

LEARNING
THEOLOGY
through the
CHURCH'S
WORSHIP



An Introduction to Christian Belief

Dennis Okholm



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To my granddaughters,
Clara Woods and Elanor Wren,
who have been singing the doxology
from the day they could toddle.
May they never stop singing it,
knowing that the church's praise is always
one generation away from extinction.

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Acknowledgments, Admissions, and Aspirations

When my Wheaton College colleague Timothy Phillips died nearly two decades ago, I promised him I would write the systematic theology that he and I envisioned. Since that time I have been on a journey studying liturgy and its relationship to theology. So in one sense I have kept my promise, though in a technical sense this is not the book that we envisioned.

It is the result of teaching theology to college and graduate students for the past thirty-five years. And so I must apologize ahead of time to those who deserve credit if there are phrases or discussions that seem borrowed. It is not my intention to pretend that all that follows is original with me. Some of what I teach has been lodged in my mind by those who have taught me in person or in books. I have tried to cite sources at all times, but I am sure there are those unconscious borrowings that have lost any memory of their origins.

One debt I *do* consciously owe is to Geoffrey Wainwright's *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine and Life; A Systematic Theology*. Wainwright's knowledge of the church's liturgy is encyclopedic, and I am no match. But what he did in that book to bring theology and liturgy together is what inspired this book. Because Wainwright assumes so much of the reader (which is not a deficiency of his book, but a deficiency in the church's catechesis), I have used the book in small seminars of honors students who could ask me to elaborate on terms and concepts that Wainwright discusses. But I wanted to do something in the same spirit that would be accessible to students who had little or no previous knowledge of theology, liturgy, or both. Hence, this book.

I also wanted to write a student's first introduction to theology that would be *interesting*. I recommended to a millennial colleague a favorite introductory theology book I have used for years, but she recoiled from my suggestion because she found the book to be boring. Most systematic theology textbooks *are* dry and boring. That's not necessarily bad; it's just that they are not meant for the novice. They are important and necessary for the theology major and the "professional" theologian. So this book will just be an introduction for the uninitiated, and along the way I hope the student sees the value and relevance of theology. One of my joys in over three decades of college teaching has been getting non-theology students excited about the necessity and relevance of good theology for our lives. If that happens to some who read this book, then my joy will be increased.

Two more items deserve mention: Occasionally the book rehearses the context of the historical debates that lie behind our theology because I don't want anyone to think that the church's doctrines just dropped out of heaven. Rather, the theology that resulted from these debates contributes to an ongoing conversation among those who believe and worship. While I cannot avoid theological terminology (since learning a language is necessary for understanding subject matter more deeply), the text does keep in mind the theological newbie, so I have tried to provide definitions along the way.

Since this is a humble introduction, it is my hope that professors will supplement this text with whatever they think students need in addition. I have always supplemented my intro texts with the most recent trade books on specific topics (such as James Cone's *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*) and with brief introductory books for specific traditions (such as Kallistos Ware's *The Orthodox Way*). I am also hoping that this book will pique the curiosity of students who want to go further and deeper—who ask for advice about reading a past or present systematic theology or finding resources on liturgy. Some sample assignments at the end of the book aim to inspire relevant explorations of the doctrines discussed in hopes that this will encourage further study.

It is time to return worship to its proper close proximity to theology. As the fourth-century monk Evagrius once said, "A theologian is one who prays, and one who prays is a theologian." For too long and in too many theology textbooks, worship has been virtually ignored. Hopefully this book makes a small contribution to correct that oversight.

Preface

How to Read This Book

In the spirit of full disclosure and by way of orientation—especially since all theology is contextual—you should know where the author is located and why he has written this book.

As might be the case with you, the reader, I was completely unfamiliar with the history of Christian worship while I was being reared in communities of faith during my youth and college days. It was only when I took a course on worship from a Christian Reformed Church pastor at an Evangelical Free Church seminary that I first encountered the rich legacy of the church’s worship. I had been shaped by Pentecostals and Baptists who did a great job of teaching me the Bible and Christian discipleship, but what was completely foreign to me and seemed inauthentic at the time were the actions and words of those “other churches” that wore robes, lit candles, had people come forward for communion, marched in and out, read prayers, and all the rest of what the church had been doing in worship for centuries. But when I began to study the heritage of the Christian Faith of which I was a part, I realized that there was much more to Christianity than I had ever known. What I learned led me on a journey to the Presbyterian Church, where I remained for three decades before making one more move, this time to the Anglicans.

Some of you have a very different history, perhaps having been *lifelong* participants in churches whose worship you recognized in my description of robes, candles, and such. (You might even have grown weary of it, and if you have, I hope this book reenergizes your participation in the liturgy.) Others of you share my background in what are sometimes referred to as nonliturgical

churches, and you still find yourself in that context. If that is the case, I will have to convince you in chapters 1 and 2 that worship must not be separated from theology if we are going to act in a world we see through a Christian lens. And if I am successful, then we are off to a very significant exploration of how worship, theology, and life intersect as we work through the church's doctrines.

Whichever Christian community claims you, my hope is that this book will help you to see how the church's doctrine often arose out of its worship and, conversely, how its worship reflects its doctrine. (For instance, if you really want to know what someone believes, listen to her prayers and observe how she worships.) The book is even laid out as if it were a traditional Christian liturgy. (We'll discuss the meaning of the word *liturgy* later.) Beginning with the first chapter, the structure of the Christian liturgy (sometimes referred to as the *ordo* or "order") shapes the design of this text, beginning with the "gathering" and ending with the "dismissal." This will serve as a constant reminder that theology and worship should not be separated.

