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ARCHIVES

Worship and the Life of the Church

JOHN H. TIETJEN

The author is president of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo. This paper was read at the 1971 conference of the Institute for Liturgical Studies meeting at St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minn.

The HOW of Christian worship should be determined by the reason WHY we worship: because God has acted in His Son and in His Spirit to inaugurate a new covenant for a new community.

Ours is an age of experimentation in worship. In the name of renewal of worship, folk songs and guitars, jazz combos and rock music have been brought into chancel and sanctuary. Dialog sermons, witness feedback sessions, multimedia presentations, and dramatic performances are some of the ways through which we are trying to communicate the Word in worship these days. We have been reminded of the place of emotion and the role of our senses in life generally, but especially in worship. We have engaged in much more frequent celebration of the Lord's Supper. A variety of forms is in use for the Holy Communion. The Blessed Sacrament is offered in regular church services, in worship of special groups, in house communions, and in underground masses. Churches have given official sanction to some of the prevalent experimentation in worship. Some churches have produced approved experimental materials. Lutherans in the United States have been provided with a *Worship Supplement* by the Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and with a variety of musical and liturgical forms by the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship.

Experimentation in worship raises the issue of the *how* of worship. What should our worship be like? What ought we be doing when we come together as the church for worship? On what basis do we legitimately make changes in congregational worship? What are the standards or principles by which to determine what should happen in worship?

There is a prior question which has to be answered first. Why do we worship? We cannot determine how we should worship until we know why we worship. In speaking to you about "Worship and the Life of the Church," I plan to deal with the why and how of worship. In the first part of my presentation I will be making the point that our reason for worship issues from the church's nature; we worship because of what the church is. In the second part of the presentation I want to make the point that the nature of the church should determine the nature of its worship; what the church is should establish how we worship.

I—WHY WE WORSHIP

Why do we worship? Some answers given to that question are less than adequate. Do we worship because God has

commanded it? Perhaps you have heard that sort of rationale given for worship, as I have. The Old Testament, of course, is replete not only with commands to worship but with precise prescriptions for when and how and where. It is possible to argue, as some have, that the Old Testament law lays down the "oughtness" of worship even though its specific prescriptions no longer apply. Martin Luther boldly transformed the decalog's prescription of Sabbath rest into a command to "sanctify the holy day." On the basis of his rendition of the Third Commandment, some of his followers have found the reason for worship in that command to sanctify a holy day. Specific commands for worship in the New Testament are hard to find. St. Paul does appeal to the Christians at Rome to offer themselves "as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to his service and pleasing to him. This is the true worship that you should offer" (Rom. 12:1). The author of the Letter to the Hebrews urges his readers: "Let us not give up the habit of meeting together, as some are doing. Instead, let us encourage one another, all the more since you see that the Day of the Lord is coming near" (Heb. 10:25). But specific commands to worship are lacking in the New Testament. Though worship is everywhere in the New Testament writings, it is not established by a specific command of God.

Some argue that we should worship because the nature of God requires it. When we become aware of His holy majesty, we have no choice but to adore Him. As we recognize His great goodness to us, what can we do but give Him thanks? True! But the reason for Christian worship is not

to be found in some metaphysical description of the nature of God.

Some say we worship because the nature of man requires it. Man is *homo religiosus*. He is religious by nature; it is therefore his nature to worship. I agree. Some time ago, when the new "Jesus music" first went out over the airways, I was asked in a television interview if I thought the new music signaled that young people were returning to religion. I responded that I didn't think young people had ever left religion; they were now expressing their religious nature in a new way. It is possible to argue that we human beings have a psychological and emotional need to worship and that such a need is at work in bringing us to worship. But the reason for Christian worship is not the religious nature of man.

Why do we worship? Because of what the church is! Or to be more precise and explicit, because of what God has done and is doing and will do through His Son and through His Spirit.

