness of His indwelling presence, peace of mind and of conscience, clarity of spiritual insight, growth in the understanding of His Word, comfort in our sorrows, courage in times of testing and trial, and strength to bear life's burdens.

It is just in this interaction between the individual and God that the process of divine alchemy occurs. As we worship Him, He molds us into the kind of person He would have us be. "They who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint" (Is. 40:31). We come to Him empty; He fills us with "good things" from the bountiful store of His grace. We come to Him weak; He imparts to us the strength that we need for the way. We come to Him bewildered, uncertain, groping for light; He irradiates our being with the Holy Spirit's "light divine." In the alchemy of worship, as we forget ourselves, hide ourselves, lose ourselves in Him — as the apostle enjoins us — it is then that we actually "find" ourselves. "For," St. Paul declares, "you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God." (Col. 3:3)

But we do not live our spiritual life in isolation. Worship is not a merely individual matter, but it finds expression in our relationship to our fellow members of the body of Christ. The Christian, in his worship life, moves between the polarity of

<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Mich., 1953), vii, 1.

the private and the corporate aspects of worship. Alfred North Whitehead once defined religion as "what a man does with his solitariness." The Christian knows better. Religion—and specifically, worship—is what a man does with his fellowship—his fellowship with God through Christ in the privacy of his chamber and his fellowship with the saints in the spiritual interaction of the body of Christ.

In this corporate expression of worship, the heavenly alchemy is also at work. For in our communal worship, our Lord receives our prayers as incense and our uplifted hands as the evening sacrifice, while our psalms and hymns and spiritual songs are blended with the melodies of heaven. The people of God have given expression to the *koinonia* in their public assemblies as, since apostolic times, they have "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."

It is significant that Luther's conservative reformation sought to retain and to cultivate all that was good and true and edifying in the Christian cultus. For liturgy is properly viewed as the "universal and timeless voice of the church." The principles of public worship to which Lutherans are committed were not established in 1517, but they are governed by the funded Christian experience of the preceding one-and-a-half millenia. Indeed, they are rooted in the Scriptures themselves, as we find in the worship of God's people, in both the Old and New Testaments, both the spirit and the pattern by which the Christian church for all future times might be guided.

Public worship, in the Lutheran concept, may be seen as embodying three

purposes: affirmation, conservation, and edification. First, *affirmation* means that all worship is actually *witness*—testimony to the saving work of God in Jesus Christ, His Son. This witness is borne by God's people whenever they gather around God's Word—to hear it orally, to receive it sacramentally, and to share it with each other and with the world.

The second purpose of public worship is *conservation*, for throughout the ages worship has been the great preservative of the faith. As the poet has written, "O Lord, Thy Church is praying yet, a thousand years the same." In public worship we associate ourselves with the *Una Sancta*—the sum total of God's people of all times and of all nations. This sense of continuity and of alignment is strengthened by adherence to the basic, historic, and universal molds into which the forms of our worship have been cast.

Third, public worship serves the purpose of *edification*, leading the worshiper into an ever fuller appreciation of God's mysteries, thus to nurture and develop the spiritual life both of the individual and of the congregation. In keeping with this purpose, Lutheran worship has ever been ready to utilize in the service of the Word the resources of music, ritual, architecture, symbolism, and the graphic arts, to impress upon the worshiper the truth, the richness, and the beauty of the Christian Gospel. One need hardly add the obvious fact that this seminary, in its current program and in its future plans, has shown a deep awareness of the Lutheran heritage of worship in all of its facets. This, too, weighs heavily in the cultivation of a "more excellent ministry."

Liturgy, in the Lutheran view, is im-

portant both for doctrinal and social reasons. On the basis of the historic cultus of the church, the worshiper is confronted in each service, and in the sequence of the church year, with all of the major doctrines of the Christian faith (*Lex orandi est lex credendi*). The Lutheran order of worship is structured in such a way that both God's saving deed in Christ and man's worshipful response to that deed are brought into proper focus. In sermon and sacrament, in hymns and prayers, in confession and absolution, in Scripture lessons and creedal affirmations, the Lutheran service encompasses both the entire plan of God for man's salvation and man's response to God's proffered grace. It has well been said that "worship is dogma come to life." This, too, belongs to God's alchemy.

