

## KARL BARTH'S THEOLOGY OF WORSHIP — by Rick Stuckwisch (1994)

### INTRODUCTION

Karl Barth is not remembered for his theology of worship. The question might even be asked whether he had such a theology, *per se*. Barth himself admitted that he had little use for the liturgy of worship, that neither did he understand it nor was he good at it.<sup>1</sup> The outward form of any particular Christian piety was for Barth entirely indifferent and at best a symbolic reminder of the One Who alone matters.<sup>2</sup> Yet, this attitude toward *cultus* does not preclude a theology of *worship*. Barth was a parish pastor for ten years, and we may assume that he attended church services throughout his Christian life.<sup>3</sup> Surely, he had some attitude toward — some *theology* of — what took place on Sunday morning. We take note, too, of the importance accorded to hymnody in Barth's personal piety; hymns emerge again and again

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Barth writes in the Foreword to a collection of his prayers: "In my youth I already had a disinclination to all cultic formality. And it was said of me only a few years ago by the leader of the Alpertsbach Movement, of whom I am very fond, that I do not understand anything at all of liturgy. It is a fact that when I had to preach in German churches I did not know how to act in front of their 'altars' except in a clumsy manner. In the old days in Bonn I once took my stand resolutely and arbitrarily behind the 'altar' instead of in front of it, but did not dare to do it a second time. (But today, even the Roman mass is not seldom celebrated from that position!) For other reasons, even after the war my friend Günther Dehn had to leave me at the door of the Poppelsdorf Church with the strict evaluation: 'You get *A* for the sermon, but *F* for the liturgy.'" (Barth, *Selected Prayers*: 5).

<sup>2</sup> As Barth remarks in his commentary on Romans: "In the midst of other religions, and without points of contact with them, 'Christendom' takes human and visible shape, as experience and institution and cultus. The religious proclamation of 'Christendom' appears in many 'types'.... Difference of form is, however, trivial. Paul accepts [the] 'type' [of the Church in Rome] as a witness of which he can remind them. He does not think it wrong to assume that by an appeal to what is typical, contingent, and visible, they will, in fact, be reminded of what is invisible, primal, and existential.... In all this he takes for granted that this reminder is no more than a reminder, for the reality of their state of grace, of which he reminds them, is—of God." (Barth, *Romans*: 219).

<sup>3</sup> It is clear, at any rate, that Barth regarded going to Church as fundamental to the Christian life. As, for example, he indicates in his *Church Dogmatics*:

When the Gospel, the good news, breaks through and asserts itself in this [Sabbath] commandment; when the history of salvation and the end is heard in it in all its glory; when man grasps it as an invitation to keep to God's grace and rejoice in it, then he will cleave to the congregation, and will definitely go to Church on Sunday, just as he will also not begrudge himself and others the rest from work. (Barth, CD III.iv: 64).

throughout his definitive biography.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Barth's theological work is marked from beginning to end with a reverent awe for the God Who is Wholly Other, but Who has condescended to become God with us and for us. He approached theology as "an assent to a decision coming from its Object; it is an acknowledgment and recognition of the Lord's own communication of Himself as Subject. Theological inquiry presupposes that the Object of inquiry stands over against the inquirer not as an 'it' or a 'he' but as 'Thou' of the Lord. God is the Subject of theology."<sup>5</sup> Such "theology" is itself an attitude of worship. Indeed, Barth followed Anselm in defining theology as "faith in search of understanding," which he regarded as the highest act of worship possible. For Barth, as for Anselm, "the churchman stands *coram Deo* and worships God as he strives for *fides intellectum* in obedience to his Lord."<sup>6</sup> Thus, for example, Barth described the Reformation not only as "a labor of research, thinking, preaching, discussion, polemic, and organization," but also as "an act of continuous prayer,

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<sup>4</sup> cf. Busch: e.g. 8, 18, 497, 499–500, *et al.*

<sup>5</sup> Kadai: 279

<sup>6</sup> Kadai: 281. Barth applauded the intention of Anselm, that his whole theological inquiry should be approached with an attitude and posture of *prayer*. "The knowledge which his theological work seeks to expound and impart is the knowledge that is peculiar to faith... Since it is a knowledge which must be bestowed on man, it has to be sought in prayer. But since, according to Anselm, no theological problems are finally settled, prayer must continue, and continue in the sure hope of being heard. Anselm's prayers must not be taken as mere rhetoric but as theology itself." (*ibid.* 280–281). In Barth's own words:

[Anselm] shows that the whole theological inquiry is intended to be understood as undertaken and carried through in prayer. In prayer, and surely that means—by presupposing in the most positive manner conceivable the Object of the inquiry, His Presence and His Authority for the course and the success of the inquiry concerning Him. This 'Object' Who is worshipped and thus investigated is, however, *Dominus Deus noster*=*Dominus Deus meus*, the God Who is Lord of the Church and as such is the God of the inquiring theologian, Who is Lord in this double relationship and to Whom only devout obedience is possible. Theology is devout obedience....

[Anselm's] thinking is achieved—and this is the most important thing that can be said about it—as it continues in worship. (Barth, *Anselm*: 150–151, 158).

an invocation, and, let us add, an act of men, of certain men, and at the same time a response on the part of God."<sup>7</sup>

It is clear that Karl Barth did have a theology of worship. It is the purpose of this study to articulate the principle aspects of this dimension of his theology, on the hunch that it will provide a microcosmic icon of Barth's entire theological approach. If this "hunch" seems an exaggeration, it is nevertheless made on the basis of Barth's own words:

The church service would be a lost cause if its content were Christian piety and morality and not Christian faith. But the church service is the most important, momentous and majestic thing which can possibly take place on earth, because its primary content is not the work of man but the work of the Holy Spirit and consequently the work of faith.<sup>8</sup>

## **I. THE CHARACTER OF WORSHIP**

We begin with Barth's identification of theology as "faith in search of understanding," which he describes in terms of *worship*. In fact, we shall not be surprised if we also conclude at this same point. Initially, however, Barth's view of theology indicates that worship is an act of faith. This observation is especially significant within the thought of Karl Barth. Worship, no less than the knowledge of God, requires faith: the work of God in man, whereby man is enabled to perceive and receive the Word of God. If this is so, then it is also the case that worship is an act of the Church: the community wherein the Word of God is spoken, heard, and known.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the intimate relation of worship to faith

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<sup>7</sup> Barth, *Prayer*: 9

<sup>8</sup> Barth, *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God*: 198

<sup>9</sup> Barth writes in the first volume of his *Church Dogmatics*: "Knowledge of the Word of God...is the presupposition of the Church. We may and must also reverse the statement and say that the Church is the presupposition of knowledge of the Word of God." (Barth, CD I.i: 188).

characterizes worship as essentially an active listening to the Word of God. The Church worships the Lord by listening and hearkening to His Word.

