

*the Special Service*  
**WORSHIP**  
**architect**

Blueprints for Weddings, Funerals, Baptisms,  
Holy Communion, and Other Occasions

Constance M. Cherry

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This book is dedicated to  
Richard Kevin Cherry,  
brother, friend, and exemplary pastor



# Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	1
1. Foundations for Sacred Actions	11
2. The Christian Wedding	35
3. The Christian Funeral	61
4. Christian Baptism	95
5. The Table of the Lord	143
6. The Healing Service	191
7. The Foot Washing Service and the Love Feast	219
8. Child Dedication and Alternative Rites	243
9. Serving as a Rituals Architect: How to Create Meaningful Rituals for Corporate Worship	279
Appendix A: Prayer Forms	287
Appendix B: Orders of Services	291
Notes	299
Index	315



# Acknowledgments

This book has been a labor of love for all of my students—past, present, and future—who are preparing for worship leadership in the local church. I often tell them, “I love you, but I love Christ’s church more.” By that I mean that I am passionate about the worship ministry of the local church. I therefore do not concentrate on what is popular or pragmatic, though these matters are not irrelevant, and we discuss them in class. Instead, I look beyond my students’ faces into the faces of countless people worshiping in their future or current congregations who will benefit from a well-prepared worship leader. I am thankful for the hundreds of students with whom I am a co-learner, not only at Indiana Wesleyan University, but at other institutions in various parts of the world. They challenge me to become a better teacher and pastor. They stretch my thinking, deepen my reflection, and expand my prayer life. I am certain that I benefit more from my students than they do from me. For this I am grateful.

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I also recognize that my thinking is dramatically formed by real people in real congregations whom I have served beside over many years. It has been the *doing* of sacred actions of worship that has influenced me more than anything else, calling me to explore how God is at work in these significant moments of the worshipping community. Thank you for your patience as I learned to lead over the years, often by trial and error.

I am greatly indebted to the late Robert E. Webber, who shaped my thinking beyond measure in all matters related to worship. His influence upon my worship worldview is serving me well and continues to be a personal priceless treasure.

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I wish to express sincere thanks to Bob Hosack and Baker Academic for believing in my ongoing work and affording me the opportunity for my teaching to reach beyond my own physical classrooms by the publication of this book.

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# Introduction

The class demonstration was over, but no one moved or spoke. The room was completely quiet except for the sound of water running down over the massive stone wall of the baptismal pool. The sunlight of high noon shone brilliantly throughout the atrium of the church, where my upper-level ministry class, Church Rituals, had just participated in a practicum on believer's baptism by immersion led by a team of students in the class. At the end of the baptism, the leaders had eloquently incorporated a renewal of baptism service—a first-time experience for most of the students in the class. The last notes of the guitar-led singing had faded, and everyone had returned to their seats after having gathered near the water. Ordinarily we would begin to evaluate the service, but not this time—at least not now. There was a holy hush that had simply taken over in the church-turned-classroom.

Eventually Sarah broke the silence with one audible word: “Wow.” Her exclamation called me back from worshiper to professor; I asked what she meant. “I have never felt like I truly worshiped in a class before. I thought this would just be a class exercise for a grade, but I am so moved by the Holy Spirit right now! I have just experienced the power of what baptism is all about.” Several other students echoed the same sentiments. Somehow evaluation just didn't seem to fit at that moment. Instead, we spent some time in silence, then prayer, and quietly left the church—my students to go on to another class, and me to praise God that classes can be times of worship too.

## **Why a Book about Sacred Actions in Corporate Worship?**

It is said that necessity is the mother of invention. This proverb was certainly true in the writing of this book. All corporate worship is significant, for each

time the people of God gather in a given locale, they experience the presence of the risen Christ. The weekly rhythm of Lord's Day worship is the foundation for the relationship between God and people. But within and in addition to Sunday worship, there are occasions that may not occur weekly but hold great potential for our experiencing God in exceptionally moving ways. On these occasions God is not more present to us, but we may be more present to God as certain events alert us to God's presence and power. This book is about these particular worship events in the life of Christian communities.

In my vocation as professor I prepare women and men for local church ministry. In this role, at both the seminary and undergraduate levels, I have regularly taught courses in "church rituals"—courses that prepare students for their first years of pastoral ministry by introducing them to particular services of worship that are related to special moments in the life of the Christian community, such as baptism, Holy Communion, weddings, funerals, healing services, foot washing, and more. These types of services involve sacred actions that are specific to experiencing and even validating the event. We explore how to plan for and preside at the "service within a service" that these occasions afford.

Throughout my years of teaching I have not found a source that covers all of these types of services thoroughly—one that not only explains *what* to do but also *why* we do what we do in order to lead these types of services effectively. I found some books that contained multiple service orders with information on how to lead the service but provided no substantial biblical, theological, or historical rationale for the actions (books such as minister's handbooks, denominational resource books, and collections of prayers and liturgies come to mind). I found other books with more historical and theological information, but they tended to provide less practical application and addressed only one or two of the services—perhaps a book on the sacraments or only one of the other types of services (funerals, weddings, healing, etc.). Both of these types of resources are very helpful, but a pastor just entering the ministry would need to acquire a significant number of these books to have the basic resources at hand. In short, I wrote this book out of necessity. I needed a textbook that was broad enough to cover the basic services at which any pastor must be able to preside, and deep enough to give the student an introductory understanding of the biblical, theological, historical, and pastoral underpinnings for planning and leading each service.

The passion I have for the topics covered in this book comes not only from my teaching but from decades of local church ministry. I am a vocational minister as well as a teacher. Services of worship are not academic exercises; they form the dynamic dialogue of a relationship between God and people.

In the pages of this book you will find not only a theoretical “how to” but a passionate “why we must”; these two streams become inseparable in the life of the experienced minister. Theory and practice, reflection and action must always be joined for the mature Christian leader.

With these purposes in mind, this book is written for anyone involved in preparing and leading services related to the primary sacred actions of the church as expressed in the sacraments/ordinances, life passages, and various other occasional services. This book is useful for the student preparing for a vocational career in ministry or for those who have never had the benefit of formal training in these specialized areas. It is also beneficial for the seasoned minister who would profit from a refreshing review of the basics, with some new insights to ponder as well. *The Special Service Worship Architect* is not only for ordained ministers who are generally expected to preside at these types of services but also for other worship leaders who have responsibility for developing worship in the local community, including musicians, other artists, altar guild or worship committees, seasonal planners, and so on.

## **Life Passages, Sacraments (Ordinances), and Other Occasional Services**

This book examines seven types of special services that fall into three broad categories: life passages (weddings and funerals), the sacraments/ordinances (baptism and Holy Communion), and other occasional services (healing service, foot washing with love feast, and child dedication). The focus is on rituals that (1) are widely practiced by many Protestants and (2) call for pastoral leadership. The categories I have chosen are somewhat generic in title in order to speak to a broad audience. Various terms used by others also hold merit. For example, the late James White refers to all of these particular services as types of sacraments (though he is not suggesting equal sacramental weight). Actions that are common to all humanity, such as marriage and caring for the dead, he designates as *natural sacraments*; those actions spoken of in the Acts of the Apostles and in various epistles, such as healing and penance, he labels as *apostolic sacraments*; and the primary sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper—those instituted by Jesus in the Gospels—he refers to as *gospel sacraments*.<sup>1</sup> Exactly how the categories are labeled is not critical; simply note that these categories represent a broad range of services. Precisely because these services do not constitute an exhaustive list of possibilities, the final chapter of this book demonstrates how the leader may go about designing *any type* of sacred ritual using particular and fitting sacred actions.

## Sacred Actions in the Context of Corporate Worship

The sacred actions presented in this book are not viewed as independent or (worse yet) private services that address the individual needs of a few people. Rather, the sacred actions belonging to these various services are always rendered in the public worship of a local congregation. All of the services addressed in this volume are viewed and presented as occasions of worship in the truest sense. Each service—a wedding, a funeral, a baptism, a foot washing service, or any number of other possibilities—is cast as a gathering to which the community is called to focus on and glorify God in Christ Jesus. As such, the normative principles of worship apply. There will be special themes and considerations, but the services will nevertheless be consistent with the best Christian worship practices.

