

## CHAPTER 1

# Christian Ethics as Informed Prayer

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The aim of this volume is to stretch, inspire, and develop the reader's conception of Christian worship in order to challenge, enrich, and transform the reader's notions of the form and content of Christian ethics. To suggest that assumptions about Christian worship could benefit from an overhaul might be regarded as uncontroversial. To suggest, however, that assumptions about Christian ethics might be altered, and, furthermore, that that alteration might take place through the exploration of the liturgy, might come as rather more of a surprise. The purpose of this chapter is to explain why the authors of this volume have chosen to perceive the discipline of Christian ethics through the lens of Christian worship, most particularly the Eucharist.

The book is written for those who sense that the problem with Christian ethics is not just the complexity and elusiveness of the questions it faces, but also the methods and environments in which it is understood to be studied. Hence the book is written in a style that is designed to be accessible to an introductory student, but it is hoped that even the most experienced practitioner in the field will have much to discover and ponder in its pages. The issues raised concern not just Christian ethics but Christian theology as well. Christians approach worship with an expectation that God will be made known through the liturgy, and Christians who approach ethics in ways informed by worship come with a similar expectation that God will be made known in their deliberations, investigations, and discernment. The study of how God is made known is, of course, generally regarded as the field of theology, and it is hoped that students who find the living God in the pages of this study will pursue their enquiry through more conventional theological literature.

## Why Study Ethics Through Worship?

But first we must confront the understandable reaction that may come from some quarters that to study the practice of worship is no way to explore the field of Christian ethics. What has the altar to do with the lecture hall? The connection of the two may seem incongruous to many, absurd to some. The simplest reason for this reaction is that the connection has not often been made. Its apparent novelty might seem to be its weakness. For those involved in pastoral ministry, the disconnection of the two is frequently experienced as a cause of great bewilderment. So often it appears that lay Christians have a thriving life of personal devotion, an active life within a worshipping community, and an engaged life fulfilling a range of professional and public roles in the workplace, neighborhood, and family; but comparatively seldom do lay Christians have an equally developed way of bringing these three parts of their discipleship together. Similarly, a great many theologians, at every level of seniority, have a corresponding range of involvements and commitments. But how often do the convictions and assumptions that shape one aspect of life genuinely interact with the key dynamics of another?

For a certain view of ethics – perhaps a dominant one within the academy over recent generations – this is just as it should be. The assumption has been made (or the aspiration has been held) that ethics is something *more* than worship – that it is broader, or deeper, or more objective, or more significant. Hence worship has been relegated to the lower divisions of the academy, regarded as the realm of the “merely pious,” open to sociological and psychological investigation certainly, but remote from the frontiers of truth. Of the reasons why worship has tended to be separated from ethics, four appear to stand out.

(1) Ethics is about the real, worship is about the unreal. This kind of assumption can be expressed in a number of different ways. Ethics is about the tangible, worship about the spiritual. Ethics is about the real world, in which it is taken for granted that the flesh is weak, people break their promises, and every motive is mixed. Worship aspires to the ideal world, in which hearts find their rest in God, resolutions are kept, and heavenly justice and peace rain down. In short, ethics knows that people are bad, worship tries to make them good. More subtly, worship is a kind of play, a temporary escape from real life to an environment where normal rules are suspended; by contrast, ethics is serious, by no means play, and an uncompromising squaring up to the sometimes unpleasant responsibilities and requirements of adult life.

Such an understanding stands very much in the tradition of Immanuel Kant. His distinction between the immanent world of experience available to us through our senses, and the unreachable (though interesting) transcendent world of which religious language speaks, has been immensely influential and represents the foundation of conventional distinctions between doctrine and ethics. It undergirds all perspectives that regard talk of God as speculation, while describing talk of ourselves, human beings, as observation.