Not only is worship an act of faith; it is the *primary* and *central* act of the entire life of faith, and specifically of the Church's life as the community of faith. "Worship," in this sense, is not some abstract concept, but precisely the worship of the Church in her divine service. "The Church lives as other communities live, but in its Church service its nature appears—proclamation of the Word of God, administration of the Sacraments, a more or less developed liturgy, the application of a Church law, and lastly theology."<sup>10</sup> This character of worship as the central activity of the Church is especially obvious in Barth's treatment of "The Holy Day."<sup>11</sup> For Barth actually *begins* his discussion of God's will and commandment with the Sabbath: the "Holy Day." Herein he finds, both comprehensively and particularly, all that God requires of man.<sup>12</sup>

The Sabbath commandment requires man to set aside all of his days and works, in deference to the *Lord's Day* and the *Lord's work*. Thus, it calls for a readiness to hear and receive the Gospel. It points man away from himself and from all his own efforts, as it points him toward the graciousness of God in Jesus Christ. As Barth summarizes in his *Church Dogmatics*, under the heading, *Freedom before God*:

It is the will of God the Creator that man, as His creature, shall be responsible before Him. In particular, His command says that man is to keep His day holy as a day of

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<sup>10</sup> Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*: 146

<sup>11</sup> *cf.* Barth, CD III.iv: 47ff.

<sup>12</sup> Barth comments: "The Sabbath commandment explains all the other commandments, or all the other forms of the one commandment. It is thus to be placed at their head." (Barth, CD III.iv: 53). Or again, in the same vein, but from a slightly different perspective: "If we are found wanting in the customary service of work and the service of man, then plainly we must consider whether we ought not first to take the divine service of Sunday far more seriously." (Barth, CD III.iv: 72).

worship, freedom and joy, that he is to confess Him in his heart and with his mouth and that he is to come to Him with his requests.<sup>13</sup>

Obviously, these requirements describe the character of the entire Christian faith and life: relinquishing all self-reliance and committing everything to the hand of God. The Sabbath commandment is in this sense comprehensive. It is also particular, however, in that it requires man to take this action of self-renunciation, not only in general, but quite specifically at a given time, one day out of seven.

What does the Sabbath commandment say? It speaks of a limiting of man's activity to the extent that this is, generally speaking, his own work, his own undertaking and achievement, the job he does for his livelihood and in the service of the community. It says that, in deference to God and to the heart and meaning of His work, there must be from time to time an interruption, a rest, a deliberate non-continuation, a temporal pause, to reflect on God and His work and to participate consciously in the salvation provided by Him and to be awaited from Him. It says that man's own work is to be performed as a work bounded by this continually recurring interruption. This interruption is the holy day.<sup>14</sup>

The Sabbath commandment requires not only the setting aside of a particular day, but also the engaging of a particular activity on that day. "God claims not only the whole time of man but also, because the whole, a special time, not only his whole activity but also, because the whole, a particular act."<sup>15</sup> To observe the Holy Day means not only to rest from the activities of the week, but to do so for the express purpose of celebrating the festival of worship and praise, thanksgiving and intercession, in the divine service of the congregation. For it is only in the worship of the Church that the Sabbath acquires its special character and positive meaning; only thus is the Sabbath commandment kept — not simply by going through the motions of worship, *ex opere operato*, but neither apart from those motions. Barth makes this very clear.

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<sup>13</sup> Barth, CD III.iv: 47

<sup>14</sup> Barth, CD III.iv: 50

<sup>15</sup> Barth, CD III.iv: 49

To observe the holy day means...to keep oneself free for participation in the praise and worship and witness and proclamation of God in His congregation, in common thanksgiving and intercession. And the blessing and profit of the holy day definitely depend also on this positive use of its freedom. At this point it is clear that its observance does not simply mean resting but, positively, the celebrating of a festival. This festival is the divine service of the congregation....

The relationship of the divine service to the primary and proper meaning of the Sabbath commandment is clear. It plainly distinguishes that renouncing faith from a spiritual work of art or action in the mystical sense; so that its object is not the God of a free intuition or an arbitrarily won idea but the God who in His Word has revealed and entrusted Himself to Christendom. Thus the renouncing faith which the Sabbath commandment implies can obviously be actualised only in the fellowship of Christendom, and the true holy day can be seriously celebrated only in its assembling as a congregation and therefore in participation in its divine service.... It is participation in the assembling of the congregation which gives this day's rest from work its positive meaning, and which openly distinguishes it from a mere inaction that can only be man's attempting whatever useless activities he can....