Because of this perspective, I conceived of this book as a sequel to my first book, *The Worship Architect: A Blueprint for Designing Culturally Relevant and Biblically Faithful Services* (Baker Academic, 2010). In *The Worship Architect* I explain how the weekly Lord’s Day duties of the worship leader resemble the duties of an architect. Worship architects care for the general, weekly worship services of a Christian community. They function much like a building architect; however, a building architect designs a *building*, whereas a worship architect designs a *relational experience* between God and people. Yet I am struck with how the metaphor also sustains the idea of creating and leading *special* sacred rituals—those worship events that may not occur on a weekly basis. The term “rituals architect” is used in this book to refer to a worship architect working with specialized sacred actions pertaining to particular services of corporate worship. How is this metaphor developed?

First, a building architect begins with visiting the site. She or he does this to discover the parameters of the project—the exact boundaries as set by the local authorities as well as how the building will be situated on the property. The architect investigates such things as the soil content (with implications for the type of foundation the building will require); whether the terrain is hilly or level and the type of structural adaptations that may be imposed by the terrain on the building; and what surrounds the property, be it commercial buildings or housing developments, freeways, or woods.

Likewise, rituals architects must “visit the site” by noting the setting for each sacred ritual. They must consider the *whole* worship service, of which any significant ritual is only one part. Too often sacred rituals appear as a tag-on to a regular service. When this is the case, parts of the service don’t appear to belong with the other parts. Perhaps it’s time for Communion simply because it’s on the church calendar; so Communion gets inserted into the service

without thought as to how it is dynamically connected to the whole service. Baptism sometimes gets treated the same way. A rituals architect understands that, like a building, any primary ritual has surroundings to consider. What comes before and after the ritual? How does it lead from and to other worship acts? Also, as with a building site, foundations are to be considered. What are the foundational principles that undergird each ritual? What beliefs will give stability to those worship words and actions a leader invites worshipers to say and do? At the beginning of each chapter we will lay some biblical, theological, and historical foundations for each ritual. This cannot possibly be comprehensive (for this book has its own parameters!), but laying good foundations for any worship endeavor is imperative.

### ***Setting the Cornerstone***

Cornerstones no longer function architecturally as they did centuries ago. Today they are largely symbolic or cosmetic. Prior to the development of modern construction techniques, the cornerstone was critical to the structure of an edifice. In previous generations the cornerstone was laid on the foundation first. It was perfectly situated as a corner anchor; as such, it served as the reference point from which all other measurements were taken and all of the walls erected. If the cornerstone was true, the entire building would be stable, providing the occupants with security and peace. If the cornerstone was not well laid, the entire structure of the building was compromised.

Christian worship is *Christian* because of Christ. Therefore, the centerpiece of all sacred rituals is Jesus Christ. Throughout this book I will be careful to note how critical the role of Jesus Christ is in each ritual, thereby affirming the Christo-centric nature of the ritual. The glorification of Jesus Christ, enabled by the Holy Spirit, who reminds believers of the Son, is well pleasing to God. It is critical to lay the cornerstone for all sacred actions on the person and work of Christ. He is true; we therefore do well to build our worship rituals centered on him, for in him “the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God” (Eph. 2:21–22).

I recently visited the magnificent, modern Coventry Cathedral in Coventry, England, rebuilt after the original cathedral was destroyed during World War II by incendiary bombs. There, strategically positioned as a cornerstone to catch every worshiper’s eye, is a large masonry piece, perfectly set as part of the building. The cornerstone was laid to the glory of God by Queen Elizabeth the Second on March 23, 1956. It is inscribed with these words: “Other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid which is JESUS CHRIST.” The

cornerstone was not needed for structural reasons, but it certainly is valued for spiritual reasons. It reminds worshipers from all over the world that Christian worship is founded on the person and work of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

### ***Building the Structure***

When a building architect begins to erect walls on the foundation, he is really “ordering the building.” He is deciding which room comes first and which rooms lead naturally to other rooms. With the establishment of doorways in the walls, a traffic flow pattern is made possible for the occupants. The order and flow of rooms is extremely important, for it will help or hinder the purposes of the building; those engaging in activities inside will feel either natural or awkward as they use the building. Probably all of us have gone through a house and wondered, “What was the architect thinking?” when we noticed that there was no apparent logical explanation for the arrangement of rooms. In the parsonage where I lived as a young child, there were two bedrooms upstairs connected by a single doorway. The only way to my bedroom was through my brothers’ bedroom—much to their dismay. When I could, I made the grandest of entrances as I made my way through their territory into my own. They risked my walking in on them as they changed clothes; I risked getting shot at with rubber bands. We would have appreciated a more efficient traffic flow to our bedrooms. Good structure facilitates good flow.

Each significant sacred ritual will have a logical sequence to its elements. Rituals architects prayerfully think through what order of words and actions will best facilitate the purpose of the ritual (as opposed to interrupting it), all the while remembering the foundations on which the structure is built. Sometimes the order is not a matter of wrong or right, but simply a matter of good versus better. Just as we seek to place worship acts in a well-planned order for our weekly worship services, the flow of the elements needed for particular sacred actions also must be well thought through. The order isn’t rigid; be flexible where possible. But let’s resist the idea that *any* order works. I suppose that could be the case if our goal was efficiency. However, the primary sacred rituals of the church are not a matter of pragmatics but of profoundness—the opportunity to experience holy moments as God works through the Spirit in the community. The order of events will definitely play a role in achieving this or hindering it.

### ***Installing Doors and Windows***

After the structure is in place, the architect installs windows, which let in light, allowing occupants to see. Doors are also set in place to help people

move through the facility, encountering others or performing their duties. Doors and windows facilitate vision and relationship.

The rituals architect is interested in discovering means by which worshippers can encounter God and one another through *experiencing* primary sacred actions. The architect considers which particular elements will shed light on the ritual and its meaning and which elements will help worshippers “see” God and experience his presence. We want to expand our vision of and relationship with God and others. For each of the rituals explored in this book, we examine various types of prayers and songs that will aid worshippers in encountering God as the service unfolds. We explore how various symbols and the Christian year can shed light on the ritual as well. These are thought of as doors and windows that help us encounter God in the ritual. They are means of spiritual illumination. This aspect of designing church rituals is a very important one, for you can have a solid order of service in mind, but without making use of appropriate and effective prayers, songs, symbols, and seasons, the encounter is limited; participants remain somewhat in the dark.

### ***Serving as Hospitable Host***

Last, an architect’s job is not finished until the building serves its purpose. If you have ever been to the dedication of a new building, you might have seen the architect (as head of the project) participating as a vital part of the ceremony. An architect’s work is not done until people inhabit the facility and are engaged in relationships appropriate to the purpose of the building.

A most crucial aspect of being a rituals architect is that of serving as host to the community as it enters into sacred actions. As one who presides, you will be the channel between God and people, helping to connect them to God and one another as they open themselves to profound mysteries that await them. A rituals architect’s work is not done until she or he effectively serves the community as host for an event. Just as when you entertain guests in your home for dinner, your actions as host (your demeanor, gestures of hospitality, conversational words, and welcoming tone) are critical to enabling others to fully engage in the event. Likewise, this book will address the important role of one who presides over each of these sacred rituals. There are certain words, gestures, and demeanors that nuance each ritual, allowing leaders to function as especially gracious hosts. Frankly, there are effective and ineffective ways to lead each ritual. Implementing the suggestions for leading effectively will take practice, but in time hosts can become very comfortable in playing the role.

Using the architect metaphor, then, each chapter that addresses a specific ritual will include these sections: Laying the Foundations (biblical, historical, and theological considerations); Building the Structure (designing the order of service, with one or more sample services included); Installing Doors and Windows (employing songs, Scriptures, prayers, symbols, and the Christian year); Serving as Hospitable Host (the duties and attributes of the effective leader); Key Terms (important vocabulary specific to each ritual); and To Learn More (suggested readings for further study). (Chapters may include other sections as well.)

Also, in order to enable group study, each chapter begins with “Explore” (questions to initiate reflection before reading the chapter) and ends with “Engage” (practical suggestions for immediate application of the content).