If you take a look at the table of contents, you will see that each chapter's title identifies where we are in the order of worship as well as what doctrine we will be considering. Sometimes the word or phrase that refers to our location in the liturgy may be unfamiliar, but not to worry: it will be explained in the chapter. In all but the chapter on the sacraments, an excerpt from the liturgy itself accompanies each chapter title or appears in the first paragraph or two. As you work your way through a chapter, it will become clear why we are discussing a particular doctrine in the context of one aspect of the worship service. Within each chapter, where it is appropriate, historical and theological connections will be made between the doctrine discussed and the church's liturgy. Many of the examples in this text will be drawn from resources like the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*,¹ but the goal is to relate theology to aspects of Christian worship that belong to the historical church's practices throughout history and across denominational lines.

Hopefully this will be a unique experience for you, since this book differs from other introductions to theology. There are many good ones that introduce the doctrines, and some of those explicitly connect those doctrines to the life of the Christian. We will take it one step further and relate worship to doctrine and life.

Whatever your history with the church's worship has been, you and I must keep in mind that we cannot be formed into people who see the world a

1. The *Book of Common Prayer* was first composed by Thomas Cranmer in 1544 during the English Reformation. It has been revised several times since then and shapes the worship of churches in the Anglican (Church of England) communion today, which includes the Episcopal Church.

certain way unless we are first changed by God’s grace. As sinners who want to be the authors of our own story, we do not desire to see the world the way God has established it and as God intends it to become. And so we need the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, especially because of the way sin affects our minds and dispositions such that we do not even *desire* to see reality as God sees it or appreciate the need for a Spirit-filled, Spirit-gifted, Spirit-led worshiping community. Only as we are so enabled by God’s Spirit can we begin the process of seeing the world as Christ sees it, as if it were to us second nature. And then we can follow Paul’s admonition to “Let this same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5). Only then can we come to know Christ by sharing in the power of his resurrection and becoming like him in his death (Phil. 3:10).

And so we begin by considering how it is that we are shaped into the kinds of people who have the mind of Christ. We begin with a prayer of Thomas Aquinas:

Creator of all things,
 true source of light and wisdom, lofty origin of all being,
 graciously let a ray of your brilliance
 penetrate into the darkness of my understanding
 and take from me the double darkness in which I have been born,
 an obscurity of both sin and ignorance.
 Give me a sharp sense of understanding,
 a retentive memory,
 and the ability to grasp things correctly and fundamentally.
 Grant me the talent of being exact in my explanations,
 and the ability to express myself with thoroughness and charm.
 Point out the beginning, direct the progress,
 and help in the completion;
 through Christ our Lord. Amen.²

2. St. Thomas Aquinas, translation from *Day by Day: The Notre Dame Prayer Book for Students*, ed. Thomas McNally, CSC, and William G. Storey, DMS, rev. ed. (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2004), 60.

1

Liturgical Ophthalmology, or Why Christian Theology and Ethics Begin and End with Worship

We Enter by “Gathering”

Your eye is the lamp of your body. If your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light; but if it is not healthy, your body is full of darkness. Therefore consider whether the light in you is not darkness. If then your whole body is full of light, with no part of it in darkness, it will be as full of light as when a lamp gives you light with its rays.

—Luke 11:34–36

The God Christians worship is known through initiation into the practices of a tradition that are necessary to know how rightly to name God.

—Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company*¹

When I was four years old my parents took me to the ophthalmologist, suspecting that my vision wasn't up to par. I remember that the doc-

1. Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 158.

tor and my parents took me over to the window, pointed toward something, and asked if I could see “that flag.” I tried and tried, but I couldn’t see what they were talking about. That led to a forty-seven-year series of increasingly thicker glasses until I got my eyes lasered to correct my nearsightedness—all so that I could *see* what I was *looking at*. I needed thick lenses to *see* what only those with good eyesight could see.

The consequences of uncorrected vision can be significant. In one episode of *Seinfeld*, George loses his glasses, yet, through squinting eyes, he thinks he sees Jerry’s girlfriend kissing another man across the street. Jerry is suspicious and accuses his girlfriend on two occasions before they eventually break up. Of course, George was mistaken, something he learns when he again thinks he sees Jerry’s girlfriend kissing another man until he puts on his new glasses and actually sees a policewoman nuzzling her horse.

Centuries before my ophthalmology appointment and any episodes of *Seinfeld*, John Calvin drew out the theological significance of these anecdotes with a wonderful analogy: “Just as old or bleary-eyed men and those with weak vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognize it to be some sort of writing, yet can scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God.”² The point is this: We do not *see* merely by *looking*. We do not *see* reality the way God created it and is in the process of redeeming it merely by *looking* at our lives and the world. Seeing requires correction—in this case, correction made possible by God’s revelation in the incarnation, in Scripture, and in Christ’s church.

If seeing were merely a matter of looking, then the centurion’s assessment of the crucified Jesus—that “truly this man was God’s Son” (Matt. 27:54)—would have been shared by the entire Roman garrison that day. If seeing were merely looking, then Paul would be wrong to say that the same cross that is foolishness to the Greeks and a stumbling block to the Jews is the saving power of God to those who believe (1 Cor. 1:18–25). If seeing were merely looking, then Jesus would not have asked his host, Simon the Pharisee, “Do you *see* this woman?” since Simon was *looking* at her; yet apparently he *saw* not a woman, but merely a prostitute (Luke 7:44), and his reactions to the situation were based on what he *saw*.

Anyone who has suffered from an ailment like myopia knows what Simon was experiencing: how and what you see has a lot to do with how you act.

2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 1.6.1.

In fact, a number of theologians have taken up Iris Murdoch's pithy remark: "You can only act in the world you can see." If that is true, then what we need to realize is that the way a Christian acts has less to do with determining right from wrong, and more to do with seeing the world *Christianly*.

And it's not only acting that flows from what we see. *We become* what we see. Hopefully that truth will become more obvious the further we get into our discussion.