Liturgy, moreover, has a social thrust. It has a horizontal as well as a vertical dimension. In our prayers, litanies, and suffrages we intercede for our fellowmen in all of their material and spiritual needs. How, then, can we sincerely pray "for all sorts and conditions of men" and at the same time harbor ill will or prejudice against those of a different color or culture or ethnic background than our own—as though this attitude were irrelevant to the integrity of our worship?

By the same token it is a negation of the very nature of Christian worship to establish any arbitrary racial or social boundaries or barriers that would prevent the people of God from worshiping together and from expressing in their worship the essential unity of the body of Christ. On the contrary, as we join with our fellow believers—regardless of color, caste, or culture—in the living expression of the *koinonia*, as we together kneel and pray

and sing and listen and confess and commune in the blessed fellowship of the Word and the sacraments, we shall feel a deeper involvement in, and a livelier concern for, the well-being and the needs of the brother. And therein we shall reflect more truly and more clearly the spirit of Him who is the Object of our worship, and in whose sight there is "no respect of persons."

In the alchemy of worship, then, God dissolves our racial pride, our social unconcern, our smug and myopic provincialism, and transmutes it into the spiritual cohesion and mutual concern that binds together all those who share the common life of the body of Christ. Thereby He makes of our fellowship here below both a harbinger and a foretaste of the eternal fellowship that awaits us above.

In enabling us to feel His presence and to partake of His power in the experience of worship, whether private or corporate, God does not appear to us in visions and revelations from on high. Neither is our assurance of His presence and power based on any emotional seizure or physical reaction on our part. As Luther emphasized in his conflict with the *Schwärmer* of his own day, our assurance of the indwelling presence of God's Spirit, and our trust in His unfailling promises, is not based on any subjective feeling on our part. Though our faith and our worship always involve our emotions, they dare never be based on sheer emotion. God has supplied us with a firm foundation, a sure criterion: the means of grace, the Word and the sacraments. These are objectively true and powerful, regardless of our emotional condition. "Ich glaub', was Jesu Wort verspricht, ich fuehl' es oder fuehl' es nicht," we sing

in the words of a well-loved German hymn.

But now, in relating Himself to us through the media of the Word and the sacraments, our Lord accommodates Himself to our human limitations, bound as we are by the factors of time and space and sense experience. He does not transport us to the third heaven, but He meets us on our own level.

He does this, for one thing, through the medium of *words*. Words—combinations of letters or symbols written on white paper, or sounds uttered by the human voice in the form of articulate speech—but *words*, mundane, earth-bound, subject to the frailties and limitations of human communication. Through His own divine alchemy, God takes these earthen vessels, these feeble, faltering—and sometimes ambiguous—human words and transforms them into the vehicles and bearers of the divine Word. For God, who has spoken to us through His Son, the Incarnate Word, has left us a deposit of revelation in the form of words about the Word—words of hope and peace and life, words that are pure and faithful and true. These words about the Word, incandescent with the glow of the Holy Spirit's light, we find between the covers of a Book—"the Book Divine, by inspiration given." He who is the Incarnate Truth becomes known to us in the Book of Truth through the guidance of the Spirit of Truth.

Now this sacred Book dare not become merely a tool that we handle with professional skill in the study or in the classroom. Rather, it must be for us primarily a means of grace and of growth in personal piety; these revealed and life-giving words must be the channel of our worship of the

Incarnate Word. For these words both proceed from Him and testify of Him. Bonhoeffer has written:

I find no salvation in my life history, but only in the history of Jesus Christ. . . . In this light the whole devotional reading of the Scriptures becomes daily more meaningful and salutary. What we call our life, our troubles, our guilt, is by no means all of reality; there in the Scriptures is our life, our need, our guilt, and our salvation. Because it pleased God to act for us there, it is only there that we shall be saved. Only in the Holy Scriptures do we learn to know our own history. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the God and Father of Jesus Christ and our Father.<sup>2</sup>

