



THE SPRINGFIELDER

December 1971
Volume 35, Number 3

The Relationship Between Liturgics And Dogmatics

DAVID P. SCAER

Nothing can be more detrimental to understanding theology than considering its divisions as absolute. The so-called divisions in theology, exegesis, systematics, historical, and practical are really artificial divisions, leaving the student with the impression that a different kind of work is going on in each department. The work of all the departments is essentially the same. For one reason or another, the students do not see the relationships that should exist in a theological curriculum. He thinks he is being forced down a channel for absolutely no good reason. Some time near or after graduation, the light generally dawns. He reads a book or hears a lecture and believes that all of a sudden the heavens have opened up for him. Everything that was presented and read before had no meaning. This writer or the lecturer is the true academic messiah who has brought the light out of darkness. This lecture is a meager attempt to show you that now you can begin to think of theology as a composite whole rather than individualistic parts whose only relationship to each other is some type of religious vocabulary.

Our task is to show the relationship between liturgics and dogmatics. We offer the following statement to explain this relationship. *Dogmatics springs from the liturgical life of the church and dogmatics finds its ultimate fulfillment in the liturgical life of the church.* Let's reword this sentence. Liturgics provides the basis for dogmatics and its goal. We go from liturgics through dogmatics and back to liturgics.

The question which now presents itself is why should liturgics have such a significant and important role in the dogmatical task of the church. Liturgics is nothing else than confession. Here we must give a definition of confession. Confession is the response of the people of God to God's great acts in Jesus Christ. It is always instigated by the Holy Spirit. This definition of confession is very much like the definition of liturgics. Liturgics means the work of the people. In Christian theology, liturgics means the work of the church in praising or confessing God.

The first confession or liturgy, if you will, was that of Peter who responded to the request of Jesus concerning His person, that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God. All liturgics, whether it be the blue-backed Lutheran Hymnal or the red-backed Worship Supplement are nothing else than a repetition of this confession.

But it should not be understood that what we call systematic theology and liturgics are identical. Systematics is purely an academic science. It does not tell you how to teach, preach, make calls, or conduct church services. Most courses in practical theology are concerned with the theory of "doing." They are more interested in

the communication of certain information or feelings, than they are with the information or feelings themselves. Liturgies occupies a halfway position. It is concerned with how things are done. Such questions as music, church architecture, various physical arrangements of the place of worship, the garments of the clergy are all 'how' things. Liturgies has a theoretical side to it in addition to the practical. It asks questions concerning the word content of hymns and liturgies. The word content of hymns and liturgies are virtually identical with confessions. In fact we offer this statement. *The hymnal is itself a confession of faith to what God has done in Jesus Christ and the hymnal may be considered the dogmatics textbook of the people.* Let's study the first proposition: the hymnal is itself a confession of faith.

A hymnal consists of two parts: the liturgies and the hymns. A liturgy may be defined as a framework for Christian worship, made necessary by the assembled congregation. Liturgies are fitting for private individuals and private worship, but are not necessary. They are necessary in all cases of corporate worship. The reason for this is that God is a God of order and not confusion. In my private prayer life, I can ramble at will from one thought to another. In public worship, this is not permitted. They tried it at Corinth and utter confusion was the result. There is also no such thing as a non-liturgical church or pastor. The claim to being non-liturgical only means that the mode of procedure is different from Sunday to Sunday and that this mode of procedure is generally a surprise to the people and sometimes even a surprise to the pastor. The supposed claim to being liturgical only means that an individual follows an older form of worship. But the distinction in the really formal sense is not valid.

Since liturgy is the expression of the corporate congregation it qualifies as confession. Confession is not a private matter, but confession is a statement of the corporate group spoken in something which approaches some kind of harmony.

In the early church there were different liturgies and confessions in different congregations, but each congregation had at least one set form. By studying the epistles we can detect certain confessional and liturgical forms. The same basic facts were confessed by those congregations in communion with St. Paul, but the mode of expression was different in each congregation. The basic facts of confession may be considered the following: God is the Father, Jesus is Lord or Christ, Jesus rose from the dead, Jesus shall return to judge the world. As congregations came in contact with each other, they began to assimilate each other's liturgies and there was a tendency to uniformity in certain sectors of the church. This was done not because liturgies had to be the same, but various congregations wanted to enrich their worship with forms that others were using. Members also moved from one congregation to another and brought older ideas with them. Common liturgy made transferring easier. However, liturgies were in no way rigid, and identical wordings of liturgy were not demanded for church fellowship.

The rigid distinction between liturgy, hymns and confessions

was also not known in the early church. What we call confessions, for example, the Apostles and Nicene Creed, have their roots in the ancient hymns of the church, some of which have been inscribed in the New Testament.