In his book, *Worship in Scripture and Tradition*, Massey H. Shepherd Jr. says about the basis of worship:

Here is a community; and it is here and is a community because it acknowledges that something happened — and that from God — before the community happened. This revelation, action, endowment, liberation, imperative is the given substance of that assembly which is here as a body that participates in these bestowals. And central, therefore, and informing all Christian worship, from the most improvised to the most traditional, is this effort, conscious or uncalculated, to affirm that what has happened and continues to happen from God is the engen-

dering force that grounds the present happening.¹

To cite a more compelling authority for Lutherans, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession states: "Thus the service and worship of the Gospel is to receive good things from God . . . the highest worship in the Gospel is the desire to receive forgiveness of sins, grace, and righteousness."²

Christians worship because of an action of God—an action in the present based on an action in the past promising an action for the future. The heart of the action is God's deed in the person of His Son Jesus, the Christ. That action can be described in so many ways. One way to describe it is in words Jesus used in giving His disciples the Holy Supper, "This cup is God's new covenant, sealed with my blood" (1 Cor. 11:25). Through His Son, Jesus, especially through His death, God inaugurated a new covenant for the world, whose benefits are a reality for all who accept them by believing in Him.

God's new covenant grew out of an ancient covenant He had made in establishing one nation out of all the nations of the earth to be His own. God made a covenant with Abraham and renewed it with his descendants. He promised Abraham descendants as numerous as the stars in the heavens and a homeland for his descendants in Canaan forever. God promised that through the nation He had chosen blessing would come to the whole world.

¹ New York: Oxford University Press, 1963, pp. 4—5.

² Ap IV 310; Cf. Ap IV 154, 49-53; citation is from *The Book of Concord*, trans., ed. Theodore G. Tappert (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959).

"When the right time finally came, God sent His own Son. He came as the son of a human mother and lived under the Jewish Law, to set free those who were under the Law, so that we might become God's sons" (Gal. 4:4-5). That is how St. Paul describes God's action in his Letter to the Galatians. He tells us that Christ became a curse for us and died on a cross because of it "in order that the blessing God promised Abraham might be given to the Gentiles by means of Christ Jesus, that we, through faith, might receive the Spirit promised by God." (Gal. 3:13-14)

In the life of our Lord Jesus Christ, God acted to fulfill His ancient covenant with His people Israel and to inaugurate a new covenant with the world. Jesus Himself affirmed it in His proclamation: "The right time has come . . . and the Kingdom of God is near! Turn away from your sins and believe the Good News!" (Mark 1:15). Through Jesus God's long promised kingdom was breaking in on men. The signs of it were there in Jesus' mighty works of healing the sick, feeding the hungry, and driving out demons.

The terms of God's covenant — His saving rule among men, the presence of His life-giving Spirit in men — were established by Jesus' suffering and death. As Jesus said in instituting the Holy Supper, God's new covenant was sealed with His blood. The New Testament writers use varied language and many pictures to describe the meaning of Jesus' death. But there is no question that for them the death of Jesus is the heart and center of God's act for men, the means by which His rule, His Spirit, His life are brought into our lives. The evidence for the fact

that God's new covenant is in effect is Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Affirming Jesus' resurrection Peter proclaimed in his Pentecost pronouncement: "All the people of Israel, then, are to know for sure that it is this Jesus, whom you nailed to the cross, that God has made Lord and Messiah!" (Acts 2:36)

Under the terms of God's new covenant God's action in His Son Jesus happens in the life of all who believe in Him. As Jesus died and rose from the dead, so those who are baptized in Jesus' name are by baptism "buried with him and shared his death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from death by the glorious power of the Father, so also we might live a new life" (Rom. 6:4). As the Spirit of God came down among men in the person of Jesus and did wondrous works through Him, so God's Spirit is poured out on those who believe in Jesus and does the same wondrous works through them. God's deliverance and His gift of abundant life are a reality already now in the lives of those who live under His new covenant. Because of His covenant we enjoy forgiveness, renewal, transformation, love, peace, joy, power already now. And because of His covenant we are sure of complete freedom from the ills and evils that beset us in life when, like our Lord, we pass through death to resurrection and the life of the world to come.