Because the divine service of the congregation is ultimately a very dubious and fragile human work...it is a short cut to say that the Sabbath commandment merely demands our attendance at Church on this day. We can only say that it does of course demand this...because the renouncing faith at which it primarily and properly aims, and the rest from work which it also includes, necessarily remain insubstantial without participation in the divine service.<sup>16</sup>

The meaning of the Holy Day is the joyful celebration of a feast. It is characterized by that freedom which is found in the resting of man from his own works and efforts, established first in the resting of God at the completion of Creation, and then again in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is characterized, also, by the joyful expectation of eternal life, as promised and achieved in that same Resurrection.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the freedom of the Holy Day is neither the freedom of anarchy nor a freedom

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<sup>16</sup> Barth, CD III.iv: 62-63

<sup>17</sup> Barth clearly has the Lord's Supper in mind when he makes this point: The meaning of Sunday freedom is joy, the celebrating of a feast. It is this as and because it is significantly concerned with freedom for God, with the remembrance of His rest and enthronement after the completion of creation, and with the remembrance of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and therefore significantly with the expectation of the eternal kingdom. (Barth, CD III.iv: 68).

from God, but a freedom *for* God: freedom for obedience and worship.<sup>18</sup> The Holy Day does not belong to man but to God; it is in a special sense the "Lord's Day," as it was called in the Early Church. It is true that every day belongs to God, but He has nevertheless established the sign of a particular day, for the purpose of rest and worship. Man, therefore, does not have the option of disregarding this sign.<sup>19</sup>

The Holy Day is not given to individual believers in isolation one from another, but like everything that comes from God, it is given to man in the fellowship of the Church. Here is found the significance of "*Church*" in the title of Barth's *Church Dogmatics*. As already indicated, participation in the divine service of the Church on Sunday morning, as compared to private "meditation" or "devotion," is not

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<sup>18</sup> On the understanding of grace as freedom for obedience, *cf.* Barth's commentary on Romans: 207ff.

<sup>19</sup> "We start out from the fact that the holy day does not belong to man but to God. To be sure, it does so only as a sign that the same is true of every day, for all our time is in His hands. Yet this day is set up as a sign, and is to be observed as such, at the heart of the rest." (Barth, CD III.iv: 67). As Barth further explains:

In the Old Testament it is called the "Sabbath" (probably just "festival" or "rest"). In English and German it is cheerfully given the somewhat ambiguous and heathen title of "Sunday." In the Early Church, according to Rev. I<sup>10</sup>, it was much better called *Dies dominica*, the Lord's Day—still recognisable in the French *dimanche*. In a special way it belongs to God and not to man; and this is something man ought to respect by not claiming it as his own. Man's activity on this day ought not to be complete inactivity, but a cessation of what he does on other days. He is to pause in his work—not perhaps for his own sake, but for God's, and yet to his own salvation—so that on the following day he may again take up his work. On this day he is to celebrate, rejoice and be free, to the glory of God. In this celebration, joy and freedom he will be obedient. To withdraw from it under any pretext would be disobedience. This is what the Sabbath commandment says. (Barth, CD III.iv: 50).

an arbitrary or optional matter.<sup>20</sup> The Holy Day is kept by the individual when he participates in the community assembled in the concrete action of worship.

Like everything that comes from God, the holy day is not given to the individual in isolation, but in relationship to his fellows. So far as one can say that it belongs to man at all, it does not belong to him in himself but in the community of which he is a member and therefore in human society. It is a communal benefit and a communal duty.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, we have returned to the Church as the context for worship.

## II. THE CONTEXT OF WORSHIP

As an activity of the Church, worship obtains its nature from the Church, which is to say that it draws its nature from Christ. As the Body of Christ, the one true Church is at once both "visible" and "invisible," even as Christ is both true God and true Man.<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, the worship of the Church

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<sup>20</sup> As Barth writes:

If [Sunday worship] were merely a matter of seeking and finding God and His Word in the depths of one's own soul; if it were only a question of meeting Him privately, then a walk in "God's own countryside," or a devout visit to a museum, or a quiet read of some spiritual or secular book, or an encounter with noble and like-minded souls would be a very suitable celebration of Sunday morning. And if it were a matter of creating for ourselves a quiet mind and conscience by participation in the *opus Dei*, we could fulfill our "Sunday duty" in the Roman Catholic sense by going to Church, i.e., to the sacrament or sermon. But are not all these movements of escape? It is not at all a question of finding God in and for oneself, but of the encounter with God in His truth and majesty, in which He will not let anyone who seeks and finds Him come off badly even in his own person, but will give him food and drink. And it is not at all a matter of "going to Church" [*i.e.* in the Roman Catholic sense] (whether to the sacrament or sermon), but of seeking the assembling of the community which God has commissioned to hear and proclaim the witness concerning Himself. (Barth, CD III.iv: 70).

<sup>21</sup> Barth, CD III.iv: 69

<sup>22</sup> As Barth explains in his *Church Dogmatics*:

The life of the children of God, and therefore the Church, the subjective reality of revelation, is divine and human, eternal and temporal, and therefore invisible and visible. It is also human, also temporal, also visible. Always in its entire hiddenness in God it



also has both visible and invisible aspects that man dare not separate. In this respect, the worship of the Church parallels her proclamation: the visible activity of man is taken up into the invisible activity of God. Thus, on the one hand, worship expresses the essential being of the Church; on the other hand, because it remains an activity of sinful man, worship is susceptible to abuse and must be subject to ongoing critique and reformation. In every case, the worship of the Church must be ordered according to the Word of God. It must also be approached with the attitude and posture of prayer.

Barth explains at length the significance of prayer as an integral aspect of worship in his discussion of the Holy Day.<sup>23</sup> For along with confession — in which man is permitted to share in the witness to the Word of God before the world — prayer constitutes a special form of human activity *vis-à-vis* God. Of the two activities, however, prayer is especially characteristic of worship, since it gives honor to God by *seeking* all things from His hands.

The basis of true prayer is the freedom of man before God. Thus, prayer rests on the same basis as the Holy Day. Man prays because he is permitted to do so, and because this permission is itself a command. Of course, prayer is a request. It is directed to God, as an expression of confidence that

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is also an historical reality. How can it be otherwise, seeing it has its origin, its ground, its centre in the incarnation of the Word?...

Into the place of the whole ancient sign-world steps the Church with its apostles and its *kerygma*, with baptism and the Lord's Supper; for that is really all there is to be said about the Church and its visibility.... The sayings of Jesus in this world rang in human ears, and His acts in this world took place before human eyes: they are the language of the incarnate Word. Even the Church after the manifestation of Christ is in the world and consists of men who as such continue to require sign-giving.... What does not cease is the extension of the Church's work on the basis of its witness to Christ: the proclamation of Christ by the preaching of Christ, the institution of baptism, and the festival of the Lord's Supper.... The Church, the body of Christ, and therefore Christ Himself exists and exists only where there are the signs of the New Testament, that is, preaching, baptism and the Lord's Supper. (Barth, CD I.ii: 219, 226–227).