This book challenges these assumptions because its authors believe that, contrary to the popular slogan, *life is a rehearsal*. Worship is indeed a kind of play with a differ-

ent set of rules – for, without such games, who would recognize that “real” life is also a set of games with their own rules? Worship has a set of rules that time, tradition, and providence have honed and honored, and Christians believe the set of rules they practice and embody in worship is a *good* set of rules, a set by which they may identify and judge other sets. In the process they may critique the kinds of binary distinctions that appear to make terms like “unreal,” “spiritual,” and “ideal” meaningful and, at the same time, secondary, exposing the social locations and power relations of those who unselfconsciously describe their own perspective as “real.” More ambitiously, many of the authors of this volume would go further in terms of outnarrating Kant, and suggest that life is in fact a rehearsal for worship – that, within an eschatological perspective, it is worship for which humanity and the creation were made, and it is worship that will make up the greater part of eternity, within which what is called “life” and “the real” will appear to be a tiny blip.

(2) Worship is about beauty, ethics is about the good. (The logic would generally follow that theology – or philosophy – is about truth.) A set of corresponding assumptions follow, which see worship as subjective, ethics as objective. Worship is about the heart, ethics about the head. It may, for example, be supposed that ethics is about judgments of right and wrong, whereas worship is more about discerning what is “fitting.” It may be assumed that ethics is about establishing unarguable reasons for decision, while worship is about exploring aesthetic grounds for choice. More significantly, worship is an activity in which only a limited number of people, perhaps a minority in North Atlantic cultures, would see themselves as engaging. It is therefore a practice for only some, whereas ethics is generally taken to be a discipline that has a bearing on everybody. Worship is something of an occasional voluntary pastime, whereas ethics touches on an obligation for which one may be accountable at any time.

This set of understandings rests on an assumption that goodness, truth, and beauty are detachable from one another, so that they may even come into conflict with one another. It is one of the foundations of modern liberal democratic culture that this detachment is not only possible, but is also necessary, if peoples with diverging and even contradictory perceptions of goodness, truth, and beauty are to live among one another without violent conflict. What tends to happen, however, is that a different set of “forms,” notably the functional, the instrumental, and the transferable, become the central language of liberal democratic culture. These are regarded as “objective,” and those who insist on talking of, still less practicing, goodness, truth, and beauty are tolerated under the label “subjective.” Ethics therefore deals with the functional, the instrumental, and the transferable, leaving worship muddling along in the backwaters of goodness, truth, and beauty.

This book challenges the distinction between “subjective” and “objective” that characterizes these assumptions. This challenge shares the already-mentioned suspicion about binary distinctions that presuppose the speaker has the global view. It distrusts the notion of “objectivity,” if objectivity assumes there was ever such a thing as a disinterested observer. It similarly questions the idea that goodness, truth, and beauty are detachable from one another. For, in worship, Christians seek the God who combines all three, while maintaining their overflowing abundance. To exemplify or amplify one in no way reduces or downplays either of the others. Worship proclaims a universality

that invites people to unite about where they are going to, not to dissent about where they are coming from. There is no shortage of goodness, truth, and beauty: there is no need for competition for scarce resources, or deliberation over their just distribution.

Meanwhile, worship challenges assumptions about what goodness, truth, and beauty mean in the light of the Gospel. That which might appear to exemplify beauty may look very different in the context of worship. For example, as preachers, we have both found that in almost every congregation in which we have preached regularly, across every social class, there has been at least one adult who would leave no rhetorical question unanswered. Such a feature of worship, such an embodiment of the way a community can welcome, nurture, and empower people who might be seen as having a disadvantage or a disability, might on first, perhaps jarring, encounter be regarded as undermining the goodness, truth, and beauty of the liturgy, but, on deeper reflection, might be relished as embodying all three.

(3) Worship is about the internal, ethics is about the external. This perception is similar to the subjective-objective assumption discussed previously, but it rests rather more on a distinction familiar in contemporary culture. Ethics is public, worship is private. To put it a different way, ethics is political, worship is (or should be) apolitical. Ethics is concerned with the good ordering of issues that affect the public sphere – crises over the beginning and ending of life; questions over the conduct of business, medicine, and technological research; the rights and wrongs of war; justice, the distribution of wealth, and human rights. Worship has no specific contributions to these questions – it merely concentrates on reconciling people with their God. (An exception is often made for issues that are considered to belong in the “private” sphere – notably questions of sexual relationships and the family.)