Just as in the case of God's ancient covenant, the inauguration of the new covenant was intended for a community of people and brought that community into being. God's new community was to comprise people from every nation on the face of the earth. From His disciples Jesus chose twelve apostles to represent the

twelve tribes of Israel and through their mission to symbolize the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham that through his offspring all nations would receive blessing. The disciples understood their commission to be to move from Jerusalem and Judea to Samaria and to the ends of the earth in order to make disciples of people everywhere. When the Spirit of God was poured out on Pentecost, present in Jerusalem were "religious men who had come from every country in the world." (Acts 2:5)

The new covenant established a new community. The Letter to the Ephesians says that "by his death on the cross" Christ broke down the walls that separated Jews and Gentiles; "by means of the cross he united both races into one single body and brought them back to God" (Eph. 2:16). St. Paul tells the Galatians: "So there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free men, between men and women: you are all one in union with Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are the descendants of Abraham, and will receive what God has promised" (Gal. 3:26-27). St. Peter tells his readers: "But you are the chosen race, the King's priests, the holy nation, God's own people, chosen to proclaim the wonderful acts of God, who called you from the darkness into his own marvelous light. At one time you were not God's people, but now you are his people; at one time you did not know God's mercy, but now you have received his mercy." (1 Peter 2:9-10)

The terms of the new covenant apply not to individuals in isolation but to people in a community. At a fellowship gathering of a community our Lord identified the cup of the Holy Supper with God's

new covenant. Everywhere in the New Testament you see the community of the new covenant in action. It is variously described: the body of Christ, the temple of the Spirit, the sheep of the Shepherd, the branches of the Vine, the family of God. Community and covenant are inseparably related. And so from the very beginning the communal meal given by the Lord Jesus Himself was the center and focus for celebration by New Testament Christians of their unity with God and with one another. By sharing in the one loaf and drinking of the one cup New Testament Christians manifested the oneness of the body of Christ as they participated in the one crucified and resurrected body of the Lord (1 Corinthians 10)

Why do we worship? Because of God's action through His Son and in His Spirit inaugurating a new covenant for a new community. We worship in order to be what God has made us. By our worship we actualize what we are. Worship is what the church does to express its nature. We worship because worship makes present God's past saving action in Christ. In worship what happened in the life of our Lord and what happened for His disciples in every age, happens for us. In the process we become and know ourselves to be God's new community established by His new covenant. As J. J. von Allmen has written: "By its worship the Church becomes itself. . . . The Church is essentially the eschatological people assembled to meet its Lord and to become itself in and through this encounter."³ We worship because in worship we appropriate God's

future saving action in Christ. In worship we remind ourselves not just of yesterday and today but of tomorrow. We rehearse not only who we are and where we come from but where we are going. We recall our source, we celebrate our present experience, and we look forward to our final end. In worship we actualize God's redemptive act at one point or moment. Both past and future are made real in the present.

In our time there have been all sorts of dire predictions about the death of the parish and the end of the congregation. I grant that the structure of the church may indeed change and probably needs to be changed. But if there is to be a church at all, there will have to be a locatable worshipping community. For that's what it means to be church. There must be community, assembly, synaxis, fellowship. The people of the Spirit have to come together to be what they are. This is not to limit worship to what Christians do when they come together as a community. Worship can be and is also a private, personal experience. It goes on in homes and schools and smaller groups within the community and is expressed in a variety of cultic forms. But these activities of worship flow from the central action of worship, which is what the church does to express its nature and to actualize God's saving deed.

We come together in worship in order to appropriate and to actualize what God has done for us in incorporating us into His new community. Jesus said that where two or three are gathered in His name, there He is in the midst of them. Precisely! And so we gather together in His name in order that He may be in our midst. We come together so that others

³ *Worship: Its Theology and Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 42, 43.

might be incorporated as members of God's family and therefore baptize them for that purpose. We come together so that God may speak His saving Word to us and so enable us to experience the power of His Good News to transform and change our lives. We come together in order to be the community God has created and share in the one loaf and partake of the one cup so that through our sharing in Christ's body and blood we become "one body and one Spirit" (Eph. 4:4). And because God is who He is, we come together to adore Him. According to the Athanasian Creed, "The catholic faith is this, that we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity." Face to face with His goodness and love, we inevitably give Him thanks and praise. As the root of the word "worship" tells us, God is "worth" the adoration we give Him.