<sup>23</sup> *cf.* Barth, CD III.iv: 87ff.

all desires are satisfied in, from, and through Him. As such, it is distinguished from all attempts of man to make himself worthy of God. Prayer is pure petition. The obedience and service of prayer consist wholly in the seeking of all things from the gracious God Who has commanded us to pray and has promised to hear us. Prayer does not attempt to give anything to God nor to do something for Him; it is offered in obedience to the command of God, but this obedience consists in turning to God, seeking, asking, and accepting from Him everything that man needs. Precisely in this sense, prayer gives the *highest* honor that God claims from man.

If man, in accordance with God's command, simply lays his need before Him and therefore comes to Him as a suppliant, he thereby renounces all arbitrariness towards God, confessing that there can be no question either of representing himself as worthy or of presenting anything worthy to God. When he comes to God simply with his request, he comes with empty hands. But empty hands are necessary when human hands are spread out before God and filled by Him. It is these empty hands that God in His goodness wills of us when He bids us pray to Him. He who is obedient to Him is ready to begin at the beginning every time he prays. He always understands God as the unique source of all good and himself as absolutely needy in relation to Him. He puts himself joyfully under this fundamental law of the covenant relationship. He has nothing either to represent or to present to God except himself as the one who has to receive all things from Him.<sup>24</sup>

Regardless of whether "public" or "private," prayer must be evaluated from the perspective of whether it addresses the needy man to God alone.<sup>25</sup> Prayer must not seek to be confession or proclamation, nor any other manner of address to man; it is an expression of need and a request *before God*. This definition of prayer does not preclude the elements of thanksgiving, repentance, and

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<sup>24</sup> Barth, CD III.iv: 97

<sup>25</sup> "Private books of prayer and Church liturgies, and in both cases both new and old and oldest of all, are to be appraised and viewed from the standpoint whether they really place man himself before God, whether they do not perhaps allow him to play again a role where he must not do so, but where his freedom before God must be shown in the fact that he simply expresses his need and nothing else." (Barth, CD III.iv: 98).

worship, but these aspects of prayer are not in addition to the petition; they are aspects of the petition itself.

The thanksgiving of prayer is in the asking, in obedience to God's command and in full expectation of His providence.

So far as thanksgiving is concerned, it is in fact the root of prayer to the extent that it impinges immediately upon the objective divine basis of this action, upon the command of the gracious God, which is as such an invitation, a permission, a freedom given to man. To thank God is obviously to act as He so kindly and liberally invites and demands, and therefore simply to come to Him as suppliants with our needs.<sup>26</sup>

Likewise, repentance is implicit in the asking, in which all claims of self-sufficiency and self-worth are abandoned.

We certainly cannot pray gratefully without realising the abyss between God and ourselves, and therefore confessing to ourselves and God that, as we are unworthy of His grace and blessings in general, so we do not deserve to be summoned and required to come before Him with our requests.... All human asking stands only too much in need of repentance and forgiveness. Our asking will also be guided, determined and limited by the fact that it is quite impossible without repentance. But again we must ask how repentance is to become serious and effectual. Certainly not in mere protestations, but in the simple doing of the imperfect in all its imperfection because it is commanded, because the humbling without which one cannot obey this commandment is concrete and serious as we respect and perform what is commanded us. But to do this is to make our requests to God as we are told to do.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, worship is itself characterized by the same attitude and posture of prayer. Worship means turning to God in quietness, humility, and submission, all of which belong also to the nature of true prayer. Prayer is also an act of worship, for it is directed to the God Who has revealed Himself in His Son as a gracious Father; this God is worshipped by petitioning His mercy. As Barth writes, "public

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<sup>26</sup> Barth, CD III.iv: 99

<sup>27</sup> Barth, CD III.iv: 99

worship, as the center of the entire life of the congregation, must be presented as a whole, and that means a whole which consists of calling on a gracious God."<sup>28</sup>

True worship is not the turning to a *Deus absconditus* in His naked majesty.... It must be a turning to the *Deus revelatus* who is the God of all comfort and the Father of all mercies. But when it is offered to Him, there is in prayer as little abstract worship as abstract thanksgiving or repentance. That we can only worship as we ask means that our asking must be directed to this God, to the One who gives us the wonderful freedom, permission and summons to do so. It must respect God as God, and that means as Father and Saviour. Hence, like thanksgiving and repentance, it must issue in petition. For how can we respect the deity of this God, how can we halt before Him, how can we fear and love Him, how, then, can we worship Him, without doing what this God wants of man? How can we honour, prize and praise Him, except as we come to Him with requests, expecting everything from Him and therefore applying to Him for everything?  
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True prayer is characterized by a hope that is sure of a hearing; that is to say, prayer is offered with confidence that God will receive the petition and adopt it into His plan and will. Indeed, the prayer is offered entirely under the determination of this hope. It is "hope," because its object is the attitude and action of the Sovereign God, but precisely because it is directed to God — Who has commanded prayer — it has the nature of unreserved and unquestioning certainty.

Again regardless of whether public or "private," the prayer directed to God alone is offered by man only in the fellowship of the Church. No true prayer is offered in isolation. The man who prays does so as a member of the Church, in the unity of the community with Christ.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Barth, *Selected Prayers*: 6

<sup>29</sup> Barth, CD III.iv: 100

<sup>30</sup> Here, once more, is Barth's constant reference to the Church as the *locus* for all theology and worship:

The 'we' who pray and therefore ask are...a fellowship which is closely knit but for this very reason open to all. This is the Christian community. Just as the holy day is its day and confession its confession, so prayer is the prayer of the Christian community. Prayer has this particular subject. And the question of true prayer is always the question whether and to what extent the individual who prays belongs to this particular subject,

Finally, both public and private prayer is subject to a certain discipline. This discipline does not consist in absolute, hard and fast rules, but *some* manner of discipline and order is necessary for true prayer. It is, as before, a discipline that stems from the freedom for obedience before God. It is necessary for a variety of reasons. First of all, prayer is not a state but an act, which takes shape in definite thoughts and words (whether silent or vocalized).<sup>31</sup> Second, man needs to pray more often than he is capable of freely forming his thoughts and words into prayer; he must be taught how to pray, just as the disciples were taught. Indeed, the Lord's Prayer itself provides a certain discipline and order. Third, the petition of true prayer should be uttered in sincerity and simplicity, and should not be allowed to develop into long meditations or overdone formalities. Fourth, general human weakness and Biblical example both suggest that prayer should be regulated according to definite times and hours:—in the divine service, morning and evening, at meals, *etc.*

It is true that the discipline and order of prayer should not be allowed to degenerate into an automatic mechanism. Prayer must ever flow forth from the free and spontaneous obedience of faith. Nevertheless, while the Church guards against such danger, she recognizes that discipline and order are required, especially in the divine service of the congregation. She must strive to offer prayers that are

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to this particular 'we.' (Barth, CD III.iv: 103).