This portrayal of ethics and worship clearly rests on a very particular notion of politics. Here is a remarkably tidy world, where every question that arises can be filed neatly under either “public” or “private.” Politics is about the reasoned distribution of scarce resources, about the efficient management of publicly accountable and fiscally funded services, about the maintenance of order and the integrity of borders, about the upholding of legitimate rights and the respect for diverse expression. In this notion of politics, ethics is likely to be drawn into the constraints of the legislative process, the reduction of what is right to what can become legal, the exaltation of tolerance and the tendency to address the virtues – justice, truth-telling, peacemaking – as if they could be isolated from one another and fulfilled alone.

By contrast, this book portrays a rival perception of politics. It aspires to a politics that discerns the best use of the unlimited gifts of God, rather than the just distribution of the limited resources of the world. It regards the contrast between public and private as yet another binary distinction that misrepresents the call of the Gospel and the nature of the Christian life. For example, in baptism, Christians (or those speaking on their behalf) are called to give up any sense that they “own” their bodies. So the notion of “private” makes no sense. Yet this creates a profound conception of politics, seen now as the best working of an organism – the body of Christ – that sees itself as being genuinely a body, rather than a mass of discrete individuals. Worship is, or aspires to be, the manifestation of the best ordering of that body, and is thus the most significantly political – the most “ethical” – thing that Christians do.

(4) Finally, worship is about words, ethics is about action. This may seem a strange way of talking about ethics, which, for a discipline that is taken in this sense to be about action, has nonetheless generated a remarkable number of words. So it may help to give another corresponding portrayal. Worship commemorates the past, ethics empowers the present – and prepares for the future. Or again, worship is about stories from the past, ethics is about life in the present.

This perception rests on a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of worship. Worship is about words and actions. Worship is an ordered series of activities that Christians carry out regularly together in obedience to Jesus' command, as a way of becoming more like him, and as a witness to God's world. Words constitute these actions as well as enrich and amplify what is done. This is an easy point to miss in an age of constant liturgical renewal, driven largely by the production of huge numbers of words, available in every kind of paper and electronic format. This mass of words should not obscure the fact that Christian worship is shaped primarily by instructions and habits of action: "Baptize them ...," "Do this ...," "Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup," "When two or three are gathered."

Worship does indeed commemorate the past, because it sees the past as the theater of God's definitive and self-revelatory actions in his world. But worship also anticipates the future, particularly through the Eucharist, in which Christians share a meal that anticipates the heavenly banquet. Ethics that has no conception of good patterns of action, treasured from the past; that has no place to go to find communities that inhabit such corporate action in the present; and that has no embodied configuration of the communal eschatological future to anticipate: this is a discipline that is almost bound to experience its context as one of daunting scarcity. The liturgy offers ethics a series of ordered practices that shape the character and assumptions of Christians, and suggest habits and models that inform every aspect of corporate life – meeting people, acknowledging fault and failure, celebrating, thanking, reading, speaking with authority, reflecting on wisdom, naming truth, registering need, bringing about reconciliation, sharing food, renewing purpose. This is the basic staple of corporate Christian life – not simply for clergy, or for those in religious orders, but for lay Christians, week in, week out. It is the most regular way in which most Christians remind themselves and others that they are Christians. It is the most significant way in which Christianity takes flesh, evolving from a set of ideas and convictions to a set of practices and a way of life.

## How Does the Liturgy Inform and Shape the Christian Life?

The American Roman Catholic priest Vincent Donovan was sent in the late 1960s to evangelize the Masai people of Tanzania. In his remarkable book, *Christianity Rediscovered*, he portrays the successes and failures of the mission. In vivid terms he describes how a series of communities came to grasp the significance of the Eucharist, and how the regular practice of the liturgy informed and shaped their common life.

Reluctant to pass on to new converts the more rigid and formalistic aspect of Roman Catholic liturgy, Donovan began with the essentials.

The first Masses in the new Masai communities were simplicity itself. I would take bread and wine, without any preceding or following ritual, and say to the people: "... On the night before he died, Jesus took bread and wine into his hands, blessed them and said, 'This is my body. This is the cup of my blood of the New Covenant, poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Do this in my memory.'" That served as Offertory, Preface and Canon. The people took it from there. (Donovan, 1982: 121–2)

But already the ethical dimensions of this practice were profound, and were lost on no one. There was no tradition of Masai men eating with Masai women. Women, due to their status and condition in the culture, were understood to pollute such food as was consumed. This raised a serious problem about how it might be possible to share the bread and wine of the Eucharist. But it also sharpened the significance of the Gospel as one that recognized neither slave nor free, neither Jew nor Greek, neither male nor female. That Gospel was one the Masai were free to accept or reject; but if they accepted it, a social revolution was likely to come with it. They did accept it, after a traumatic period of discernment; and a group of teenage girls told Donovan later that the "good news" was really good news for them.