## What the Reader Can Expect

This book is a guide to effective leadership in the sacred actions of Christian worship. It will invite the reader to participate through reflection on and the performance of certain standard rituals that have developed over time and have found accepted practice in their general features while remaining adaptable to various denominational distinctives. I have intended to voice the content in broadly Protestant terms. While I write out of the greater Wesleyan tradition that I claim, I am sincere in my attempt to welcome and speak to other traditions within the body of Christ. I trust you will see that attempt reflected throughout the book. I am confident that each reader will be able to nuance the principles and practices suggested to suit his or her own denominational reference points. I make no attempt to be all things to all people. Still, there is much common ground to be enjoyed and celebrated.

Chapter 1 will introduce the reader to the vocabulary of sacred actions by defining some terms used throughout the book—terms such as “ritual,” “rite,” “liturgy,” “rubric,” “sacrament,” and “ordinance.” The reader will note that throughout the book I use the terms “sacred actions” and “rituals” interchangeably, a practice reminiscent of the influence of my mentor, the late Robert E. Webber. Chapter 1 will then set forth five foundational principles of all Christian sacred action (a nonexhaustive list). These fundamental aspects assert that sacred actions are corporate, formational, symbolic, Christo-centric, and outwardly focused in nature.

Chapters 2 and 3 present services related to life passages: the Christian wedding and the Christian funeral.

Chapters 4 and 5, the heart of the book, discuss services related to the sacraments/ordinances: baptism and the Lord’s Table.

Chapters 6, 7, and 8 examine services related to other occasions: healing, foot washing with love feast, and child dedications. (Not only are child dedications, most common within the so-called Free Church tradition,<sup>2</sup> explained, but alternative approaches are also suggested, which may commend this ritual to wider consideration.)

Chapter 9 is a unique feature of the book. It answers the question, How does the leader go about designing other types of sacred actions? This chapter includes five dimensions of sacred ritual for corporate worship, additional considerations, the general order of sacred actions, particular features of dedications, and ten basic steps in designing sacred actions for corporate worship.

If this volume enriches your experience and understanding of the various sacred actions employed in your future or present congregation, my prayers will have been answered. May the Holy Spirit, poured out at Pentecost, empower every act of worship placed in service to the glory of God and for the sake of the world.

Constance M. Cherry  
Pentecost Sunday, 2012



# 1

## Foundations for Sacred Actions

Ryan and Jason landed jobs in the same town after graduation. They knew each other in college but had never hung out in the same circle of friends. Once they realized that they were going to be living in the same town, and given the high cost of rent, they decided to become housemates in order to share expenses. They met at a local coffee shop one Friday night to talk over the details. After they discussed the housing arrangements, they turned to how things would work in the mornings; after all, they would leave for work around the same time. “I have my own routine in the morning,” Ryan said. “When the alarm goes off and my feet hit the floor, I do the same things, the same way, in the same order every morning. It’s efficient. I make some coffee, let the dog out, take a shower, sip my first cup of coffee, brush my teeth, shave (drink coffee), let the dog in, get dressed (drink more coffee), eat some cereal, fill my travel mug with the last of the coffee, and start the car.”

“Do you ever vary the routine?” Jason asked.

“Rarely,” Ryan replied. “There’s no reason to change it, really; it gets me where I’m going just fine. Besides, I don’t have to think about it; I just *do* it!” He paused. “So, how does your morning go?”

“Well, I hit the snooze bar, get up eventually, run to the shower, dress, and dash out the door. I grab breakfast at a drive-through.”

Both agreed that they wouldn’t be in each other’s way and that things should work out just fine—as long as somebody let the dog out.

A regular morning routine is a kind of *ritual*. It consists of performing the necessary tasks in a certain sequence to prepare us for the day. We often maintain the same routine because it's just plain efficient. We probably all have our morning ritual. What's yours?

When we think about the sacred actions of Christian worship, we are thinking of sacred rituals performed in the context of the church; and while they are ordered actions, they are far from routine. The rituals of Christianity performed in public worship are much more than things we do without having to think about it. The sacred rituals of Christian worship are about relationship. They are about a chosen people on a journey with the triune God. The sacred actions that mark this journey *signify the type of relationship* we have with God and others; and they also *provide opportunities for ever-increasing depth in this holy relationship*. Rituals provide us the ways and means to express the relationship between God and God's people. Keep the following two features in mind as you proceed through this book:

- Rituals signify the believer's relationship with God.
- Rituals aid in deepening this relationship.

Every relationship transpires in stages; it's like a journey taking place over time. The primary sacred rituals of the Christian faith, that have been practiced by the church for millennia, provide markers for the stages of our journey with God. Some rituals have been practiced by believers since the time of Christ and are understood to "belong to the *esse* of the church"; that is, they are "essential practices . . . that constitute the church as church."<sup>1</sup> The proclamation of the Word and participation in the sacraments/ordinances are two examples of essential practices. Other rituals have been claimed by the church over time because, while they may not constitute the church in the same way, they are, nevertheless, to the great benefit of the church. These rituals are believed to be *bene esse*,<sup>2</sup> practices that are beneficial for the church. Many of the time-honored church rituals, such as services of healing, funerals, ordination, and weddings, may be considered in this category. So one way of thinking about the rituals of corporate Christian worship is to consider them as essential or highly beneficial. These ecclesial practices are related in that out of the church's commitment to Word and sacraments (both primary means for relationship with God) flows the context for the other more occasional practices.

The sacred actions that serve as markers on our journey with God can be categorized in other ways too. Some relate to common life passages, while others do not. For instance, weddings and funerals represent significant transitions

from one way of life to another—a time when “life before” is very different than “life after.” Some rituals relate to personal spiritual life passages, such as conversion, baptism, and confirmation. These occasions also represent lifestyles that are very different before and after, as individuals take on Christ and pursue life as citizens of the kingdom of God.<sup>3</sup> Some rituals are celebrated frequently, for instance the Table of the Lord; others are more occasional and need-specific, such as a healing rite. So while there are many types of rituals that Christians practice, each serves as a marker of some sort, as God’s people progress on their faith journey, making pilgrimage in stages.

In this book we will explore several different types of sacred actions used in corporate worship settings. While they will vary in purpose and approach, you will discover how much they have in common. This chapter will examine some significant aspects all rituals share. These important commonalities form the biblical, theological, historical, cultural, pastoral, and missiological foundations for sacred ritual.

But first, every discipline has its own terminology, and ritual studies is no different. This chapter begins by explaining some basic and important terms so that as we learn about sacred actions central to Christian faith, we will have command of the vocabulary related to our craft as rituals architects. Many more vocabulary words that pertain to specific rituals are explained in succeeding chapters.

## **The Vocabulary of Sacred Ritual**

As we get started, it is possible that you may not have heard of some of the words defined below; or if you have, perhaps you have held a very different opinion of their meaning. It’s even possible that you have a negative bias about one or more of these words. If so, simply remember that we are venturing into vocabulary that has been accepted by church leaders throughout the centuries in many places and in many Christian traditions. If you are one who has had little or no acclimation to such terminology, simply try to take each meaning at face value. Many fine liturgical dictionaries and glossaries are available to offer helpful definitions as well; I encourage you to examine several of these sources to further round out your understanding of each concept. In doing so you will probably find that the words are nuanced a little differently depending upon the source. That’s okay. It usually takes several good definitions to strike at the heart of the meaning of these words.

Here are a few key terms, then, that will be used repeatedly throughout the book as we become rituals architects. For each one, you will find a very

simple definition; I have tried to keep them as succinct and as basic as possible. Each definition will be followed by some important things to note about the term.

### **Ritual**

An authoritative *event*, sanctioned by the church, which uses formalized actions, words, gestures, and symbols that are repeated to enable some particular aspect of the corporate worship of God.<sup>4</sup>

### **Things to Note**

#### *ALL WORSHIPING COMMUNITIES EMPLOY RITUALS*

Every worshiping community employs rituals to enable their worship, regardless of their history or tradition. Even those worshipers who are rooted in a very free and spontaneous tradition use actions, words, and gestures that are repeated in order to facilitate their experience of worship. Repeated actions, words, and gestures used by any community to enable some aspect of the worship of God are considered rituals. The question will not be *whether* we have or use rituals but the *degree to which* we reflect on and employ the rituals that we use in worship so that they glorify God and edify believers.