Learning to See the World Christianly

Let's start with what should be self-evident: seeing is always from a perspective. There is no view from nowhere. If I witness an accident that takes place in a busy intersection, I can recount what took place from my vantage point on one corner, while another person on the opposite corner will recount what took place from *her* perspective. Both of us may provide accurate accounts of what took place, but there will be variations between our accounts due to our different perspectives. We interpret reality from *somewhere*; we cannot do it from *nowhere*.

While that should be obvious, it is not always admitted in our modernist milieu. The modernist assumption is that neutrality and complete objectivity are not only possible, but desirable. The claim is that we should look at the world without presuppositions or assumptions or culturally shaped perspectives because our modern Western scientific way of looking at the world is the only way any self-respecting, rational human being *would* look at the world. The Declaration of Independence makes this claim: "We hold these Truths to be *self-evident*, that all Men are created equal," even though the author of this statement had African slaves, and women would not be allowed to vote in this "equal" society for nearly 150 years after these words were written. Presumably to any "right-thinking rational" person, this statement about males of European origin was true. Even some zealous defenders of Christian apologetics and morality argue with unbelievers under the assumption that if the non-Christian disagrees, it is only because the other person is being irrational. Modernists who make these assumptions need to be brought up to speed by what I once heard Dallas Seminary's Howard Hendricks say, "You can't teach a person to walk before they're born."

If we really hear what the apostle Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians about perceptions of the cross, then we should realize that the biblical story—the true story of the world—does not make its appeal to some supposed universal rational assessment for legitimation. Augustine knew this when he articulated

what most of his peers held: “faith seeks understanding.” Centuries later, Anselm would be explicit as well, though he meant something slightly different by “understanding”: “I believe in order to understand. And I believe that if I do not believe, then I cannot understand.”

In his book *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, Robert Wilken narrates how early Christians did not rely so much on demonstration or argument or proof, as the philosophers did, but on witnesses to what happened; as he puts it, they were concerned with “the ability to *see* what is disclosed in events and the readiness to trust the words of those who testify to them.”³ And he shows how much of this was accomplished through the church’s liturgy,⁴ as we will demonstrate below.

But first we need to establish how the perspective from which we see as Christians is developed.

Communities cultivate perspective. They shape the way we see the world. For instance, consider why you believe that everything that surrounds you is composed of atomic and subatomic particles that you have never seen, or that the earth is spinning even though to all appearances it seems that the sun rises rather than that the earth turns each morning, or that our planet is orbiting the sun at an incredible speed, which you do not feel. *Traditioned* scientific and educational communities that you *trusted* taught you to see and experience the world in these counterintuitive ways to the point that you would consider someone a fool or “uneducated” who did not see things this way.

Of course, adopting this perspective of things required you to learn a language. You learned about protons, electrons, and neutrons rather than simply referring to “little things that make up atoms.” You even had to learn the words *atom*, *earth*, *planet*, *sun*, *orbit*, and so on. And the more you mastered the language, the more imbedded in the community and its view of the world you became.

So, what we see and how we interpret and articulate what we see has much to do with being part of a language-using community—a linguistic

3. Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 7 (italics added).

4. The word that Christians use to speak of worship is *liturgy*. It is often misunderstood (etymologically) as “work of the people (*laos*).” It comes from the Greek word *leitourgia*, which comes from the Greek *leitos* (public) and *ergon* (work). In other words, it is a secular Greek word for public work done on behalf of the people by another person or group appointed to the task. In the New Testament the primary use of the term refers to Christ himself: Hebrews 8:2 designates him as our *leitourgos*. In other words, we join a liturgy already in progress—the Son, our high priest, renders worship to the Father, and we participate in that worship as we offer ourselves to Christ. See Maxwell E. Johnson, *Praying and Believing in Early Christianity: The Interplay between Christian Worship and Doctrine* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013), xi–xii.

culture. In fact, language operates as the filter through which we experience the world. Early on, perhaps with the help of *Sesame Street*, you learned to call “the one that is not like the others” a “triangle.” Later, when painting the interior walls of your house, you learned that white isn’t just white, but eggshell white, seashell white, ivory, and cosmic latte.

In the book *The Giver* by Lois Lowry, Jonas can’t understand what he was perceiving when he looked at Fiona’s hair until the Giver gave him the word *red*. Once he had a word to interpret his experience, he began to see the color associated with the word—something that had been lost because the dystopian community in which he was reared had intentionally changed the language and altered the perception of reality.

These interpretive communities are known by the language they use. For example, if you heard “Play ball,” you would associate that with baseball. “Start your engines” would conjure up images of a speedway. If you heard the phrase “Let us pray,” you would surmise you were in some Christian worship context.

But only those who have been reared in a specific community know the language more deeply because they have been shaped by a particular community’s language to describe and understand and even participate in its concerns and activities. For instance, if I have entered more deeply into the baseball community, I will know that the initials ERA do not stand for “Equal Rights Amendment,” but for a statistic that will be important in the baseball community’s assessment of a pitcher’s abilities. To know the words “I believe in God the Father Almighty” and to really appreciate the meaning of those words, I might likely have been catechized and reared in the Christian community.

To be part of a community that shapes the way I see the world and respond to it, then, requires that I learn, understand, and function with the language of that community. Though they will understand if I naively order a small latte, when I become integrated into the Starbucks community I will eventually find myself ordering a “Tall.” When I become more sophisticated and more thirsty, I will tout the word “Venti” and receive a 20-ounce hot drink or a 24-ounce cold drink, even if I don’t know the exact translation of the word “Venti.” And if I want to become a priest at Starbucks, I will have to learn the liturgical language that only a few parishioners know, such as “iced single Venti Mocha no whip” or “double tall skinny cappuccino, extra dry” followed by the person’s name as they are called forward to the altar to receive the cup. There are even websites and videos to train the neophyte; think of them as new membership classes for Starbucks.