Donovan began to develop some misgivings, however, that the Eucharist had almost too significant a role in the people's notion of Church:

At one point I thought the people were badly confusing the meaning of the Eucharist, or that of the church, or both. They already referred to the church as the *orporor*, the brotherhood. Now, from time to time, I heard them calling the Eucharist the *orporor sinyati*, the holy *orporor*, or the holy brotherhood. They would ask questions like 'Next time you come, are we holding or making the holy *orporor*?' It did not seem to make sense until I remembered St Paul's saying, 'This bread that we break, is it not the *koinonia* of the body and blood of Christ?' ... These Masai communities did, in fact, build up and make the church in each Eucharist they celebrated. (Donovan 1982: 123)

The Masai's way of resolving arguments was for one person to offer a tuft of grass (the vital food of cattle) and a second to accept it, as a guarantee and embodiment of peace. And this helped the elders to decide whether there was to be a Eucharist on a certain day.

We had tried to teach these people that it was not easy to achieve the Eucharist. It was not an act of magic achieved by the saying of a few words in the right order. ... If the life of the village had been less than human or holy, there was no Mass. If there had been selfishness or hatefulness and lack of forgiveness ... let them not make a sacrilege out of it by calling it the Body of Christ. And the leaders did decide occasionally that, despite the prayers and readings and discussions, if the grass had stopped, if someone, or some group, in the village had refused to accept the grass as the sign of the peace of Christ, there would be no Eucharist at this time. (Donovan 1982: 127)

With this understanding of the Eucharist, it became the principal way in which the priest and people discerned the good for their common life. A highly significant example of this came in relation to another tribe, the Sonjo, who were expert dancers. In the hands of the Sonjo, the Eucharist took on a new dimension. It became the practice

through which the community discerned the good. The following words epitomize the understanding this volume seeks to present of the role of worship in ethics.

They brought their music directly to the place where the bread and wine were later to be blessed, and performed it there deliberately and carefully. Some of their music was decidedly secular. The elders in that community pointed out to me that the purpose of such a procedure was to make an actual judgement on a very important area of their lives. The time of the Eucharist was the time for that judgement. They were not ashamed of that dance in their own lives, so they wanted that part of their lives to be offered with the Eucharist. There were some dances they were ashamed to bring into the Eucharist. By that very fact, a judgement had been made on them. Such dances should no longer be a part of their lives at all. Eucharist served as judgement for them. (Donovan 1982: 125)

It will be clear by now that the ethos of this volume is entirely constructive. While the “judgement” of the Eucharist found some aspects of the Sonjo’s culture wanting, so likewise the judgement of the Eucharist as explored in this volume finds some aspects of contemporary culture and some of the methods often used in Christian ethics wanting. In particular, a number of chapters find that the consumer culture prevailing in contemporary North Atlantic countries and elsewhere creates a hazy mist through which it is difficult to see the Gospel, indeed any aspect of life, straight. By suggesting that worship, especially the Eucharist, offers a lens through which to see life, this volume seeks to offer to its readers what Vincent Donovan offered to the Masai: a corporate practice for discerning the good. And it is not a new practice: it is one that has been at the heart of many of the world’s cultures for hundreds of years.

## Worship as a Series of Practices

Because the Eucharist incorporates so many practices, one could easily fall into the habit of using the term in a sweeping manner, to suggest that the Eucharist is the answer to every question that arises in contemporary Christian ethics. This is a danger, because not only does it risk overlooking the detail of what those specific practices are and how they are best carried out, but it can also slip into making the Eucharist an abstraction, a theoretical panacea detached from embodied practice – the very opposite of the intention. Thus, even though the Eucharist must always be understood as a whole, this volume largely treats it as an ordered series of specific practices. By so doing, detailed attention may be given to these particular practices, and concentrated emphasis may rest on how the performance of these practices shapes the character of Christians and the mind of the Church as a whole.