We worship in order to be what we are. As branches we draw our life and strength from the Vine. As members of the body we seek our direction from our Head. We actualize the fellowship between God and His people. But we also exhibit and express the fellowship we have with one another. We worship together because we share a common life and because we therefore want to share our common life with one another. We worship in order to be equipped to live up to the calling we have received from God. Our whole life is to be lived as a living sacrifice to God. Our worship is example and impulse to be "slave" and "deacon" to everyone. It equips us to fulfill God's command to Adam to care for the earth. It enables us to live out a life of love in the world.

If we are to be what God has made us, worship cannot be a one-time or sometime

event. We continually fall short of the new pattern of life to which God has called us. Our propensity to sin against God and our fellowman puts us in constant need of forgiveness. The evil that is loose in our lives is always doing us in. The fires of faith flicker low. Our love grows cold. We fail to make progress in our growth to the maturity exhibited in Christ's full stature.

So we worship. We come together to actualize over and over for ourselves God's saving action in Jesus Christ. We gather together to be God's community in order to strengthen our community. We exercise our unity in order to preserve it. We affirm our faith in order to strengthen it. We open up ourselves to the Holy Spirit so that He may nurture the life He has given us.

II—HOW WE WORSHIP

Why worship? We worship because of what the church is. In what follows I want to make the point that what the church is should determine how we worship. In other words, why we worship should shape how we worship.

Sometimes people try to shape our worship in accord with Biblical precept or example. As Lutherans we should know better than to determine our worship by reference to the Law. In discussing the meaning of mass and priesthood the Lutheran confessional writings warn against applying Old Testament regulations concerning sacrifice and priesthood to New Testament services of worship. With Saint Paul we affirm the freedom from the demands of the Law which Christ has won for us. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews in affirming Jesus as "the High Priest that meets our needs" (Heb. 7:26)

shows how the new covenant arranged by Christ has replaced the old. He says: "By speaking of a new covenant, God has made the first one old; and anything that is getting old and worn out will soon disappear" (Heb. 8:13). Examples of worship in the Scripture, especially in the New Testament, can be instructive for the how of worship, for they illustrate how those who had been with Jesus and were eyewitnesses of God's mighty act in Him conceived of what to do when they came together in His name. So it is instructive for us to note the centrality of Gospel proclamation and the Supper of the Lord in their assemblies. But we do not have Biblical legislation prescribing how to worship.

In the Lutheran Reformation a governing principle of reform in worship viewed the Holy Scriptures always as the norm for worship but not necessarily the source for the "how" of worship. For Luther and his followers it was not necessary to return to a first-century mode of worship for worship to be Scriptural. Luther went so far as to assert that we do not have to do everything Christ did or omit everything He omitted when He worshiped. He said: "Therefore we will not be bound by any example, even by that of Christ . . . unless there is a Word of God present that commands us to do so" (WA XVIII, 114-15). Therefore, Lutherans were able to draw from the whole catholic tradition in determining the how of worship. The Lutheran principle of reform provides us with considerable freedom for liturgical renovation.

Therefore, the past tradition of the church is not the way to determine how to worship, either. For the tradition changes. Again, it is instructive to note

what the church down through history has considered essential for worship. The persistent centrality of what we call the Service of Holy Communion is remarkably clear. But you cannot justify the Eucharist as the church's central liturgy simply by reference to historical precedent. Nor as Lutherans can you do that by arguing from the Lutheran Symbols. The Augsburg Confession does indeed affirm that among its confessors the mass is celebrated every Lord's Day and Holy Day and the traditional ceremonies more reverently and faithfully practiced than among the adversaries. But the Augustana was not thereby establishing canon law for its adherents: it specifically affirms that for the unity of the church liturgical rites and ceremonies need not be everywhere alike.

How we worship should be determined rather by our reason for worship. Our worship should be shaped in accord with what we have come together for: actualizing in our lives God's redemptive work in Christ in inaugurating a new covenant and thereby creating a new community; responding to Him in adoration and thanksgiving for all He has done and is doing; continuing that response by the way we live our lives in the world. There is a rhythm to worship. We come together for identification and strength; we go out into the world to celebrate life under the cross; we come back together to celebrate our true identity and to claim God's promise for the future. Within this rhythm of coming and going we find the answer to how to worship.