This communal training to see the world a certain way happens both intentionally and unintentionally. When my family learned that I had not only

nearsightedness but also astigmatism, my mother was told to train my eyes by daily having me follow the slowly rotating movements of the head of a hatpin. That was intentional. But we are being trained every day, usually without our intentional involvement, to see the world as consumers in a capitalist economy with its advertisements, news reports, and excursions to the mall. One corporate manager put it this way: “Corporate branding is really about worldwide beliefs management.”⁵ This involves what James K. A. Smith calls competing “liturgies”—ritual practices of deep significance.⁶ Furthermore, because we are members of at least these two communities—the consumerist and the Christian—we are often afflicted with “double vision” over against the single focus on the kingdom that Jesus insists upon in Matthew 6:33. Or, worse, like my monovision LASIKed—eyes that permit me to move back and forth between near and distant foci because one eye is immediately and unconsciously dominant over the other depending on the circumstance, often the consumerist eye is dominant over the Christian.

So we need to be even more intentional about training ourselves to see Christianly. Jesus put it this way in Matthew 6: your heart is where your treasure is. The order is important: what you treasure, that is, what you worship—what you invest your time, money, and energy in pursuing—is what will shape your heart. We not only become what we see. We become what we *worship*.

This is where the church community comes in. It is in the church that we learn the language and engage in the practices or rituals that will train us to see reality as disciples of the crucified, risen, and ascended Christ. This happens especially as we rehearse the biblical narrative, particularly that part of the narrative centered around Christ. Our moral conceptions depend on the way that this ecclesiastical language—using community shapes the way we as moral people see the world by recounting and reliving the story into which we have been baptized. Our worship—our liturgy—plays a central role at this point, centered in the Eucharist (the Lord’s Supper or communion).

To illustrate, in his book *Christianity Rediscovered*, the American Roman Catholic priest Vincent Donovan tells the story of being sent in the late 1960s to evangelize the Masai people of Tanzania. He describes how a series of communities came to grasp the significance of the Eucharist (communion) and how the regular practice of the liturgy informed and shaped their common life—how the liturgy changed the way they *saw* everything. But at first it wasn’t easy. Here is what he wrote:

5. Quoted in William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 47.

6. James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).

Masai men had never eaten in the presence of Masai women. In their minds, the status and condition of women were such that the very presence of women at the time of eating was enough to pollute any food that was present. . . . How then was the Eucharist possible? If ever there was a need for the Eucharist as a salvific sign of unity, it was here. . . . Here, in the Eucharist, we were at the heart of the unchanging gospel that I was passing on to them. They were free to accept the gospel or reject it, but if they accepted it, they were accepting the truth that in the Eucharist . . . “there is neither slave nor free, neither Jew nor Greek, neither male nor female.”⁷

They came to accept it. It radically changed their lives. Because of the liturgy—the Eucharist—the men now *saw* the women in a new way and, as a result, treated them differently.

When we sing and internalize a praise song or hymn, we are being shaped to see the world Christianly. For example, singing the hymn “This Is My Father’s World” reminds us that, in spite of the temptation to find our identity in the community of a political party or nation, we believe that “though the wrong seems oft so strong, *God* is the *Ruler* yet.” Our responses to events that are reported in the news or that we encounter in our everyday lives come to be shaped by this reminder in our liturgy.

Listening to Scripture read in worship—whether from stories of Jesus’s encounters with people in the Gospel accounts or a reminder from Genesis or 1 John that we are all made in the image of God—shapes the way we see and therefore respond to a homeless person rummaging around in a trash can, a welfare recipient, an immigrant, or even the worst of sinners for whom Jesus Christ died.

Nathan Mitchell put it this way: “Christian liturgy begins as ritual practice but ends as ethical performance.”⁸ Our lives should correspond to what we articulate in our worship such that our works verify or authenticate our sermon engagement, praying, and singing. This is as old as the Hebrew prophets (see Amos 5:21–24) and Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians (see 1 Cor. 11:17–34). The relationship between how we worship, what we believe, and how we live is nicely summarized by Maxwell Johnson: “Christians act morally or ethically because of what they believe, and what they believe is continually shaped by worship, by how they are formed by the words and acts of worship, by the divine encounter with the God of grace and love mediated in the liturgy via its spoken words, texts, acts, gestures, and sacramental signs.”⁹

7. Vincent Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003), 91.

8. Quoted in M. Johnson, *Praying and Believing*, 95.

9. M. Johnson, *Praying and Believing*, 98.

And if our lives do not match our words and acts in worship, perhaps it is not because the liturgy is at fault, but because it is not really *Christian* worship that is shaping us. To paraphrase Paul, who scolded those who cut in front of the line at the *agape* (love) meal that included communion, “When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord’s supper” (1 Cor. 11:20). And as N. T. Wright articulates Paul’s analysis of the human situation in the first chapter of his Letter to the Romans, “The primary human problem . . . is not ‘sin,’ but ‘ungodliness.’ It is a failure not primarily of behavior (though that follows), but of *worship*. Worship the wrong divinity, and instead of reflecting God’s wise order into the world you will reflect and then produce a distortion: something out of joint, something ‘unjust.’”¹⁰

When we are baptized, we are initiated and immersed into a community that is attempting to live into and be shaped by God’s story. And we commit ourselves to learning this story with the church, embracing it, and letting it get into us as we continually rehearse it. The church calendar functions as one of the means by which we remember this baptized identity. Every day I catch myself glancing at the calendar from *Touchstone* magazine that hangs in our kitchen by the refrigerator. I am looking to see who in my church family—my first family—is to be remembered today. Often it is not someone whose name I recognize, but, thankfully, their work, their mission, their martyrdom—their participation in this same story—is not forgotten, and I learn more about the way I should live as one who shares their vision of life.