<sup>31</sup> In this context, Barth inserts a pointed comment:

In divine service [prayer] will very definitely be vocal. No one has ever been able to make crystal clear to us what is really meant by the so-called "silent worship" which has invaded a wider area of the Church from the Quakers, the *Berneuchenern* and other sects. They say that it is beautiful, and in any case necessary for the soul's health, for a churchful of men to keep communal silence for five minutes. It can also be found embarrassing. But has it any spiritual meaning? Can it be established and justified theologically? Is it not repugnant to the nature of divine service as an assembly of the community, in which prayer ought not to be a private matter but common and therefore in some way vocal? And does it not lead us to the idea of wordless prayer, which as a whole and exceptions apart cannot be regarded as true prayer? (Barth, CD III.iv: 112).

at once both ordered and free, congregational and spontaneous. Even this striving, of course, is a discipline of prayer. "The rule: Better according to a form than not at all, or: Better according to a form in the community than freely in separation, is one which might well be argued, although it cannot be regarded as the last word."<sup>32</sup>

Barth himself engaged in this struggle for an appropriate discipline of prayer, as he describes in the Foreword to his book of prayers:

For a long time now I have been dissatisfied when I felt that for the sake of order (or perhaps simply for convenience' sake?) I must or should hold to the various customary Books of Worship before and after my sermons. The irrelevance of the content as well as the lack of organic relationship between the (ancient and even modern) style and language of these prayers and that of my sermons disturbed me. Then for awhile I sought help by substituting for the offerings of the Books—not extemporaneous prayers (I never risked that!) but free combinations of passages from the Psalms. Only in later years did I begin to compose in my own words in connection with the preparation of my sermon [such prayers as those included in this selection], first for the end, and then also for the beginning of the main action of the service of worship.<sup>33</sup>

### III. THE CENTRALITY OF WORSHIP

The need for a certain discipline of prayer is indicative of a similar need for discipline in the larger sphere of activity in the Church. In order to maintain the integrity of the Church in accordance with the Word of God, on account of her visibility, it is necessary for the Church to establish a "law" for her life on earth. Among its other characteristics, Barth indicates that this "canon law" is necessarily *liturgical*.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Barth, CD III.iv: 112

<sup>33</sup> Barth, *Selected Prayers*: 6. We note, in particular, that Barth always avoided the use of extemporaneous prayers in public worship.

<sup>34</sup> *cf.* Barth, CD IV.ii: 695ff.; also, *cf.* O'Grady: 299–304

Because the Church is the Body of *Christ*, Who is revealed in His own particular history, the Church also must live as a particular history: an event. Just as Jesus Christ comes to the Church in the eternally significant history of His sojourn from Bethlehem to Golgotha, so does His Body live by an earthly-historical participation in that event. The *existence* of the Church cannot be static, but must live as an event: an *history*. This history occurs in the coming together of the community for Christian worship.<sup>35</sup> Consequently, the law and order of the Church is a liturgical law and order.

The Church is liturgical in her "original seat"; that is to say, she is a community and the Body of Christ precisely in the gathering for worship in the Name of Jesus. "The saying of Mt 18:20 ('Where two or three are gathered . . . ') has unmistakable reference to the gathering of the community."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> O'Grady provides an excellent summary of Barth's understanding of worship as the central activity of the Church as the body of Christ. In discussing "The Spirit and the Upbuilding of the Community," he writes:

To build up means to integrate. It means to gather together, to constitute and maintain a heterogeneous plurality of free individuals as one common being, as one brotherhood, as one people united in a full and total sense in unanimous action. Concretely, this upbuilding consists in love for one's neighbour. More concretely still it consists in mutual encouragement and consolation in the reception of the Gospel. Everything that Christians do should be judged by the standard of whether it serves this 'joining together' or not.... The Church takes place as Christians, loved by God and integrated by Him, mutually love one another and thus build themselves up for His service in the world. Only as such is it really the Church, that is, only as such does it correspond to its being [*i.e.* Jesus Christ].

The action in which this communion and upbuilding primarily and continually takes place is the community's common worship.... From this centre, communion should spread to the everyday life of Christians, so that their whole life becomes worship.

Thus it is no accident that St. Paul uses the word *oikodome* most frequently when he speaks of the congregation gathered for worship, as in I Cor 14. Nor is it an accident that he describes the everyday life of Christians in cultic terms with reference to worship.... Even if in the rest of the New Testament there are few explicit references to the central importance and necessity of worship (cf. Heb 10:23f.), still 'the possibility of a Christianity outside the Church and aloof from its common worship could only be the object of supreme bewilderment to the New Testament community'. (O'Grady: 288-290).

<sup>36</sup> O'Grady: 300

Thus, in spite of the human imperfection and corruption of the divine service, the worship of the Church is "lawful and right," because Jesus Christ is present and active in the fellowship of the community. This fellowship is shaped, as per the Holy Scriptures, by the activities of confession, Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and prayer.

First of all, the Church is "lawful and right" as a *fellowship of confession*: in the performance of a liturgical act of confession.