#### *THEY'RE OLDER THAN YOU THINK*

Worship rituals are not practices that originated over the past several hundred years of Western church history. Though every religion known to humankind employs ritual, our use of ritual is rooted in the Judeo-Christian practices we claim in the Old and New Testaments. Even a cursory reading of the Old Testament yields an astounding number of examples of worship rituals ordered by God to maintain the relationship between Israel and Yahweh. These include such things as circumcision, purification rites, entrance rites to the temple, sacrifices, offerings, and seasonal observances. Carefully constructed rituals, given by God, were the central features of Jewish worship. Many of these do not carry forward to the New Testament;<sup>5</sup> yet it is clear from the apostles' writings that while many rituals changed or were no longer needed, the early church nevertheless was not "rituals free." There too we find repeated actions and words that became necessary for Christian worship from God's point of view. This is seen, for instance, in the commands surrounding the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:17–34),<sup>6</sup> the act of corporate prayer (see 1 Tim. 2:1–4), the giving of offerings for those in need (see 1 Cor. 16:1–4), and so on. The new community was expected to repeat these rituals to enable worship, though the manner varied from place to place. As various rituals developed

and were formalized, certain features became normative and were passed on for widespread use.

#### *RITUALS HAVE SPECIAL FEATURES*

Rituals commonly share certain important features; I will highlight three. First, sacred rituals have significance—they are not “just actions and words.” Worship rituals employ actions, words, gestures, and symbols in such a way that they express a deeper meaning than what is evident on the surface. Something profound is being experienced in these agents of communication, even if one holds a nonsacramental view of sacred actions. I was raised in a tradition that referred to baptism and the Lord’s Supper as ordinances. (“Sacrament” and “ordinance” will be explained soon—hold on!) While we did not conceive of these actions as conveying any divine activity, even as a child I can remember experiencing a profound sense of the presence of Christ as I knelt at a Communion rail with other believers to receive bread and juice. For me those occasions were not void of God’s activity in my young heart; they were extremely significant in advancing my spiritual journey. Regardless of your view of God’s role in rituals practiced by the church, never make the mistake of underestimating the power of God-ordained rituals to communicate a spiritual truth and grace well beyond the words and actions themselves.

Second, rituals bear repetition—their actions, words, gestures, and symbols are repeated from time to time and place to place. That is one of the things that makes them rituals. If you’ve ever attended a Major League baseball game, perhaps you have noticed the sports rituals that surround the event—and have for well over a century. The same routine manifests itself from place to place: the players do warm-ups, the umpire yells “play ball,” the organ background music pumps up the crowd, the announcer uses his familiar phrases, the seventh-inning stretch allows for the singing of “Take Me Out to the Ball Game,” some hot dogs are eaten, and much more. These very actions and words together constitute what it means to *experience* baseball the good old American way. Baseball in America is not just a routine—it’s an experience! It has its rituals, and they bear repeating; for each time people attend a game, they desire to engage in the same routine that helps them to participate in the event in all its fullness.

Actions, words, gestures, and symbols, when repeated over time in the context of Christian worship, likewise provide a means for participating in a holy event in all its fullness. The experience becomes recognizable through the very repetition of the rituals from time to time and place to place. It is in the repetition that the ritual becomes recognizable precisely as the event that it is, giving shape and character to the experience which, in turn, gives it its meaning.

A third feature of ritual is that it becomes formalized over time. Some folks have an aversion to the word “formalized.” All that is meant here is that there has become a normative way of carrying out most sacred actions among Christians—for good reason. Certain ways of doing things have earned the church’s seal of approval not because the rituals police are on patrol, but because there is typically a good and rich and full way of engaging in the actions that reflect biblical and theological soundness. In some cases, certain aspects of a ritual are formalized because of a direct command from Scripture. A good example of this is the use of particularly chosen words that Paul used at the Lord’s Supper and, by implication, commends to the next generation of believers to use as well. These very words, Paul indicates, were passed on to him from the Lord: “The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me’” (1 Cor. 11:23–24). These words of institution, used almost universally at the Lord’s Table, are an instance of formalized liturgy. It’s the same principle at work when we baptize using the Trinitarian formula of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19). The singing of hymns during a foot washing service, the use of oil during healing services, the exchange of rings during a wedding ceremony, the eulogy during a funeral—all of these are instances of formalized liturgy. The exact actions, words, gestures, symbols, and orders of service have always varied according to context, of course. Yet there is amazingly widespread continuity in the general practice of sacred rituals because, over time, the church has viewed certain things as necessary or helpful to the ritual for effectiveness and for authenticity to scriptural expectations.

### **Rite**

The particular combination of actions, words, gestures, and symbols that constitute the order and content for a designated ritual.<sup>7</sup>

### **Things to Note**

The word “rite” is used in a variety of ways, which can get confusing. It can refer to the combination of actions, words, gestures, and symbols that relate to *a particular aspect of a worship service*. For instance, sometimes we refer to Gathering rites—those worship acts that are employed at the beginning of a service to help worshipers enter properly into God’s presence as a community. (Remember, every church has Gathering rites, whether they call them that or not.) Other times the word “rite” refers to the combined worship elements of *a particular sacred ritual*. For instance, a baptismal rite consists

of the actions, words, gestures, and symbols employed by a community to carry out Christ's command to baptize disciples of all nations.

Either way, rites are primarily the content choices and ordering of those words and actions considered to be important for experiencing the ritual event at hand. A rite creates a "rituals journey"; it forms a pathway for taking the community from point A to point B in a sensible way so that the relationship between God and people is deepened as they progress through the various worship acts related to the ritual. Rites can be contemporary or traditional in style (or any other type of stylistic expression); they may be formally or informally led. Simply think of rites as the plan you will follow to convey the ritual event.

### ***Liturgy***

The complete collection of actions, words, gestures, and symbols that facilitates the prayerful worship and full participation of all worshipers in the context of corporate worship.

#### **Things to Note**

The English word "liturgy" is from the Greek word *leitourgia*, translated as "the work of the people." In its broadest sense, "liturgy" refers to the sum total of worship acts that the people do in the course of any given worship service. In its original context in ancient Greece, *leitourgia* had to do with service in municipalities, the public works of civic employees as they served the community. Service is the key to understanding the word's original Greek use. In fact, it can be translated as "service" and is, of course, why we refer to a worship event as a "worship service." *Leitourgia* is a favored term in the New Testament, used numerous times to refer to the various worship acts rendered by persons as they serve God in public worship.

Liturgy is often identified with the content of worship. However, it is more than that. Liturgy is active—participatory. It refers to all that is entailed as the people offer themselves to God through sacred texts and actions. It includes not only what is verbalized but also what is unspoken—gestures, movements, signs, symbols, and more. Liturgy focuses on "participatory knowledge" rather than "propositional knowledge."<sup>8</sup> *Leitourgia* suggests that all worshipers should be highly invested in serving God through the corporate acts of the liturgy.

Like the word "rite," the word "liturgy" can refer to either a part of a service (for example, the Liturgy of the Word, the Liturgy of Baptism) or the entire worship service (the Divine Liturgy).<sup>9</sup> It is important to realize that the

whole liturgy is, in itself, prayer. While there are prayers *in* worship, *all* of what we do in the holy occupation of corporate worship should be viewed as prayer—God communicating to worshipers, and worshipers communicating to God. Because sacred rituals are so intricately dependent on the use of the body, the early church father Tertullian emphasized that sacramental liturgy is inescapably a prayer of the body.<sup>10</sup> Worshipers engage their bodies through gestures and actions in order to “do” the ritual. The body both shows (portrays) and tells (announces) the central truths of the gospel represented in the ritual. Sometimes the most profoundly beautiful aspect of sacred ritual is the embodiment of the truth expressed in the ritual as prayer.

By now you may be thinking that there is overlap in the definitions of the three terms presented thus far: ritual, rite, and liturgy. You’re right. It’s sort of difficult to define one without resorting to the use of one of the other terms. In fact, you will notice this very problem when you study the words using authoritative sources. At times some of them are interchanged.<sup>11</sup> That’s okay; the words do intersect. There is no reason to force differentiations between them that do not exist. Nevertheless, I would like to emphasize a central feature of each of these terms to help us as we make our way through the seven sacred actions explained in the following chapters.

Ritual is an *event*. We will think of rituals primarily as events in which we participate.

Example: Baptism is a ritual. (Baptism is an event.)

Rite is the intentional *content and order* of the event.

Example: A baptism ritual uses a particular set of worship elements in a sensible order that constitute a baptism (i.e., the baptismal rite).

Liturgy is the corporate words and actions that provide for the *prayerful participation* of worshipers.