This is what it means to “tradition” the faith. We maintain the tradition—hand on what we have received—through liturgy and lectionary (a two- or three-year sequence of biblical readings) and church calendar, because we are people of space and time, and the church is an embodied, time-sequenced, historical community that participates in what G. K. Chesterton once called the “democracy of the dead.”¹¹

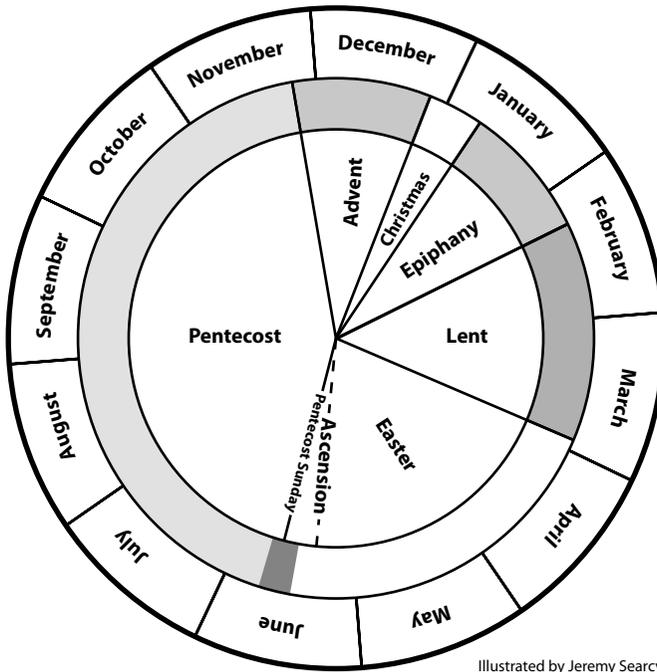
As Stanley Hauerwas and Sam Wells remind us, “Theologians like Augustine and Aquinas never forget that their task was to help Christians remember that their lives are shaped by story-determined practices that make all that they do and do not intelligible.”¹² And what makes our words and behavior intelligible is the story that we hear in the Word and rehearse in the sacraments in our praise and worship of God.

10. N. T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus’s Crucifixion* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2016), 268.

11. From “The Ethics of Elfland,” chap. 4 of *Orthodoxy* (New York: John Lane Company, 1908), 85.

12. Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004, 2006), 46.

Figure 1
The Church Year Calendar



Illustrated by Jeremy Searcy

Hauerwas summarizes these last few thoughts even better:

Practically speaking, what the church asks of people is difficult *to do* by oneself . . . what the church asks of people is difficult *to see* by oneself. Christian ethics arise, in great part, out of something Christians claim to have seen that the world has not seen, namely, the creation of a people, a family, a colony that is a living witness that Jesus Christ is Lord. Tradition, as we use the term here, is a complex, lively argument about what happened in Jesus that has been carried on, across the generations, by a concrete body of people called the church. Fidelity to this tradition, this story, is the most invigorating challenge of the adventure begun in our baptism and the toughest job of Christian ethics.¹³

And this “tough job” falls on the church. But how does the church accomplish this when the world finds our lived Christianity unintelligible because it is looking at us from the perspective of different stories given ultimacy in their lives? How do grace-enlivened people of the church stay on track?

13. Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 72 (italics original).

If you've ever mowed a lawn or plowed a field, you know that it is difficult if not impossible to keep a straight line if you only look at what is immediately ahead of you. The trick is to keep your eye on the distant goal—the end of the mowed path or plowed row. It is the same with those who belong to Christ's church: in order to maintain a rightly focused and single vision, we center our attention on a *telos*—the goal of the kingdom of God that is already here but not yet fulfilled. Those of us who sit through the biblical narratives during the Easter Vigil (the Saturday evening liturgy before Easter Sunday) reenter the story of God's promise and provisions for this coming kingdom. And when we celebrate the Eucharist we not only look backward to Jesus's Last Supper with the Twelve before his crucifixion, but we also look forward to the eschatological banquet of the Lamb. In fact, in the Eucharist we actually experience in the present these two events at opposite ends of the chronology. (More about this will come in chap. 11.)

Again, here we find ourselves at odds with those shaped by a different story, for the *telos*—the end goal or purpose—depends on the story. And the dominant story in our culture is liberal democracy. Now, on the one hand, we appreciate the narrative of our nation driven by the perspective of philosophical architects such as John Locke, for it makes it possible for us who are being shaped by the biblical story to live out that story with little interference. But, on the other hand, the problem with our liberal democracy is that we in the West have no agreement on the *telos*. In fact, we relish the individualism that allows each person to define her own *telos* as long as the means to achieve it do not interfere with others in the pursuit of their own chosen *telos*. But, as we have said, the church is defined by the *telos* of the story that is centered in the establishment of God's kingdom.

Furthermore, we hold that this story is the only true story of the world—the only correct interpretation of reality that explains why we see the world the way we do and act in it as we do. The kingdom requires certain characteristics that must be cultivated—such as the description of kingdom people in the Sermon on the Mount. To cultivate those characteristics requires discipline, but also a community of memory—both of which we have already mentioned. It is not possible to develop the character traits of humility and patience and love outside of the community that is centered around the worship of the God revealed in Jesus Christ, whose life, death, and resurrection define these characteristics.

So we are the people who seek this kingdom. (By the way, a “seeker church” should not be a church that *attracts* people to it, but a church that seeks the kingdom [Matt. 6:33] and that seeks people to invite into the kingdom who are usually not in the church building.) We seek because, before we are knowers,

we are desirers, lovers. (Note the prevalent images of hungering, thirsting, seeking, and the like in Jesus's teachings. Even the word *know* is sometimes connected with sexual desire in the biblical narrative.)