Where two or three are gathered in [the Name of Jesus], they speak with and to one another in human words. They do not do this merely because speech is the characteristic vehicle of human fellowship, but because from the very first this particular fellowship has its meaning and substance in the fact that there is something specific which calls for common utterance and must be declared by those who have been brought to this fellowship. In general terms, it is a matter of the common confession of the One who has brought them together by awakening them all to know Him and believe in Him and love Him and hope in Him.... They hear Him together as the Word of God addressed to them, and they cannot do this without making their common human response.... This common response in the common hearing of the Word of God, the confession commonly spoken and received in the renewal of the common knowledge, is the first element in the public worship of Christians. It may include the common recitation of a creed. It will certainly involve singing. But it will take place decisively in free witness, bound only to its object, as the Word of God is proclaimed and published and taught and preached and heard by the community according to the commission of its Lord.<sup>37</sup>

Second, the Church is "lawful and right" as a *fellowship of Baptism*: the fellowship of those who are baptized and who assemble precisely and only *as such*.

Where two or three are gathered in the name of Jesus they will mutually recognise and acknowledge that they are those who are gathered by Him as their one Lord, and regard and receive one another as brothers because they are all brothers of this First-begotten. Who really belongs to them? Who is awakened by the quickening power of the Holy Spirit, and therefore a saint, and as such a member of the communion of saints, a brother of those united with him in this fellowship? They all see and judge one another with human eyes and not with those of God. They do not see into the heart. They can only trust one another.... The Christian community is built on the fact that this trust is permitted and commanded.... It is in this authorised and commanded trust that the community gathers for divine service.... They cannot see one another as brothers. But

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<sup>37</sup> Barth, CD IV.ii: 699-700



they see that these men, and they themselves, are baptised—in the one new name common to them all, in the name of Jesus, and therefore the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.... Because they all stand under this sign in the name of the Lord, they accept the sign. Hence they are permitted and commanded to do that which of themselves they have no right or power to do—to take these others and themselves seriously as members of the body of Jesus Christ, and to be with them gladly and confidently in the congregation.<sup>38</sup>

Third, the Church is "lawful and right" as the *fellowship of the Lord's Supper*: the nourishment of the Lord, received in the confident hope of eternal life.

Where two or three are brought together in the name of Jesus, it is in order that they may be unitedly strengthened and preserved to eternal life. Eternal life is their human life, but as their true life, hidden and glorified with God. They assemble as members of the Christian community, and celebrate divine service, to be prepared for the attainment of their life in this form.... They hunger and thirst to be prepared, to be strengthened and preserved, for the eternal life which in defiance of the frailty of the present form of their life is His work, and can be only His work. The promise with which they are brought together is that He will give them food and drink, that in the life in which they too are surrounded by death He will provide, and will Himself be, their wayside sustenance. And so they go and come to the gathering of the community to seat themselves, and to eat and drink, as brothers and sisters at the table where He Himself presides as Lord and Host, and they are invited and welcomed guests. They go and come to the Lord's Supper.<sup>39</sup>

Finally, the Church is "lawful and right" as the *fellowship of prayer*, in which the community prays the "Our Father" as the brothers and sisters of the Son of God. Barth's understanding of prayer and its relationship to worship has already been discussed. We simply note here, that "where two or three are gathered together in the name of Jesus, they are called by Him to pray with one another. Those gathered by the revelation of His name are men who are wholly referred and directed to God."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Barth, CD IV.ii: 701–702

<sup>39</sup> Barth, CD IV.ii: 702–703

<sup>40</sup> Barth, CD IV.ii: 704. Barth provides a concise description of his concept of public worship as a fellowship of prayer, in the Foreword to his book of prayers:

[Public worship, which consists of calling on a gracious God] begins, after the greeting of the congregation as the people of God, by their joining in song (an activity which I

The Church is liturgical in her "source"; that is to say, the Church is to be sought and found and known in Christian worship, as in her concrete source, again because Jesus Christ Himself is concretely present in her liturgical fellowship. The Church's law will therefore be shaped by the ordering of confession, Baptism, Lord's Supper, and prayer, in accordance with the Word of God.<sup>41</sup>

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think is not regarded and cultivated with sufficient seriousness). It continues through the lips of the member of the congregation who is serving as the leader of this activity, in the expression of their thanks, their confession, their special petition for God's presence and support in the particular activity of their gathering for worship. It rises to the sermon in which the calling on God become address and proclamation in the exposition and application of a word of Scripture (a short one rather than a long one!). From there on it moves downward toward the concluding prayer, in which the declarations of the sermon (now again in direct calling on God) are to be brought closely together, but in this the service is above all to be opened outward toward all other men, toward the rest of the church and the world as an intercession that is as wide in scope as possible (is this not too often neglected?). In the second congregational hymn the worshipers make this concluding prayer their own. They are dismissed by the pronouncing of the blessing by the presiding member of the congregation, "The Lord bless you...!" (not us!). (If it were up to me, the order for baptism and for the Lord's Supper would proceed along the same lines.) In all this the spice in each part consists not in spiritual and theological verbosity, but in brevity! (Barth, *Selected Prayers*: 6-7).

<sup>41</sup> As, for example, Barth writes concerning the Sacraments in his *Church Dogmatics*: The authority of the prophets and apostles and through it the grace of the incarnate Word of God is set at the beginning of our existence as the children of God, just as baptism is put at the beginning of our Christian life as an objective testimony pronounced upon us. And we live by the word of the prophets and apostles, i.e., by the proclamation based upon their testimony and again by the grace of God's Word through this proclamation, just as we are fed with bread and given wine to drink in the Lord's Supper. We are bound to baptism and the Lord's Supper in token of this ordering and maintenance of life by the Word mediated through the prophetic and apostolic word. For this ordering, this maintenance of life is inseparable from this life, the life of the children of God. It is this life only because and in so far as it is life by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that is to say, only when it is ordered and maintained in the way indicated by the sacraments. For that reason and in that sense we have to say in all seriousness that sacraments are an indispensable "means of grace." (In this concept, we have only to stress the word "grace" to understand correctly!) And no complaints about "Roman sacramentalism" will prevent us from declaring that on its objective side the Church is sacramental; that is to say, it has to be understood on the analogy of baptism and the Lord's Supper. In other words: The sphere of subjective reality in revelation is the sphere of sacrament. This has nothing to do with the Roman *opus operatum* or with heathen "magic." The sphere