Example: The baptismal liturgy contains all of the appropriate actions, words, gestures, and symbols for all worshipers to prayerfully participate in the baptismal service (the baptismal liturgy).

I hope to “lean into” these meanings of the terms as we proceed through the chapters of this book. There will always be some overlap of definitions, but this need not frustrate us. As rituals architects, we must understand how these words are used in certain contexts and also how they can shed light on our holy duties as we seek to lead God’s people in most sacred moments.

## **Rubric**

Instructions for leading and participating in a ritual.

### **Things to Note**

Guidance for those leading sacred rituals is very important, for two reasons. First, there are sometimes very specific things to say and do that are considered necessary for the ritual to truly function as the ritual that is intended. For example, a rubric for a baptismal service will tell the minister how and when to use the symbol of water in the baptismal rite (appropriate to your tradition), as well as what words to say and when (for example, “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”). The rituals instituted by Christ and his church are *sacred* rituals. As such, it is very important that the integrity of each ritual is maintained. This does not mean that all Christians will perform the rituals in exactly the same way. But rubrics make sure we are performing the ritual well, biblically, theologically, and pastorally.

Second, because Christian rituals hold the potential for a congregation to experience profound moments of deep spiritual meaning, the way leaders approach each ritual really matters. Rubrics provide helpful things to note to enrich the potential experience of the ritual event. Good leaders avail themselves of appropriate rubrics as a way of minimizing attention on themselves, drawing the attention instead to the God-moments of the ritual.

Rubrics, of course, are used in any number of events for good reason. Boy Scout leaders are provided rubrics for leading the Pledge of Allegiance. Written instructions advise the leader first to invite the audience to stand, then to turn and face the flag, place his right hand over his heart, begin with a strong voice, and lead at an appropriate pace. These are things expected of anyone leading the Pledge of Allegiance in order to fulfill the demands of the ritual.

Rubrics appear as written instructions found within denominational worship manuals or minister’s handbooks.<sup>12</sup> Some rubrics are very detailed; others are less so. You will most often see rubrics appearing in red print. (The word “rubric” is derived from the Latin word *ruber*, for “red.”) Some rubrics are indicated as *prescriptive* (required of leaders in order to fulfill the demands of the ritual from the church’s point of view), while others are *descriptive* only (suggested for effective leadership). One can typically discern between prescriptive and descriptive by the use of the terms “shall” (prescriptive) or “may” (descriptive).

Rubrics should not be viewed as hard-and-fast rules to follow; often it’s not a matter of right or wrong. Rather, rubrics are helpful guides that, if followed, coach the leader in performing the sacred action properly and pastorally from

one's ecclesial point of view (in some cases authorized by one's denomination). Rubrics, then, are specific directions that help a leader preserve the integrity of the ritual and lead it effectively in the community.

## **Sacrament**

A sacred ritual, instituted and commanded by Christ to be practiced by all believers of all times and places, which serves as a means of grace.

### **Things to Note**

#### *TWO SACRAMENTS/ORDINANCES*

Protestants almost universally embrace two rituals that are called either “sacraments” or “ordinances.”<sup>13</sup> These two are baptism and the Lord’s Supper.<sup>14</sup> Some Christian groups have determined that other rituals also qualify as sacraments. Many Anabaptist traditions designate three ordinances by including feet washing. Roman Catholics designate seven sacraments: baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, penance, anointing of the sick, holy orders, and matrimony. Eastern Orthodox churches likewise embrace the same seven sacraments (though confirmation is referred to as “chrismation,” due to the anointing with oil, “chrism,” in the ritual).<sup>15</sup>

However, following the Reformation of the early sixteenth century, Protestant groups largely endorsed the two sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. They were identified as such because both were (1) mandated by Christ for his followers, (2) to be practiced by all believers for all time, and (3) the only two actions that joined promise and visible sign; that is, both baptism and the Lord’s Supper are based on a promise of God that cannot be separated from a visible sign that enacts the promise. As James White explains, “Sacraments are promises connected to visible signs, and those promises are contained in scripture.”<sup>16</sup> Baptismal promises are contained in Scripture; for example, “The one who believes and is baptized will be saved” (Mark 16:16) and “This is my body . . . this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:26, 28). It is important to note that receiving the promise is not simply intellectual but includes “a deep sense of assurance that the sacrament actually conveys the promise that accompanies it.”<sup>17</sup> This last dimension was most prominent in Martin Luther’s theology; in fact, it was central to official Lutheran teaching.<sup>18</sup> John Calvin nuanced this same truth differently, choosing to view the sacraments as seals of God’s promises.<sup>19</sup> For Calvin, the signs were extremely important, for they effected what they signified. The Church of England articulated its view in its Articles of Religion: “Sacraments ordained of Christ be not only badges or

tokens of Christian men's profession, but rather they be certain sure witnesses, and effectual signs of grace, and God's good will toward us, by the which he doth work invisibly in us, and doth not only quicken, but also strengthen and confirm our Faith in him."<sup>20</sup> As you can see, most of the Reformers, in some measure, embraced the view that a sacrament is "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace."<sup>21</sup>

For reasons addressed above, then, most Protestants have designated baptism and the Lord's Supper as the only true sacraments/ordinances to be practiced by the church. They are sometimes referred to as "dominical actions"—those actions ordered by Christ for his followers to practice. ("Ecclesial actions" refers to those sacred actions that are recommended and valued by virtue of common historical practice but are not explicitly commanded by Jesus.)

#### ROOTS OF THE WORD

Our English word "sacrament" comes from the Latin word *sacramentum*, which means "sacred pledge."<sup>22</sup> The term was used in ancient Rome to refer to a military oath of allegiance that a soldier took in pledge to his commanding officer—an oath not to desert his place of duty. The first part of the word comes from *sacer*, and refers to that which is sacred, set apart, consecrated, made holy in contradistinction to the profane or the secular. When we participate in the sacraments, we are engaged with sacred entities, tangible items (water, bread, wine) that have been set apart (consecrated) for holy use. By God's grace, what was common is now made uncommon to serve God's purposes. And all this is understood to be in the context of a sacred pledge—a covenant, if you will. In baptism we receive God's pledge of cleansing from sin and salvation; we pledge ourselves to repentance and to being faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, serving him as Lord. At the Table, Christ reminds us of his ongoing pledge to us of salvation from sin, of victory over evil, and his promise to return; we then renew our pledge to follow him as his true disciples and give ourselves anew in service to the kingdom of God. A mutual, sacred pledge transpires at the sacraments. Some traditions refer to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper as a mystery. This reference comes from the Greek word *mystērion*, a word Paul uses often in his New Testament letters. Indeed, how great a mystery God's love in Jesus Christ truly is, recalled in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Yet when we use the word "sacrament," caution is in order. We must not be too quick to cast all traditions that use the word "sacrament" into the same pile. While many Protestants favor the term "sacrament" when referring to baptism and the Lord's Supper, a broad range of meanings is intended, depending on the official doctrinal perspective of one's denomination. The

degree of supernatural significance that is understood to be at play varies widely. Some would take the “softer” sacramental view: “By faith we believe that God is somehow supernaturally at work in the event, though we may not know exactly how.” Others would affirm a more assertive view: “We believe that God is supernaturally at work performing eternal salvation in and through the ritual.” There are also a number of views that appear between these two extremes, much like a continuum.

As you can see, there’s quite a variance of understanding among those who use the term “sacrament.” They may agree on the term but disagree on the meaning of the actual ritual event. Those who use the term “sacrament” will agree, however, that divine activity is at work in and through baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and that the Holy Spirit is expected to empower believers in their discipleship and spiritual formation (seen or unseen, recognized or not) when they sincerely participate in these events by faith. This position considers the sacraments to be “means of grace.” They are a means, a way in which believers receive the gift of God’s sustaining grace; they serve as a God-appointed avenue through which God meets us and changes us for God’s glory.

Again, caution is in order. First, the phrase “means of grace” has a range of meanings, depending upon where you find yourself on this sacramental continuum. The majority of traditions that use the phrase are not referring to a means for eternal salvation apart from individual faith. Second, remember that grace is a multifaceted word, as there are several dimensions to grace. John Wesley noted four dimensions of grace: prevenient grace, justifying grace, sanctifying grace, and perfecting grace. Wesley said these episodes of grace were a way to explain the several movements of God’s grace in our journey; in each of these movements God comes to us to impart that which we cannot provide for ourselves. We are not talking about more grace or less grace here; grace is grace. It’s not about an amount of grace. Those who use the phrase “means of grace” are simply saying that the sacraments are God’s venue for God to be at work calling us, saving us, sanctifying us, and perfecting us for God’s glory and for the sake of God’s kingdom.