We often make a huge miscalculation in thinking that if we just give people the right cerebral information, they will become deeply committed followers of Christ.¹⁴ Instead, as whole embodied people who are both thinkers and desirers, we are to be shaped into certain kinds of people who, like Jesus, exhibit the fruit of the Spirit, love our neighbor, pray for our enemies, bless our persecutors, and care for orphans and widows. And, as we have been saying all along, that shaping comes by participating in the storied community centered on the narrative of Scripture and in the liturgy that replays the narrative in action. Then, as people so changed and so shaped, we tell and live the story within our world's prevailing story of a plurality of *teloi*.

So what is this biblical narrative that shapes the storied community called church?

The Story into Which We Are Called

The Bible unfurls one grand story. It is the true story of God and the overarching narrative of the world. It deals with God's purposes for a world God created, sustains, and is in the process of restoring. It is into this story that the church is called to participate.

Just as a person's history might help a psychologist better understand an episode in a person's life, so the parts of the Bible are correctly understood only when they are placed in the context of the whole biblical narrative. Unfortunately, what often happens is that another narrative supersedes the biblical narrative such that "Bible bits" get absorbed into that other story and, because they are taken out of context, the bits get misused and misunderstood. For example, 2 Chronicles 7:14 has to do with Solomon and the establishment of the temple in Jerusalem; the "my people" in this verse is referring to the Jews with whom God made a covenant. But often this verse gets superimposed on an American flag and misused as if citizens of the USA were the "my people" to which the verse refers. The danger is exacerbated when the association justifies an American ideology or action. When we do this, we are giving more authority to the nation's narrative than to God's written Word. Robert Louis Wilken graphically made the point: "Without a grasp of the plot that holds everything together, the Bible is as vacuous as a

14. This is a point forcefully made by J. Smith in *Desiring the Kingdom*.

mosaic in which the tiles have been arbitrarily rearranged without reference to the original design.”¹⁵ When this happens in sermons, passages get treated as moralisms, lessons for “Everyman” (see *VeggieTales*), or psychological helps.¹⁶

This does not mean the Bible does not contain directives for how we should live our lives. But how we are to act and what we should decide only make sense if we know what story we're in.¹⁷ This comes out beautifully in the movie *Sweetland*, which features a quote by Don Snyder at the beginning of the movie: “Let us hope that we are all preceded in this world by a love story.” The film is about a Minnesota farmer who is tempted by a developer's significant monetary offer for his land; his final decision is made in the context of his remembrance of the story of his father and immigrant mother whose farm he inherited.

Another movie that communicates the narrative context for the moral life is *Stranger than Fiction*. Harold Crick (played by Will Ferrell) is upset when he learns that his story—including his imminent death—is being written by a novelist (played by Emma Thompson). But after reading and understanding the story and after accepting the assessment of a literary critic (played by Dustin Hoffman), Harold is able and willing to die.

The biblical story is not about my happiness or my success. It's about fitting into the history that God is writing concerning the establishment of God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven—even if fitting into God's story includes my death. In the end, I can only answer the question, What am I to do? If I can answer the prior question, in what story do I find myself?¹⁸

This, again, is why liturgy plays such an important role in our moral life. For example, cycling through the three-year lectionary of Bible readings reminds us of the entire biblical narrative, especially as it is tied to the church

15. Wilken, *Early Christian Thought*, 68.

16. A good example of this is the book on marriage *Love and Respect* by Emerson Eggerichs (Nashville: Nelson, 2004). Taken from one verse in Ephesians 5 (v. 33), psychological principles get spun out differentiating how husbands should *love* their wives, while wives are to *respect* their husbands. Seen in the larger context of Ephesians, let alone the entire biblical narrative (to which Paul is referring in Ephesians 1–2), the relation of husbands and wives is *primarily* about serving Christ's church and the kingdom of God, with happiness in marriage a by-product. That focus is missing in most Christian books on marriage. (Though see that focus played out in Trevecca Okholm, *Kingdom Family: Re-Envisioning God's Plan for Marriage and Family* [Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012]).

17. This point is developed well in *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story*, by Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004). Also see Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983). I am especially indebted to Bartholomew and Goheen for some of the concepts developed in this chapter.

18. This is the point Alasdair MacIntyre makes in *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

calendar, so that by the time the cycle is complete, we have reentered God's story in ways that shape our entire being. In fact, though the church year after year wends its way from the Jewish expectation of a Messiah (Advent) to the experience of the church in the book of Acts (so-called Ordinary Time), the circle is not a mere repetition, as Philip Pfatteicher reminds us:

When we begin the year once more, we are not the same people as we were when we began the cycle the year before. The world has changed, and we have changed with it. New experiences must be incorporated in the recurring cycle. . . . The Church's year is a circle, but it is not an endless round. It has a goal, an end, a purpose as we move from slavery to the Promised Land, from exile to return, "from this world to that which is to come." . . . As the Church progresses through the circle year after year, it leads ever higher, spiraling ever up the mountain, for this journey is going somewhere, moving always to a higher level, toward the final goal.¹⁹

Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen,²⁰ along with suggestions made by N. T. Wright, help us to see the biblical narrative as a play in six acts and how that narrative dictates the way we live.

In act one, God creates his kingdom (Gen. 1–2). But by the second act his creatures have rebelled (Gen. 3–11). So God promises to restore the kingdom and bless all nations through Israel—the progeny of Abraham with whom he makes this covenant—a covenant that actually goes back to the promise God made in Genesis 3:15 that Eve's seed would crush the serpent's head. Some theologians have called this initial promise in Genesis 3 the *protoevangelion* or first announcement of the gospel—of the coming of Jesus Christ.²¹

God extended the promise of Genesis 3:15 in the story of Noah and the flood. But it really gets its impetus in act three—the story of Abraham that begins in Genesis 12 and continues with Israel's history throughout the Old Testament.