What God does is always primary in worship. For we come together in worship that God might do among us what He did for us in the life of His Son. "In

its primary sense worship is God's action in Christ," Ernest Koenker reminds us.⁴ Because it is, Peter Brunner says that we can dispense with everything else in worship except for the proclamation of God's Word and the administration of the sacraments. For they are the instruments by which God does for us through His Spirit what He accomplished through Jesus Christ.

As "God spoke to our ancestors many times and in many ways through the prophets," and as "in these last days he has spoken to us through his Son" (Heb. 1:1), so He speaks to us by His Spirit when in worship we proclaim the good news of His speaking to our world. Christians affirm that when we come together for worship, we do not just speak about God; we speak the Word of the Lord. We believe that God Himself addresses us and speaks His message of grace and life to us. We believe that God's good news is a power to save as it renews and transforms our lives.

So we should shape our worship in such a way that God's Word can be proclaimed to us. Both the reading of God's written Word in the Scriptures and the public proclamation of His Word by one of the church's ordained representatives are essential features of worship when worship is viewed as God's action in Christ.

God spoke His Word not just through the words but through the life of His Son—and preeminently through His death and resurrection. We come together in worship so that God may do in our lives what He did in the life of His Son. We

come to be united with our Lord so that we may be joined with Him in His death and resurrection. He gives us His Holy Supper to make that a reality. St. Paul asks: "The cup of blessing for which we give thanks to God: do we not share in the blood of Christ when we drink from this cup? And the bread we break: do we not share in the body of Christ when we eat this bread? Because there is the one bread, all of us, though many, are one body; for we all share the same loaf" (1 Corinthians 10:16-17). Through the bread and wine of His Supper our Lord makes it possible for us to share in His body and blood and so to be one body with Him. We thereby share in all the benefits He gained for us by His redeeming work on the cross. So St. Paul can say: "I have been put to death with Christ on his cross, so that it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:19-20). Everyone who shares in the Lord's Supper can say the same.

Since we worship in order that God's redeeming work may be a reality in our lives, our worship should include those actions by which our Lord has promised to do His redeeming work for us. The sacraments are indispensable in our worship. We need to baptize to incorporate others into Christ. We need to absolve to restore sinners to fellowship. We need to gather around the Lord's Table to be the covenant community established by our Lord in the giving of His body and the shedding of His blood.

How should we worship? Because of our reason for worship—because of what the church is—Word and Sacrament are central and essential, for through them

⁴ *Worship in Word and Sacrament* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), p. 11.

God's action in Christ is made contemporary.

Since Christian worship is the church actualizing itself as God's community, the way to worship is to function in fellowship and community. For God's action in Christ creates community. He brings us into fellowship with Himself, sharing with us His very life and Spirit. In so doing He brings us into fellowship with one another and enables us to share our lives with each other.

How should we worship? The answer is in our reason for worship. We should worship in such a way that we may be the community God enables us to be. We look to our God and Father to share His Spirit with us so that we may be in unity with Him and with each other. We baptize to make that possible, for as St. Paul reminds us, we are "baptized into union with Christ, and so have taken upon yourselves the qualities of Christ himself" (Gal. 3: 27). And since by sharing the same loaf, "all of us, though many, are one body" (1 Cor. 10:17), we eat and drink together at the table of the Lord. Every act of eating together has communal meaning. We eat together to show that we belong together and are sharing life together. When the eating and drinking provide us with the Bread of Heaven and the cup of salvation, we affirm our community in the life that is eternal.

Whatever expresses and fosters our community as God's people is appropriate for our worship. So we ought to be speaking, not just to God but to each other. We ought to be praying for each other. We ought to be giving for each other's needs. We ought to be embracing each other in love.

In the process we need to remember that God's gracious activity is conveyed not only by the preached Word, the sacraments, and prayer, but by postures, gestures, and other symbolical acts of worship. That is true of our response, too. The priority we give to the means of grace should not blind us to the significance and value of symbolic actions in worship. Contemporary research into how man "takes in" a message has taught us to be aware of man's full sensory apparatus. Therefore, symbolic action, art, and ceremony are all vehicles in worship.