In summary, the sacramental view of baptism and the Lord’s Supper can be articulated this way: “When God speaks, God shows; and when God shows, God gives.”<sup>23</sup>

### **Ordinance**

A purely symbolic sacred ritual, instituted and commanded by Christ to be practiced by all believers of all times and places, which does not serve as a means of grace.

**Things to Note**

Christians who favor the term “ordinance” practice the same two rituals instituted by Jesus—baptism and the Lord’s Supper—but they view the events very differently from Christians who hold a sacramental view. Ordinance folks take a highly symbolic view and believe that these events are *only* symbolic, that the events do not provide a means of grace,<sup>24</sup> while sacramental folks value the symbols related to the rituals of baptism and the Lord’s Supper but understand the event to be more than symbolic. Ordinance folks perform the ordinances because they are ordained by God in Scripture through the commands of Jesus. Ordinance people say, “We baptize because Jesus said to; we take the Lord’s Supper because Jesus said to. In so doing we use the symbols associated with the biblical accounts of these events, but we do not expect God to be at work supernaturally. We are simply obeying our Lord by doing what he told us to do concerning these two occasions.”

At the risk of oversimplification, here is a very simple (nonexhaustive) comparison of the sacramental view and ordinance view as they pertain to baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

Sacramental View	Ordinance View
Sacraments are a means of grace.	Ordinances are not a means of grace.
Sacraments are observed because Jesus told us to do so <i>and</i> we need God’s ongoing and renewing grace.	Ordinances are observed because Jesus told us to do so.
The emphasis is on God’s activity.	The emphasis is on the participant’s activity.
The sacraments are more than symbolic.	The ordinances are purely symbolic in nature.
The Lord’s Supper tends to be celebrated more frequently because it is a means of grace.	The Lord’s Supper tends to be celebrated less frequently because it is not a means of grace.

Both positions are time-honored Christian views. This is one of those areas where we extend Christian charity, whether believers use the term “sacrament” or “ordinance.” There are many things that divide us; this need not be one of them. Deeply spiritual people have used either of these two terms over the centuries, having simply arrived at a different viewpoint as a result of their interpretation of Scripture. In this book, especially as we get into the chapters on the Lord’s Supper and baptism, I will approach the matter from the standpoint of sacrament, because that is the view I hold as a pastor and teacher and also because it is the position of my denomination and the institution in which I teach. Nevertheless, I honor my “ordinance” sisters and brothers and will continue to speak to their view also, as you will see.

**Officiate**

To perform a religious ceremony by virtue of office.

**Things to Note**

Most denominations have a stated position on exactly who may officiate at various church rituals. It may be the clergy, an elder, or a layperson, depending on the event and the denomination's polity. If someone officiates at a ritual, they do so by virtue of their ecclesial office. A pastor generally officiates at a wedding or a funeral and is most often required for baptism and the Lord's Supper. If you are a pastor-to-be, get comfortable with the funeral director's phone call with the invitation, "Will you officiate at your parishioner's funeral?"

**Preside**

To direct proceedings by virtue of exercising control over the event.

**Things to Note**

If you run into the word "president" in a rituals context, it is not referring to someone holding political or civic office; it simply means "the one who presides" at the ritual event. He or she is the one who controls what happens. There is no real difference between the meaning of the terms "preside" and "officiate"; both are used extensively in pastoral literature. For whatever reason, it is more common to find the word "officiate" in relation to leading weddings and funerals and "preside" when referring to the sacraments of the Lord's Supper and baptism.<sup>25</sup>

We have begun with exploring some basic terms that are important for the understanding of sacred rituals. It's important to learn these long-standing terms first, for they form the basic vocabulary of the rituals architect. Now let us turn to some foundational principles that will undergird our services of sacred actions.

**The Corporate Nature of Sacred Rituals**

Individualism has become a problem in modern Western worship. While it is true that God relates to individual persons and that the invitation to salvation and Christian discipleship is extended to individuals with the expectation of a personal response to the triune God, we are called to live out our faith in community. We are not isolated believers seeking to follow God on our own; rather, we are members of the body of Christ, operating within a fellowship

of Christ-followers who are committed to living as residents of the kingdom of God.

All primary church rituals are to be offered within the context of corporate worship,<sup>26</sup> for it is in the communal worship setting where we experience the presence of the living Lord in a most unique way. In addition, we are on life's journey together; as a collective body we must gather ourselves, at God's invitation, to engage in the wondrous work of each sacred action. It is the body of Christ that must form the context for celebrating the significant occasions of spiritual pilgrimage and life passages.

Corporate worship is the primary avenue God uses to relate to any Christian community.<sup>27</sup> When faithful followers are gathered weekly for worship, they are holding a corporate conversation with God in Christ as empowered by the Holy Spirit. God is understood to be present, through Christ, among the believers who come together to hear from God and to offer themselves in love and service in response. Worshiping in community is a core value described in both the Old and New Testaments. In the Scriptures we read of dozens of occasions when God met with people of faith to receive their worship and to impart God's own self in return. The priority afforded in Scripture to weekly community gatherings of worship is unmistakable. It is through corporate worship that the God-human relationship is fostered and secured.

But there is more. Corporate worship is not only the scriptural means through which God and community relate; the meeting itself helps to form our corporate identity as the people of God. The truth is that we are shaped by our regular meeting with one another in God's presence. Like a biological family, we take on values, beliefs, language, and priorities simply by participation in the events of the family. Just when you think you are not your father or mother, you discover how very much like them you really are; we *are* our parents' children. Much of whom each of us has become has been *caught* rather than taught. Likewise, when we regularly place ourselves under the influence of the liturgy of our church, we will find ourselves becoming transformed by that which we hear, speak, think, taste, feel, and imagine. The ancient maxim *lex orandi, lex credendi* (as we pray, so we believe) is widely embraced to be true:<sup>28</sup> we pray (engage in the whole liturgy) only to find that we come to believe that which we are speaking and doing through worship. Certainly it is a two-way street; our theological understanding should influence the way we worship as well. In that sense, *lex orandi, lex credendi* is reciprocal. Nevertheless, this basic premise we find to be true: we worship in faith first, and then find ourselves shaped by that to which we have surrendered. That is why it is so very important to have young children participating regularly in the liturgy. In doing so we are discipling them in the faith; we are forming their

Christian worldview. Worship in community is, therefore, a profound arena for participating in the primary sacred rituals of the church, for in corporate worship we encounter the presence of the risen Lord and are positioning ourselves to be shaped by that very encounter.

It is imperative, then, that the liturgies for church rituals are communal in nature. Much care must be given to involve the worshipping community at every possible opportunity. It is not appropriate for the liturgy to take place between the pastor and one or two persons alone, with the congregation merely looking on. While we may be witnessing an individual person making a life passage (a funeral) or spiritual pilgrimage (a baptism), the person is understood to be undertaking this journey from, through, or into the community of faith. It is the unison voice of the community that must become the dominant voice of the ritual. Liturgical theologian Nathan Mitchell argues that “the gathered assembly is the primary *subject* (agent) of liturgical action and is not only the ‘object’ or passive recipient of ministry from the ordained.”<sup>29</sup> Mitchell is not dismissing the agency of the Holy Spirit at work in liturgical action when he refers to the assembly as the primary subject; rather, he is simply emphasizing the critical role the community plays in corporate worship. The danger of individualism in worship is that the clergy and one or two “recipients” of liturgical action form a passive approach to church rituals, when instead it is the assembly *together*—the congregants, clergy, and particular participants in the ritual (a wedding couple, a youth to be baptized)—that is fully engaged throughout. That is why, for instance, *corporate* pledges are made in most rituals. When a congregation states their intent to pray for a newly baptized believer or pledge their support of the bride and groom, when it proclaims a creed of the church, or when worshipers sing a blessing, the ritual is centered in community. Remember that sacred rituals are about relationship—not just individual worshipers’ relationships with God but also our relationship with one another before God. With the communal nature of sacred rituals in mind, we discover that rituals are both vertical *and* horizontal—they are directed to God and one another. Each of the primary sacred rituals of our Christian faith is intended to be celebrated publicly, with one’s sisters and brothers of faith forming the arena for the ritual and serving as energetic participants throughout. There is little room for individual piety when it comes to the rituals of the church.