However, Israel is sent into exile for failing to keep the conditions of the covenant (see Deut. 1–28). Thus, redemption of the creation and reestablishment of God's kingdom must be accomplished by the only faithful Israelite—the God-man, the Messiah (King), Jesus. This is act four, told to us in the four Gospel accounts.

19. Philip H. Pfatteicher, *Journey into the Heart of God: Living the Liturgical Year* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 344.

20. See Bartholomew and Goheen, *Drama of Scripture*.

21. Philip Pfatteicher (*Journey*, 68) notes that Johann Heinrich Wichser (nineteenth century) invented the Advent wreath for a boys' home he founded, and he had the promise in Genesis 3:15 recited by the children as the candle was lit for the first Sunday in Advent.

The preview of the kingdom coming in all of its fullness is portrayed in act five, as the church carries out its mission of living and telling the news of the king and the kingdom, inviting folks to join in; Acts and the Epistles are the script.

Finally, the play concludes with act six, when the king returns, the kingdom is fully restored, and the redemption of creation is complete—essentially the book of Revelation.

So where do we fit into this six-act play? Wright asks us to imagine the following scenario.²² We are members of a Shakespearian acting troop. We have mastered the plays of Shakespeare. Recently a previously unknown six-act play has been found, but the fifth act is incomplete and the sixth is somewhat vague. Nevertheless, because we are imbued with Shakespeare and because we have rehearsed over and over (like a three-year cycle in a lectionary and church calendar) this particular play, when we get to the incomplete fifth act, no one in the audience can tell that it is unfinished because we improvise in a way that fits what *is* available to us. In like manner, we Christians know full well the first four acts, what is available of the fifth, and the gist of the sixth. And so we improvise, living out our lives in a way that corresponds to the conclusion God has determined and toward which the end of the drama is moving. We have been so shaped by the story that those who observe our thoughts and behaviors have no idea that we are improvising during the fifth act.

We were called and baptized to live within God's story—a story about God's mission to restore the creation. It is the true story of the whole world. It is God's story of our world, and God expects us to appropriate this story for ourselves. We do this in worship, especially when we participate in the *anaphora* (literally, “offering”)—the ancient prayer of thanksgiving that has been central to the church's eucharistic liturgy to this day (see the box titled “Part of the *Anaphora* from *The Book of Common Prayer*” for an excerpt). It has a “distinct narrative structure,” which Robert Louis Wilken says “follows biblical precedent. . . . The liturgy kept intact the biblical narrative, and by recounting the story of Israel and Christ in ritual form it confirmed Christian belief that God's fullest revelation came through historical events.”²³ So, in every baptism and every communion service, the church's liturgy educates us and reminds us of the story in which we, as Christians, are living our lives.

Understanding that we are baptized into this story calls into question the ease of so casually referring to salvation with phrases such as “Jesus came

22. N. T. Wright uses this model (of five acts in his case) in several of his writings.

23. Wilken, *Early Christian Thought*, 33.

Table 1
The Acts in the Biblical Drama

“Before the founda- tions of the world” (Eph. 1:4)	ACT 1 Gen. 1–2	ACT 2 Gen. 3	ACT 3 Old Testament	ACT 4 Gospels	ACT 5 Acts & New Tes- tament Epistles	ACT 6 Revelation
Our lives are pre- ceded by a love story.	CREATION	THE FALL	ISRAEL	JESUS CHRIST	THE CHURCH	KINGDOM OF GOD
	Mandate: “Fill the earth” as God’s image- bearers (Gen. 1:26–28).	Genesis 3:15—the “Protoevan- gelium” as the first announce- ment of the coming of a Redeemer— Eve’s seed, Mary’s child.	Genesis 12—God’s covenant with Abra- ham for the sake of the world.	The only faithful Israelite takes on Israel’s punish- ment so the Cov- enant can go forward.	The Body of Christ takes it to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). <i>We are here in the story!</i>	The rec- reation of the fallen cosmos—a renewed heaven and earth.

into my life” and “I accepted Jesus into my heart.” These statements subtly hint that we may still be in control, asking Jesus to come into *our* story. Also, even though Paul often uses the phrase “Christ in us” (thereby making our phrases acceptable), he more often uses the phrase “we are in Christ.” In other words, what if *we* more often referred to our salvation with phrases like, “I have been accepted into Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection” and “I have been baptized into God’s story—into Jesus’s death and resurrection”? The Christian claims not to be merely copying Jesus Christ as a model, like copy- ing a rock star or sports figure, though “putting on Christ” might mean that sometimes the Christian acts like Christ even if she does not yet understand why (Rom. 13:11–14). Nor does one just accept the values of Jesus Christ (as with nineteenth-century liberalism). And neither is this simply following a code of conduct or set of rules for living a respectable moral life. We are not talking about a self-help or self-improvement program that merely “baptizes” insights from psychology with Christian jargon. We have been talking about sharing Christ’s life in an organic way, just as a vine is attached to its branch, just as we are one with Christ and each other as the Son and the Father are one (John 15:1–17 and 17:20–24).

This is precisely what the church’s liturgy calls us to. So how does the church’s eucharistic liturgy with its narrative structure help participants align

Part of the *Anaphora* from *The Book of Common Prayer*

Holy and gracious Father: In your infinite love you made us for yourself; and, when we had fallen into sin and become subject to evil and death, you, in your mercy, sent Jesus Christ, your only and eternal Son, to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to you, the God and Father of all.

their lives with all that God is up to? To answer that, we need to get a general overview of this liturgy.