This Word of God—whether proclaimed from the pulpit, spoken at the bedside, conveyed in a counselling session, received in its sacramental form, discussed in the classroom, or read in the privacy of our own spiritual exercises—is always the "food divine," which alone can revive our famished souls and give us strength to walk life's way. For to be nourished by this Word is to be nourished by Christ Himself, who is the living Word. "For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." (John 6:33)

Now the Incarnate Word relates Himself to us not only through the medium of written and spoken words but also through physical elements He invests with His sacramental power. He takes water—the most common and the most universal of all earthly elements, of small intrinsic value and yet indispensable to life—and

<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, translated by John W. Doberstein (Harper & Row, New York, 1954), p. 54.

in the alchemy of the Spirit He makes of common water the instrument of His grace and the "washing of regeneration." For in the Sacrament of Holy Baptism we have not "simple water only," a combination of hydrogen and oxygen, but water that is the bearer of spiritual life and the seal of God's redemptive covenant.

To that covenant He will remain true, no matter how often we prove faithless to it through the weakness of our faith and the poverty of our worship. This must be our daily source of hope and strength as we see the evil triad of devil, world, and flesh drowned in the baptismal waters, as we daily rise unto "newness of life," revived and cleansed by the sacramental flood.

But more: God, in the miracle of His divine alchemy, takes other earthly elements—the grain of the field and the fruit of the vine—and makes them the bearers of the body and blood of Christ. Here, within the elements of earthly bread and wine, we encounter the real presence of our Lord. We do not seek to analyze the sacramental union or explain the sacramental mystery; we believe it, we proclaim it, and we partake of it—faithfully and often. For in this sacrament we receive both pardon and power for the Christian life.

We need the Lord Jesus Christ. We need Him individually and we need Him together. We need Him in the privacy of our own heart and we need Him in the company of our Christian brethren. The sacrament helps to fulfill our need in a unique, transcendent way. For after all, the sacrament is not a pious and solemn rite performed by the church on special occasions; it is a means of grace, a reser-

voir of spiritual power, a concretion of the promises of God. It is a *Eucharist*, a glad-some union with a gracious and forgiving God, in whose presence—also in whose sacramental presence—"there is fullness of joy."

This sacrament is preeminently a sacrament of *fellowship*; a visible token of the *koinonia* that binds us together with our sacramental Lord and with those who kneel together with us at His altar. Thus in a striking word picture Luther describes this fellowship in his *Treatise on the Blessed Sacrament*:

Just as the bread is made out of many grains ground and mixed together, and out of the bodies of many grains there comes the body of one bread, in which each grain loses its form and body and takes upon itself the common body of the bread; and just as the drops of wine, in losing their own form, become the body of one common wine and drink—so it is and should be with us, if we use this sacrament properly.<sup>3</sup>

Again, Luther writes of this fellowship:

We become one loaf, one bread, one body, one drink, and have all things in common. . . . In the sacrament we too become united with Christ, and are made one body with all the saints.<sup>4</sup>

It is for this reason that the sacrament has an appropriate and indeed a vital place on this seminary campus, as a truly integral part of your ongoing program of corporate worship. For the several hundred members of a Christian community like this to experience in a group the sacramental fellowship indeed serves to knit all together,

<sup>3</sup> WA II, 748; translation quoted from *Luther's Works*, American Edition 35, 58.

<sup>4</sup> WA II, 748; American Edition 35, 58 f.

faculty and students alike, in a more cohesive spiritual unity; it serves to actualize the concept of the body of Christ in this place; it serves to foster a stronger sense of communal solidarity in the true *koinonia*, as brothers in Christ and as sons of God. Here we learn the truth of Luther's reassuring words: "To give us strength and courage, God gives us this sacrament, as though He said, 'Be bold and confident, thou fightest not alone; great help and support are round about thee.'"