## The Formational Nature of Sacred Rituals

We have just noted how sacred rituals shape us as we present ourselves to God in worship. And so, in a way, *lex orandi, lex credendi* happens somewhat informally.<sup>30</sup>

This formational aspect of the liturgy just “happens” over time as the sincere worshiper participates fully in communal worship. That true worship fosters faith through our full participation in the liturgy cannot be underestimated. At the same time, rituals offer us an opportunity for intentional spiritual formation.

The term “spiritual formation” is used in different ways today.<sup>31</sup> I am using the term to refer to our growth in Christlikeness, which comes when we intentionally cooperate with God for our transformation, especially through the ongoing use of the spiritual disciplines. M. Robert Mulholland offers a helpful definition: “Spiritual formation is the process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others.”<sup>32</sup> The key words provide much insight. First, spiritual formation is always a *process*. There is no such thing as instantaneous spiritual formation. It happens over a long period of time—a lifetime, in fact. Second, spiritual formation is a process of *being conformed*. This suggests that surrender is involved. While our contemporary culture shouts, “*Be yourself*,” God’s Spirit is calling, “*Surrender yourself*.” The point of spiritual formation is to become what God has in mind and to resist what we have in mind. Third, spiritual formation has only one goal: growth in Christlikeness. Spiritual formation is not about *knowing* more or *doing* more; it is about *being* more—more like Jesus. The fourth part of the definition is incredibly significant: our pursuit of Christlikeness is *for the sake of others*. We often have the mistaken idea that we are to become like Jesus so that we can be more spiritual people. Not really. Any progress in Christlikeness has a more important goal, that of benefiting others in their perception and experience of the triune God. The more we are like Christ, the greater the chances that others will comprehend who God is and experience aspects of his love.

This all raises the question, How does spiritual formation happen? One of the primary means through which we are formed is the practice of time-honored spiritual disciplines. Spiritual disciplines are those means that believers employ to place themselves before God in order for God to change them according to his will. They are intentional things we do (disciplines of engagement),<sup>33</sup> or cease to do (disciplines of abstinence),<sup>34</sup> in order to open ourselves to God for intervention—for allowing God’s Spirit to transform our ungodly nature into God’s holy nature. Spiritual disciplines are useful avenues that help facilitate the sanctification of the believer.<sup>35</sup> It is in and through the disciplines that we cooperate with God in our transformation. We have a part (offering ourselves to God by engaging with the disciplines), and God has a part (transforming us in the process). Simon Chan states it well:

In other words, we do the work, and yet it is ultimately the work of grace, something freely given to us, something that we could only receive as a gift. . . .

We cannot predetermine the outcome of our practices no matter how correctly they are carried out. For ultimately it is grace that forms us and not practices per se, and yet it forms us not apart from practice.<sup>36</sup>

Worship is a spiritual discipline.<sup>37</sup> As we meet to offer worship to God regularly, sincerely, and intentionally, we create an opportunity for God to meet us and change us for his glory. Often the changes that take place in us as a result of true worship are unexpected, perhaps even unseen at first; but they are happening nevertheless. The fruit of spiritual disciplines is most often slow-growing. We must be patient as we look for ways in which God transforms us through corporate worship. When we view worship as a spiritual discipline that we undertake to honor God, when we commit ourselves to the work of worship, when we intentionally participate personally, and when we contribute to the worship experience of others, we are engaging in formal or intentional formation.

Now we come to sacred rituals in particular and their relationship to spiritual formation. Rituals function as corporate spiritual disciplines. As we engage in the sacraments and other rituals, we present ourselves to God, trusting that he will use these as transformational moments in the lives of individual believers and of the community. Intentional participation in many of the sacred rituals, when undertaken as a spiritual discipline, is an important means for individuals and communities to be transformed. For instance, in the ritual of foot washing, we engage in a process (washing feet) of being conformed (self-humbling) to the image of Christ (who not only modeled the ritual for us but commanded us to carry it on) for the sake of others (so that others receive the blessing of being served). The remarkable phenomenon is that in willfully participating in the spiritual discipline of the ritual of foot washing, we find ourselves changed for God's glory for the sake of others. *Sacred rituals provide a ways and means to be spiritually transformed.*

## The Symbolic Nature of Sacred Rituals

Another thing that sacred rituals share in common is their prominent use of symbol and sign.<sup>38</sup> It doesn't take very long as a participant of worship to realize that rituals of the church speak about and portray some very profound truths of our faith. These realities of faith are not readily understood at first pass; indeed, perhaps none are ever fully comprehended. For instance, at one level we can understand what is *done* in the act of baptism (someone gets wet) and even what it *signifies* (identification with Jesus Christ in his dying and rising [Rom. 6:1–4]). But who of us can truly comprehend what this *means*—exactly how the

Holy Spirit is at work in baptism or what this sacrament implies in all its fullness? Symbols move us from the known to the unknown, from what is familiar to a truth yet unfamiliar. “That is what gives rituals and symbols their power to point to an inexhaustible ‘surplus’ of truth and reality that it is impossible for reason alone to discern. That is also why rituals and symbols invite *faith*.”<sup>39</sup>

Believers in the West today have inherited the Enlightenment mind-set, which is still very much alive and well. One of the less fortunate results of the Enlightenment was the belief that almost anything could be understood given the proper information. The intellectual capabilities of the human mind were glorified; embracing mystery was devalued. Yet every religion

is an immense symbol-system about the meaning of the past, value in the present, and imagination about the future. Religions propose to the community what ought to be considered ultimate and mysterious. . . . Since this system of the ultimate and mysterious is, by definition, beyond human knowledge, religion relies on symbols to radiate something of this ultimate mystery. . . . By the power of an especially effective symbol, the past is brought into the present, the commonplace is transformed by the exceptional, the individual is united with the community, and sorrow meets up with joy.<sup>40</sup>

So from the beginning of every religion, symbols have been used to communicate aspects of faith with which the human mind struggles to grasp. Verbal explanation only goes so far. The nonverbal language of symbols speaks of ritual’s meaning at a deeper, more intuitive level than the purely rational. Symbols are useful because the sheer image itself speaks volumes. An obvious example of the unspoken power of image is one’s national flag. Young children in schools in every developed country learn of their nation’s history, its significant leaders, its political system, and so on. They are also instructed in the symbolic figures and colors of the flag. At first the young child simply learns to salute the flag and recite its pledge. Over time, the symbol grows in meaning until, when the flag is unfurled at a sports event or on a national holiday, the mere sight of the flag instantaneously represents far more to the youth or adult than the facts once learned about it; it calls up deep-seated feelings of patriotism, honor, and love of country.

Particular symbols are used for Christian rituals primarily because the event and the symbol are linked in Scripture. Water is the symbol for baptism, oil for healing, the rainbow for covenant, a towel and basin for feet washing, bread and wine for the Lord’s Supper, and so forth. Worshipers have not been faced with the task of creating all symbols out of nothing; many are gifts to us, specified by God.

The whole idea of symbol is rooted in the doctrines of creation and incarnation. When God created the heavens and the earth, every aspect of creation was declared to be good; therefore, all things may be used for God's purposes. Jesus used tangible aspects of creation (salt, light, weather patterns, stones) as symbols of the truth he was teaching. Material items are not disqualified for spiritual purposes because of our fallen world. Jesus proved otherwise. Creation is still good. With the incarnation, God proved that what was beyond us (the physical presence of God) would come among us in human form (Jesus). Therefore the incarnation is God's ultimate symbol: the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

The English word "symbol" is derived from the Greek noun *symbolon*, a token by which one infers something.<sup>41</sup> The verb form, *symbollo*, means "to compare."<sup>42</sup> Essentially a symbol is an object or action that represents a meaning or truth greater than the symbol. That which is tangible represents that which is intangible. All symbols have external, internal, and spiritual qualities. The external quality is the physical property itself (water); the internal quality is the interpretation given to a symbol by the group employing it (the water is a symbol of washing/cleansing); the spiritual quality is the spiritual transformation that is received by faith so that the worshiper is transformed to the glory of God (by faith I am purified by the waters of baptism and seek to walk in my baptism daily as I am conformed to the image of Christ).