In addition to community, thanksgiving is another essential feature of worship flowing from the basic reason for worship. God acts for us in worship as He acted in His Son. And we are the recipients of His action. God's action toward us is one of grace. "It is by God's grace that you have been saved, through faith. It is not your own doing but God's gift. There is nothing here to boast of, since it is not the result of your own efforts" (Eph. 2:8-9). By God's grace we have received mercy and appropriate God's blessings anew every time He reaches out to us in Word and Sacrament. What could the cleansed leper do but throw himself at our Lord's feet and give thanks?

Thanksgiving should be the dominant spirit in our worship.⁵ For that reason it is very appropriate for us to refer to our worship as Eucharist. As our Lord gave thanks over God's gifts of bread and wine, so it is "truly meet, right and salutary" for us to give thanks for God's bountiful gifts of grace. Celebration should be the mood of worship because of the great things God

⁵ Cf. Ap XXIV 18-19, 21-25, 27-30, *op. cit.*

has done and is doing for us. Our worship needs the wings of music and song.

Related to our posture as recipients, sacrifice is another essential feature of worship which flows from our basic reason for worship. God's action in Christ summons us to a way of life by giving us life. Our Lord Jesus called His disciples with the invitation, "Follow Me." By giving us His Spirit, God calls us to live out His life in our own. In our worship, when God acts to give us Himself, He calls on us to empty ourselves and to let Him transform us inwardly by a complete change of mind. That requires offering ourselves as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to His service and pleasing to Him. (Rom. 12:1-2)

The action of sacrifice is appropriate to what we come to worship for. As God's Son yielded Himself up on the cross to do His Father's will, so we offer ourselves to God. Our worship should enable us to present God with ourselves.

More could be said, I am sure, but I think I have said enough to make the point that we should determine the how of worship by the nature and purpose of worship. What the church is should shape how the church worships. With that as the criterion, the essential shapers of worship should be Word and Sacrament, community, thanksgiving, sacrifice.⁶ Worship should be unashamedly proclamatory and eucharistic. But it proclaims and celebrates as vehicles for effecting and expressing what God does for us in Christ. Whether you should make a change in worship or

introduce a new form or feature in worship depends on how it relates to what worship is for. I have been subjected to forms of communication in worship—visual and oral, including sermons—that communicated anything but the Word of the Lord. I have participated in the struggle of a congregation to sing a guitar-accompanied song, whose poor singing furthered neither community nor thanksgiving nor sacrifice, to say nothing about hearing the Word of the Lord or joining in fellowship with Him. And yet a simple drama has spoken God's Word as powerfully as I have ever heard it, and guitars on other occasions have made for sheer joy and celebration.

As I see it, Word and Sacrament belong together in worship. I agree with Peter Brunner that "Holy Communion is the heart of the worship of the congregation assembled in the name of Jesus."⁷ Brunner concedes that "assemblies for worship are possible without the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Sermon services and prayer services, especially horary prayers, fall into this category. However, such services in which the celebration of Holy Communion is not planned must be conceived, basically, as an isolation of worship elements rooted in the worship service in which Holy Communion is celebrated. Such services tend toward Holy Communion worship services, and this is true particularly of sermon services. They also derive from the Holy Communion worship service, as one might observe especially in the horary prayer."⁸ Though I participate with profit

⁶ Yngve Brilioth in *Eucharistic Faith and Practice, Evangelical and Catholic* (London: SPCK, 1939) lists five basic themes: thanksgiving, communion, commemoration, sacrifice, and mystery.

⁷ *Worship in the Name of Jesus*, trans. M. H. Bertram (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), p. 157.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

in daily non-eucharistic worship, both corporate and private, that worship derives its meaning from its relation to my participation in Sunday and midweek Eucharists.

To sum up, what we do in worship should depend on our reason for worship. The why of worship should determine the

how. If that is so, then Ernest Koenker is right: "The Order of the Holy Communion, including sermon and Sacrament, is still the chief service of the Lutheran Church."⁹

St. Louis, Mo.

⁹ *Worship in Word and Sacrament*, p. 59.