Finally, the Church is liturgical in her "object." Just as the task of dogmatics must serve as a constant check against the interventions of sinful humanness in the proclamation of the Church, so must the law of the Church order the divine service, to counteract the pollution of her own sinful humanness. Order is required, as in the case of prayer, as an obedient response to the freedom of grace. "This will involve the answering of questions such as: Who is responsible for the expression and interpretation of the confession? What are the conditions for the reception of baptism, and the obligations resulting from it? Who is to be admitted to the Lord's Supper? What will be the shape of the community as the living fellowship of the Lord's Supper and of prayer?"<sup>42</sup>

Barth provides an example of such an ordering in his discussion of "the architectural problem of Protestant places of worship." His brief remarks are indicative of his theology of worship:

The principle of a "circular place" seems to me to be right because it shows that church buildings are designed to be places for the preaching of the Word of God and for the prayer of the assembled community....

What should be placed at the centre? To my mind, a simple wooden *table*, slightly raised, but distinctly different from an "altar". This seems to me to be the ideal solution. This table, fitted with a removable lectern, should serve *at one and the same time* for pulpit, communion table and "baptismal font". (No matter how it is done, the separation of pulpit, communion table and "baptismal font" can serve only to dissipate attention and create confusion; such separation could not be justified theologically.)

Since the organ and choir are accessories appreciated to a greater or lesser degree and may in principle be dispensed with, they should not appear in the field of vision of the assembled community.

Images and symbols have *no place at all* in a building designed for Protestant worship. (They too can serve only to dissipate attention and create confusion. It is only the community met together for "worship" in the strict meaning of the word—*that is for prayer, preaching, baptism and the Lord's Supper [emphasis added]*—and above all for the community in action in every day life, which corresponds to the reality of the person

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of sacrament means the sphere in which man has to think of himself as on the way from the baptism already poured out upon him to the Lord's Supper yet to be dispensed to him, the sphere in which he begins with faith in order to reach faith, *ek pisteos eis pistin*. (Barth, CD I.ii: 231–232).

<sup>42</sup> O'Grady: 302

and work of Jesus Christ. No image and no symbol can play that rôle.) The shape, dimension and colour of the doors, walls and windows, and of the seating can and must contribute to the concentration of those taking part in the service. These factors should help to orientate the worshippers towards the message and worship which draws them together, without the necessity of recourse to extraneous ornamentation. It is only thus that the whole building will be "worthy" and "beautiful".<sup>43</sup>

#### IV. THE SHAPE OF WORSHIP

As for the essence and meaning of worship, as it emerges in the visible action of the Church service, Barth discusses in his Gifford Lectures the liturgical life of the Church according to both its primary (*i.e.* divine) and secondary (*i.e.* human) dimensions. With respect to each of these two aspects, he identifies the *ground*, the *content*, and the *form* of worship. Thus, it is here that Barth's theology of worship is given its most explicit expression.<sup>44</sup> Yet, very little is here added to the principles already examined; instead, those same principles are simply stated more directly, concisely, and concretely. We follow suit by summarizing briefly the points of Barth's lectures.

The *primary ground* of the Church service is the divine presence and action of Jesus Christ Himself, and thus the divine work of *creating* and *sustaining* the Church and the Christian life of her members:—the meaning and goal of all human history. The "divine service" is thus primarily *God's service* to men.

The *secondary ground* of the Church service is the corresponding necessity of *obedience* to the gracious will of Jesus Christ, Who is present and active in the midst of the Church in her worship.

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<sup>43</sup> Barth, "The Architectural Problem of Protestant Places of Worship": 92–93

<sup>44</sup> *cf.* Barth, *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God*: 188ff., 203ff.

This obedience is also that service which the Church owes to the whole world.<sup>45</sup> "Obedience" is, on the secondary/human side, the key word for Barth's theology of worship. It has nothing to do with any manner of "works righteousness," but signifies Barth's notion of grace as freedom *for* God. If anything, it is most similar to Luther's insistence that believers should pray and receive the Sacrament *because God has commanded His children to do so*.

The *primary content* of the Church service is the two-fold divine work of the Holy Spirit: the proclamation and revelation of God in Jesus Christ, as determined and delimited by *Baptism* and the *Lord's Supper*, and that faith which is *established* and *nourished* by this proclamation. Thus, the primary content of Baptism corresponds to primary ground of "creating," and the primary content of the Lord's Supper corresponds to the primary ground of "sustaining" the Church. By these activities of the Holy Spirit, the man who is by nature without faith and obedience, commits himself by faith to the gracious care and almighty lordship of God. In this way, the divine service is from first to last a gracious action of God.

The *secondary content* of the Church service is the corresponding action of the congregation, which has as its goal a new, more loyal, and more efficacious hearing of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, to the glory of God's Name in the midst of the Church and throughout the world.

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<sup>45</sup> The worship of the Church, as her act of obedience before God, is also a service to the world at large, because the Church publicly acknowledges and receives from God that which He bestows upon *all* mankind.

'Let everything that breathes praise the Lord' (Ps 150:6). In praising God the community substitutes for the yawning gulf in the life of the world. The praise of God is enjoined on all the forms of the community's ministry, but it also has its own specific place and form. Its particular place is the assembling for divine service. It gives meaning to the whole action of divine service, shaping it as 'liturgy', that is, as a concrete and public performance of service to the God who in His being and action is for us. More particularly it proclaims to itself and the world the main concern of its whole existence, and therefore of its assembling too. It demands public expression (Rom 10:9; 15:6). (O'Grady: 328-329).