And so, as the members of the seminary family gather around the altar, they will, in the words of Herman Preus, "begin to experience the *community* of Christians, a community whose roots reach down into the very wounds of Christ. And with the blood of Christ coursing through their veins, they are drawn closer than brothers. For they are the very body of Christ."<sup>5</sup>

In this body of Christ the members speak the common language of prayer. Here, too, the divine alchemy is unmistakably evident. For the Spirit takes our prayers, weak, stammering, inchoate, and translates them into the very language of God. Often we must confess with St. Paul, "We do not even know how we ought to pray." But then the Holy Spirit comes to our aid, as the apostle goes on to assure us, "But through our inarticulate groans the Spirit Himself is pleading for us, and God who searches our inmost being knows what the Spirit means, because He pleads for God's own people in God's own way." (NEB)

Richard R. Caemmerer has written, "Prayer is not simply, and actually not

ever, a device for invoking the magical power of God to aid in the selfish problems of the individual. But it is the individual's alertness to the . . . will of God, his request that God would stand by with resources for faith and love, and overcome the barriers and obstacles of materialism, worldliness, and selfishness."<sup>6</sup>

Our prayers, therefore, should not be merely of the "give me" variety. We should rather cultivate the "make me" type of prayer. "Make me, O God, to see Your will in everything that befalls me. Make me to be more thoughtful, kind, unselfish in my relations with my fellowmen. Make me to conform to Your own pattern for Christian living. Make me faithful in my study, zealous in my ministry, a good steward of Your mysteries. Make me, O God, Your kind of man!" Our prayer-life will then undergo the alchemy that enables us to echo the words of Frances Havergal:

Take my will and make it Thine,  
It shall be no longer mine,

and to make our own the moving words of the ancient collect: "Almighty God, give unto us the increase of faith, hope, and charity; and that we may obtain that which Thou dost promise, make us to love that which Thou dost command."

But finally this exploration of the alchemy of worship would be incomplete were there no reference to another evidence of this alchemy: the alchemy that begins with earthly materials—stone and concrete, brick and mortar, metal and glass—and transforms these coarse and common elements into a house of God—an earthly temple wherein His Holy Spirit

<sup>5</sup> Herman Preus, *The Communion of Saints* (Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis, 1948), pp. 120—121.

<sup>6</sup> Richard R. Caemmerer, *The Church in the World* (Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, 1949), p. 71.

dwells, wherein He meets His people with Word and sacrament; a building that by its design, by its symbolism, and by its atmosphere is distinct from every structure used for purely secular pursuits.

This type of alchemy will soon, God willing, become visible on this seminary campus, when the Chapel of the Holy Trinity at long last becomes a reality as the focal point—both physically and spiritually—of the life and program of this seminary. As this beautiful and impressive structure takes shape, dominating the entire campus complex, it will, I am sure, evoke the reverent, awe-filled response of Jacob: "This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!" And who shall be able to estimate the blessed influence of the Chapel of the Holy Trinity and of the smaller but equally worshipful new chapel in Luther Tower not only on the spiritual enrichment of the members of this campus family in their daily corporate and private worship but also in achieving the ultimate goal of training—also in the art of worship—a "more excellent ministry."

All of this, then, belongs to the alchemy of worship: The molding of the "man in Christ"—made a new creature in the water of Baptism, grounded in both the

words and the spirit of Holy Writ, renewed through the daily practice of the presence of God in meditation and prayer, made strong by the experience of corporate worship, enriched by the grace and fellowship of the Eucharist, uplifted by the symbols and atmosphere of worship in God's house. This, in fine, is our life in the body of Christ.

In the classic words of Evelyn Underhill, the heavenly alchemy will make of our worship:

... a free self-offering without conditions to the transforming energy of God ... an adoration, intercession, sacrifice. ... And this approach to the Cross ... is met, answered, completed by the action of God. ... "My life shall be a real life, being wholly full of Thee." This is the ordained consummation of Christian personal worship; the mystery of creation, fulfilled in the secret ground of every soul.<sup>7</sup>

"A real life, being wholly full of Thee!" May God perform His alchemy in "the secret ground" of each of us, so that ours may be a more excellent ministry—and a more excellent life.

Fort Wayne, Indiana

<sup>7</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *Worship* (Harper & Row, New York, 1937), pp. 189—190.