Why then is there a difference today between what we call confessions, hymns, and liturgies? The situation was brought about by the intrusion of heresy into the church. The Arian and the Apollonian heresy resulted in the Niceano-Constantinopolitan Creed. It reached a near final form at the end of the fourth century, officially recognized in the fifth century, and crept into the liturgy as a formal part of liturgy in the mid-sixth century. Not until the eleventh century did it become a legal part of the Roman Mass. The distinction between liturgy and hymn on one side and confession on the other was somewhat artificial, but it was necessary because churches in agreement with one another in faith expressed their common faith in creeds with a set word order. However, the formalization of hymns into creeds, did not prevent the church from continuing to express itself freely through hymns and liturgies.

Liturgies occupy a halfway place between confessions and hymns. Liturgies like hymns are never legally recognized. But unlike hymns and like confessions there is a set form which can, but not necessarily, be perpetuated from one Sunday to another. Hymns resemble more spontaneous confessions of faith written by individuals to be shared with others. New ones can be written for new circumstances and older ones, which have fallen into disuse, can be revived. In concluding this section, let us summarize this point: Formal creeds, less formal liturgies, and hymns written spontaneously by individuals are all confessions or creeds of God's people. They are all liturgies, because they are the work of God's people prompted by the Holy Spirit. The work of God is that we praise and glorify God. They are all hymns because they spring individually from the heart even within the setting of public worship. Let's consider the second part. The hymnal is the dogmatic textbook of the people.

Dogmatics takes no great interest in the rubrics or the outward form of worship, except where certain actions are freighted with dogmatical or confessional meaning. (To prostrate oneself before the consecrated Host in an act of worship or to dispense the consecrated Host as if it were peanuts at a cocktail party has great interest for dogmatical theology.) Dogmatics takes great interest in the wording.

For example, dogmatics which is based upon the confessions of the church, constantly re-examines the confessions of the church including the Apostles and Nicene Creeds on the basis of the Scriptures. It examines minutely the wording of the creeds. In a recent issue of *The Springfielder*, I have briefly discussed the wording of the Apostles Creed in the Worship Supplement. The chairman of the commission in our synod, who was partially responsible for the Supplement, raised counter-objections on one or two points. The others he must have accepted. The point is this: no changes should be made in the creeds unless the church has examined it theologically.

This is not only the task of the liturgical experts. It really belongs to those who specialize in systematic theology, especially in the area of confessions.

The liturgy (and let's take and consider the page 5 and 15 versions) are magnificent dogmatical statements of faith. Some people get carried away with the music and most are bored with it. But the heart of the matter is still the words. The Gloria in Excelsis teaches such things that Jesus is God with the words, "O Lord, the only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, O Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father." Here is a more than adequate expression of Trinitarian theology that does more than justice to the theology of St. John and St. Paul in their New Testament writings. The phrase concerning the taking away of the sin of the world, which is also found in the Agnus Dei, confesses the vicarious atonement of Jesus. The set forms of the Mass: the Kyrie, the Gloria in Excelsis, the Creed, the Agnus Dei, and the Sanctus are the highest expressions of Trinitarian and Christological faith that the church has ever known. It is through these parts of the liturgy that our people receive the so-called basics.

The hymns serve to broaden out the people's theology. Since half of our church year from Advent in December to Pentecost, sometime in May and June, centers specifically in the life of the Christ, the hymns suggested for these seasons are specifically Christological. Advent hymns are strong on eschatology. Such Christmas hymns as "A Great and Mighty Wonder" (76), "All Praise to the Eternal Word" (80) and especially "Savior of the Nations Come" (95) emphasize and teach incarnational theology, using such dogmatical terms as "Son", "Word", and "becoming flesh." The Lenten hymn "A Lamb Goes Uncomplaining Forth, the Guilt of All Bearing" teaches the universal atonement of Christ for sin. A parenthetical element could be added here. Hymns from the earliest centuries of the church and from the Reformation reflect the highest degree of doctrinal development. Ambrose, Luther, Origen, John of Damascus and others were also great theologians in their time. They were aware that the best way to teach dogmatics or doctrine to the people was through the hymns. I would even endeavor to say that more can be done through hymns than through sermons; and the liturgical life of the church in some centuries and generations was the church's only salvation.

Many pastors do not study dogmatics as an individual discipline after they graduate, but because of the necessity of your office you will always be engaged in worship. There is no such thing as a non-liturgical pastor. There are sloppy pastors, but not non-liturgical ones. You can use the liturgies as an effective way of leading your people to know and to respond to the great works of God in Christ. At worst it can be a crutch and a compensation for those who are intellectually lazy to do this task through preaching. In many cases the liturgies do implicitly what we should be doing deliberately. On this account, we repeat, the liturgies of the church have been its salvation and will continue to be so.