If [the Church] is truly assembled, and if her fellowship must be consummated through words, what can these words be unless the word of faith, which accepts the revelation of God and which is therefore the prayer of thanksgiving, which includes the prayer of repentance and the prayer of praise and all other prayers. The Lord's Supper was called in the ancient church the Eucharist, and as being a Eucharist, a thanksgiving, the Lord's Supper characterises the whole service. The service is faith becoming audible and visible, just as it is the proclamation of revelation. The gratitude which we owe God for His revelation consists in our receiving and accepting Jesus Christ by faith as he exists as man, His body and blood, as the Lord's Supper testifies, in eating and drinking and thus in making Him our own and so in being nourished to this end that we may be with God in Him as He is with God. And it is this too which preserves the church as the true church. We can thank God in no other way than by receiving what He has given us.<sup>46</sup>

The *primary form* of the Church service is given and determined by the divinely given means and signs: specifically, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. These signs do not take the place of Jesus Christ, as though they were absolute and He now superfluous. Yet, neither can these signs, as the primary form of the Church service, be detached from its content or be otherwise disregarded. These signs are the divinely mandated means by which the Church receives and shares the *historical* and *incarnational* character of the revealed Word of God. The Word did not become "preaching"; the Word became *flesh*. Thus, any so-called church that has disregarded the Sacraments or the centrality of their significance has thereby also disregarded the essence of the true Church and of revelation itself.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Barth, *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God*: 197

<sup>47</sup> As Barth stresses in his *Church Dogmatics*:

The sacrament is emphatically described as an *actio sacra*. And we naturally think of the nature of baptism and the Lord's Supper as being the Church's action as opposed to the Church's word in preaching.... A sacrament gives prominence to something special within the general context. As a *signum visibile*, a *symbolum externum*, a sign in the *elementum* and in an *actio*, a sacrament asserts clearly, and with relatively greater eloquence than the word in the narrower sense can ever do, that the *iustificatio* or *sanctificatio hominis*, which is the meaning of all divine sign-giving, does not rest upon an idea but upon reality, upon an event. And the event upon which it rests is of such a kind that it does not merely possess the relevance which a powerfully disseminated philosophical doctrine or a popular conviction may have. It is the event which has shown itself to be both spiritual and corporeal, the act of a Creator who is above the antithesis between the corporeal and the spiritual, the event of the entry of this Creator into our

Finally, in returning to the start — having now come full-circle — the *secondary form* of the Church service is the unceasing effort and task of the Church to receive the proclamation with sincerity and humility and to understand by faith the Word of God. Worship is, in this sense, *fides quaerens intellectum*. This effort is "critical" in nature, which is to say that it is the work of *theology* as applied to the center of the Church's life: the ongoing examination, critique, and reformation of the Church's liturgy of worship.

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history, the event of the rolling up of our history by His presence....

'*O logos sarx egeneto* (Jn. 1<sup>14</sup>)—preaching, too, can and must say this. But in a way which preaching can never do, the sacrament underlines the words *sarx* and *egeneto*. And we have to think of these words as underlined if we are to understand and treat the divine sign-giving as the objective side of the Church, that is to say, in its given-ness, indeed in its pre-given-ness, comprehensive, undiscernible from any angle, unassailable from any angle. The sacrament's insistence upon this quality in divine sign-giving is its special feature as compared with preaching and its special feature in the whole life of God's people assembled to form the Church. We will not be always noting about a theology whether it has any knowledge of baptism and the Lord's Supper, or whether these things are at bottom an embarrassment to it, which it must pester itself to say anything sensible about. If this is indeed the case, it will surely be revealed at some quite different (though only apparently different) point. We shall perceive that it has no proper knowledge of the distinct validity of the prophetic and apostolic word in the Church, or of the value of dogma, or of the theological relevance of the decision of Nicaea or the decision of the Reformation. And certainly it will not be able to value preaching as the central part of the Church's liturgy. And we shall have to ask whether a theology of this kind can have any awareness of the comprehensively and unassailable given-ness of revelation itself. On the other hand, it may well be that a theology allows itself to learn from the very simple fact that in the Church baptism must always be administered and the Lord's Supper celebrated. By this fact it is reminded that, since it is the reality of revelation, the subjective reality of revelation necessarily has an objective side. It is from this objective side that our thinking must invariably derive. It is in this way (this way and not another) that it becomes thinking with a definite content, thinking which is really connected with the object here set before us. It is from the standpoint of baptism and the Lord's Supper that the prophets and apostles, and in their turn the fathers and Reformers, are really fixed: and fixed in such a way that we cannot evade them. And it is when regarded in the light of baptism and the Lord's Supper that, parallel to every temporal movement in time in which it must occur, preaching too must and will always acquire that peculiar element of fixity, of unchanging similarity to itself, without which it ceases in any really effective way to bear witness by the mouth of man. *Et incarnatus est*. (Barth, CD I.ii: 230–231).

[Theology] can neither take the place of nor supplement the church's hearing of the Word of God, as the real human act in the church service. It has a very modest significance, but it has this significance, and therefore it causes unrest and often for this reason the church shuts its ears to theology. It enquires if our hearing of God's Word is being duly qualified and it enquires about the adequacy of our proclamation and perception in relation to the institution of the church as established by Jesus Christ. It asks the church about her sincerity and humility. To this extent theology, too, belongs to the church service and is itself a leaven for the church's liturgy. And to this extent it must be admitted, too, that the church service is necessarily a theological act.<sup>48</sup>

*[O Lord,] Be Thou Thyself among us, as we now on this last Sunday before the holy day once again seek together to prepare ourselves to receive Him as Thy gift! Grant that here all speaking, hearing, and praying may be done aright, in true and thankful awe at that which Thou hast in store for us all, hast already determined for us all, hast already done for us all! Amen.*<sup>49</sup>

+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +

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<sup>48</sup> Barth, *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God*: 215–216. As Barth also describes in the prolegomena to his *Church Dogmatics*:

The dogmatic question has to be put to the practical theologian too, because even the most external question regarding the conduct of worship to-day can be given very different answers according to the insight into what is proper proclamation and what is not. Furthermore the prayers and praises of the Church cannot be regarded as of no dogmatic importance at all; the liturgy and hymnal must be taken seriously from the standpoint that their substance consists of human words and can thus be effective as proclamation, perhaps as very distorted proclamation.

It is a strange thing that when there are revisions of books of order and hymn-books in the Evangelical churches every possible authority is usually consulted as a standard but not dogmatic science. The results naturally correspond. (Barth, CD I.i: 81).

<sup>49</sup> Barth, *Selected Prayers*: 15



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