Here are a few important things to note about the use of symbols as you prepare to be a rituals architect. Symbols

- are bidirectional (God speaks to us through symbols, and we speak to God in response by using symbols);
- are not ends in themselves;
- come in many forms: an item (cross), a gesture (kneeling), a color (white), a time of the year (Pentecost), a word (Passover);
- both reveal and conceal (they reveal truth to the believer; they conceal truth to the unbeliever [1 Cor. 2:11–16; Mark 4:11–12]);
- are the point at which the finiteness of humanity meets the mystery of God;
- are grounded in material, tangible forms;
- are culturally understood (symbols can have variable meanings based on culture);
- are polyvalent (symbols can have more than one inference at once);
- are limited in scope (they can infer only to a certain extent);
- are used to glorify God and edify believers.<sup>43</sup>

A word of caution is in order regarding symbols. Symbols have assigned meanings. That is to say that the symbol refers to something because someone says it does. Jesus gave assigned meaning to bread and wine. He said that the bread is his body, the wine is his blood. We inherit our symbols; they are therefore precious and to be valued. That is not to say that it is wrong for us to infer appropriate meanings for other symbols. In a Good Friday service it may be helpful to use the symbol of a large nail to represent the suffering of Christ. That inference is not found in Scripture, but it can be useful. However, be careful to (1) preserve the meanings assigned in Scripture and by the church, and (2) take up the leader's responsibility to teach what symbols mean. We must not only describe the symbol but also prescribe its meaning. We have the theological task of training believers in the faith; it is a matter of discipleship to explain and claim the meaning of sacred symbol and sign. I fear that in recent decades the church has been less diligent in clearly prescribing the intent of symbols and signs. I urge rituals architects to assume their pastoral duties not only in creating and leading sacred rituals but also in communicating the intended meaning of the symbols implicit in them.

Two virtues are especially helpful to pursue as we contemplate the importance of symbols and signs. First is the virtue of humility. We don't call all the shots as to the meaning and role of symbols in worship. Remember that "in liturgy and sacrament the church does not 'invent' its own identity, but receives it from . . . God."<sup>44</sup> Humility is critical, for worshipers must seek to surrender their desire to make worship into their own form. It is imperative that the church serve *God* in worship "by performing a gesture which is not from itself, by saying words which are not its own, by receiving elements which it has not chosen."<sup>45</sup> The second helpful virtue is patience. Symbols grow in significance as we mature in faith. Because of this we must learn the discipline of contentment as we await the understanding that will come in time.

As you prepare and lead sacred rituals for your congregation, do not underestimate the power of symbol, especially when people influenced by post-modern culture are highly image-driven. Thoughtfully and prayerfully employ symbols as a means of experiencing that which cannot always be explained, for we will never exhaust the mystery of God.

## The Christo-centric Nature of Sacred Rituals

In all of our discussion about symbols, the most important point is yet to be made: symbols must enable the centrality of Christ to be perceived in worship. Christian worship is *Christian* precisely because of the ongoing presence and

ministry of the incarnate Son of God in the gathered community. Each and every symbol used in worship does not, of course, directly represent Christ. At the same time, all symbols must ultimately enable worship that properly glorifies God through the exaltation of Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Worship that glorifies God is worship that (1) magnifies God's Son (Phil. 2:9–11; Heb. 1:6; Rev. 5:12) and (2) is offered through the priestly ministry of God's Son (Heb. 2:10–13; 7:25; 8:1–2; 1 Tim. 2:5). While symbols are significant, even necessary, to Christian worship, they are not so because they are thought-provoking or because they offer a modality to satisfy certain types of learning styles of worshipers, helpful as these are. Symbols are of ultimate importance in worship to the degree that they enable worship that is truly *Christian*—worship understood to be properly centered in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

In focusing on Christ, symbols play an important role in remembrance. Christian worship is essentially a remembrance of who God is and what God has done. By remembering, believers recall, re-present, and anticipate the marvelous works of the triune God for the purpose of glorifying the One who has acted throughout human history.<sup>46</sup> Symbols greatly aid in our ability to recall (“remembering backward”), re-present (“remembering in the present”), and anticipate God's reign in the future (“remembering forward”). While the sweeping story of salvation history is vast, it culminates in the greatest of God's saving acts on behalf of humankind: the giving of Jesus, God's incarnate Son, for the redemption of all who will believe.

Nowhere are the symbols of remembrance more profoundly obvious than in the symbols related to the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Table. The waters of baptism recall how God has saved people through water in the past (Noah and the great flood, Moses and the Red Sea); how God is saving people through the waters of baptism today (1 Pet. 3:21); and how those whose robes have been washed will have a special place near the river of the water of life in the heavenly kingdom (Rev. 22:1, 14). The bread and the wine of the Lord's Supper recall the Passover of God (Luke 22:15), provide an ongoing remembrance of Christ's body and blood until he returns (Luke 22:19–20), and anticipate the heavenly supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:9). The symbols of remembrance attached to the sacraments are Christ symbols, for it is only in Christ that we are saved and baptized, and it is only in Christ that we feed on him by faith at his Table.

As you engage in leadership as a rituals architect, I urge you to consider how you will set Christ as the cornerstone of each and every ritual. Allow the person and work of Christ to be obvious in your actions, words, gestures, and symbols, for this is well pleasing to God.

## Sacred Rituals for the Sake of the World

By now I trust the reader is more energized as to the purpose and value of sacred actions in corporate worship. But we must end this chapter where we began, by clearly stating that rituals are not valuable for their own sake. What's more, in many ways, neither are they valuable for the participants' sake exclusively. No, they have a much larger role to play. When the time-honored sacred rituals approved by the church of Jesus Christ are offered with devotion and sincerity, they are done so for the sake of the world. Church rituals have strong witnessing power—they present to the world a picture of the church in relationship with God through Jesus Christ. It is *that* final role that they must ultimately assume. Returning to Mulholland's definition, we recall that "spiritual formation is the process of being conformed to the image of Christ *for the sake of others*" (emphasis mine).<sup>47</sup> Whatever holy moment we experience is not for our own satisfaction but to glorify God in the face of a defiant world. Remember that rituals are primarily about relationship; they help us mirror the eternal relationship of the triune God. A beautiful relationship that is well demonstrated is prophetic in nature. Jesus prayed, "As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:21). Sacred rituals express the very relationship Jesus prayed for: an expression of oneness between God and God's people, and all for the greater purpose that the world may believe. This is the missiological piece to sacred rituals. In our faithful devotion to participating in those actions deemed necessary and beneficial by the church, we proclaim to the world the truth that the rituals portray. And we do so with Jesus's prayer on our lips that "the world may believe."

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have attempted to lay some critical foundation pieces that will ground all of the sacred rituals practiced in the church. The next seven chapters will reflect these foundations as individual rituals are examined. Before you turn the page, however, remember the two propositions with which we started:

1. Rituals signify the believer's relationship with God. "Christian worship is not doctrine disguised in ritual shorthand but action that draws us into the dynamic, hospitable, yet perilous space of God's own life."<sup>48</sup> In short, "Liturgy's goal isn't meaning but *meeting*."<sup>49</sup>
2. Rituals aid in deepening this relationship. "Liturgies are, finally, about *connection*; about *being* connected and *making* connections—to God,

people, and planet; to space, time, culture, and history; to difference and otherness; to memory and expectation.”<sup>50</sup>

## Key Terms

**liturgy** The complete collection of actions, words, gestures, and symbols that facilitates the prayerful worship and full participation of all worshipers in the context of corporate worship.

**officiate** To perform a religious ceremony by virtue of office.

**ordinance** A purely symbolic sacred ritual, instituted and commanded by Christ to be practiced by all believers of all times and places, which does not serve as a means of grace.

**preside** To direct proceedings by virtue of exercising control over the event.

**rite** The particular combination of actions, words, gestures, and symbols that constitute the order and content for a designated ritual.

**ritual** An authoritative *event*, sanctioned by the church, which uses formalized actions, words, gestures, and symbols that are repeated to enable some particular aspect of the corporate worship of God.

**rubric** Instructions for leading and participating in a ritual.

**sacrament** A sacred ritual, instituted and commanded by Christ to be practiced by all believers of all times and places, which serves as a means of grace.