The Structure and Significance of Christian Worship for Theology

From its early Christian origins the church established a pattern for the order of liturgy (referred to as the *ordo*). The first half of worship was designated the “Liturgy of the Word,” while the second half was the “Liturgy of the Eucharist.” All were invited to participate in the first half, but those who were yet to be baptized were dismissed before the second half in order to be trained (or catechized) in the Faith.

Catechesis means “instruction” in Greek. By the fourth century this catechesis might take two to three years before the catechumen (learner) was baptized on Holy Saturday (the night before Easter Sunday). During Lent (the weeks before Easter) those to be baptized underwent the “scrutinies”—examinations, exorcisms, and prayers—and, before baptism, the “handing over” of the creed (*traditio symboli*) to the catechumens so that they would “hand it back” (*redditio*) by repeating what they had memorized.²⁴ As time went on, catechisms, such as Martin Luther’s, included instruction organized around the Apostles’ Creed (what Christians believe), the Ten Commandments (how Christians live), and the Lord’s Prayer (how Christians worship).

The Liturgy of the Word, in which all participated, began with the gathering, calling the people to worship. This might involve a greeting (such as “The Lord be with you”), a prayer of preparation, and a collect (a prayer prayed by the priest²⁵ that “collects” the thoughts of the people and expresses the theme of the day). As Simon Chan develops it, gathering means the church comes from the world to be church—to be the new creation.²⁶ This is a “grand

24. See Pfatteicher, *Journey*, 142.

25. Note that priest is a shortened form of the Greek word *presbyter*, which is usually translated “elder.”

26. See Simon Chan, *Liturgical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 130–34.

entrance,” as Edith Humphrey calls it: the church enters into a space, time, and fellowship that is larger than what it sees.²⁷ But this then situates the church between the call to gather and the dismissal at the end of worship when the church reenters the world that is yet to be fully redeemed. It becomes a reminder to the church that we live between the “already” and the “not yet” of the kingdom. This is especially prominent in Eastern Orthodox worship,²⁸ since the liturgy and the sanctuary are meant to represent heaven. For a few hours the church experiences its true reality and a reality that is yet to come.

Alexander Schmemmann captures this so well:

It is not an escape from the world, rather it is the arrival at a vantage point from which we can see more deeply into the reality of the world.

The journey begins when Christians leave their homes and beds. They leave, indeed, their life in this present and concrete world, and whether they have to drive fifteen miles or walk a few blocks, a sacramental act is already taking place, an act which is the very condition of everything else that is to happen. For they are now on their way to *constitute the Church*, or to be more exact, to be transformed into the Church of God. . . . And now they have been called to “come together in one place,” to bring their lives, their very “world” with them and to be more than what they were: a *new* community with a new life. . . . The purpose is to *fulfill the Church*, and that means to make present the One to whom all things are at their *end*, and all things are at their *beginning*.²⁹

The Liturgy of the Word continued with the reading of Scripture. The Scripture for the day might involve more than one passage. In fact, as the lectionary evolved, the Scripture that was read included a passage from the Old Testament, a New Testament Epistle, and the Gospels, with a psalm or portion of a psalm. After the readings, a homily or sermon explained what had been read. Typically the recitation of the creed (Apostles’ or Nicene) followed as the church’s response to the written and preached Word—kind of a “pledge of allegiance” to the One who has just, once again, made himself known in Scripture and sermon. Intercessions (prayers for the concerns of the church and the world) would often follow.

27. See Edith M. Humphrey, *Grand Entrance: Worship on Earth as in Heaven* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2011).

28. The Christian church is divided into three communities: Eastern Orthodox (which includes communions such as Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Coptic, etc.), Roman Catholic, and Protestant (which is further divided into Lutheran, Reformed, Anabaptist, and Anglican camps).

29. Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1973), 27 (italics original).

The Liturgy of the Eucharist or the Table began with the church's offerings, including the presentation of the bread and wine to be used in the Eucharist.³⁰ This was followed by prayers (such as asking God to set apart this common bread and wine for this holy purpose), the Lord's Prayer (a prayer that only the baptized could pray, since it begins with the address "Our Father"; see Gal. 4:6), the exchange of peace (the first words with which the resurrected Jesus greeted his disciples; see John 20:19, 21), and communion. The service concluded with a dismissal (from which we get the word "Mass") that sent the worshipers back out into the world as witnesses of what they had heard, seen, and tasted in worship.

Table 2
The Order of Worship

The Liturgy of the Word		The Liturgy of the Eucharist	
Gathering	The Word	Eucharist	Dismissal
God welcomes us into God's presence.	We hear the Word of God read (Scripture) and preached (sermon).	We join in the prayers and communion.	We are sent back into the world in love and service.

A chart comparing all the details of the liturgy in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox liturgies is found in Fernando Arzolo Jr., *Exploring Worship: Catholic, Evangelical, and Orthodox Perspectives* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 50–51.

Where Are We Going from Here?

As we work our way through essential Christian beliefs, we will pay close attention to the ways that these beliefs have been generated out of and expressed in the community that has been shaped by its language and rituals—language and rituals that ultimately go back to their founder, Jesus Christ.³¹ The first Christian confession of faith, "Jesus is Lord," was both a declaration used in worship and an assertion of doctrine. It also reflected the life of those who made that claim. Here we begin our exploration of what it means to believe and worship and live as disciples of Jesus Christ.

30. *Eucharist* is another word for communion. It comes from the Greek *eucharistos*, meaning "thanksgiving," as in the words of the biblical text that "the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it" (1 Cor. 11:23–24).

31. We must also remember that Jesus was a Jew, as were the first disciples and the earliest New Testament church. So some of the language and rituals have been influenced by Jewish practices, not to mention the Hellenistic (Greek) and Roman culture in which the church developed.