The volume is shaped in an ecumenical spirit, and includes contributors from the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, Mennonite, and Pentecostal traditions. The outline of the Eucharist is intended not to mimic that performed in any one of these traditions alone, but nonetheless to take a form that any Christian would recognize. Indeed, no effort has been made to elide differing perceptions of the nature and significance of aspects of the liturgy. The variety of ecclesial identification is part of the reality of the Church, and conflict is part of that heritage. To establish an internal

consistency in the volume that ignored the unhealed divisions in the Church would be hopeful but less than truthful.

The practices of the Eucharist have been treated under five broad sequential headings. (It is taken for granted that, contrary to some popular usage, the term “Eucharist” refers to every action of the liturgy from greeting to dismissal, not simply to the specific activities of blessing and consuming the bread and the wine.) All the headings are participles, emphasizing the kinetic, or action-based, emphasis of this volume’s understanding of worship. No effort has been made to make each chapter’s treatment of a particular moment in the liturgy an exclusive one. It is inevitable and right that most of the chapters treat not only their specific practice but make reference to other practices in the liturgy and in some cases to the Eucharist as a whole. There is bound to be a small dimension of arbitrariness in the way the practices and the ethical “issues” have been assigned, but the reader is encouraged to treat the volume as a whole, rather than to judge the argument on any one particular chapter. The overall objective is to take worship from being a curiosity in ethical discussion to being considered so significant that it is taken for granted in every debate and permitted to generate questions that shape the whole discipline.

The first heading, describing the first group of practices, is “Meeting God and One Another.” This refers to the four principal introductory activities that most congregations carry out early in their time together. They gather; they greet God and one another; they confess sin; and they celebrate forgiveness and other blessings, often musically. The chapters on the themes of gathering and greeting consider the social and political significance of the very fact that Christians gather at all, and the questions of identity and purpose that arise from such basic elements of being Church. The chapters on praise and celebration consider how hymn singing and similar practices inform the Church’s understanding of the arts in general, and modern communication in particular; and an additional chapter reflects on the way the developmentally disabled may in some cases praise more readily than they may reason. The chapter on confessing sin focuses on how the practice of reconciliation might shape general understandings of juridical punishment.

The second group of practices is called “Re-Encountering the Story.” This is perhaps the most conventional part of the volume, because it considers how the Scripture shapes the character of Christians and the mind of the Church. But this section is interested in the Scripture not just as a written text, but as a performed and enacted Word. Thus reading and preaching are only two of the practices discussed; there is also consideration of the discipline of listening, the recital of the Nicene Creed, and, most easily missed, the pause between sermon and creed, in which the body discerns the ways in which the truth of the Gospel reveals both God and the world for what they are and empowers the Church to anticipate, experience, and participate in liberation. The chapters in this section consider such significant issues as authority, justice, truth, and description, issues that underlie any approach to Christian ethics.

The third group of practices is treated under the name “Being Embodied.” This is the point in the service, after the proclamation of the Word, in which other elements may be included before the sharing of food begins. Hence the volume includes two specific practices that are not a part of most celebrations of the Eucharist, but are a part of



some – namely baptism and marriage. All the chapters in this section consider aspects of what it means for the Church to regard itself as living as one body. The practice of intercession is considered in relation both to human need (poverty) and one highly influential model of response to scarcity (management). The question of posture in relation to gender and sex is also addressed here. Baptism offers a series of practices that shape Christians' understanding of the body, and thus is the right way in which to consider abortion and cloning. It also provides a poignant context for a theological consideration of race. Likewise, marriage is about a shared embodiment. And lastly, the sharing of the peace provides a corresponding chapter to that on confessing sin, underlining the practices necessary to maintain trust and thus sustain the body, and a consideration of class.

The fourth and largest group of practices considers the preparation and consumption of the eucharistic food itself, and this section is called "Re-Enacting the Story." The first three chapters address the material of the Eucharist and the way it is handled, and reflect on how this informs Christians' relationship with the material world. The next two chapters reflect on the powerful forces at work at the altar, and notions such as sacrifice that emphasize the dimension in which blessing and breaking bread is the heart of the Christian response to what seem to be the most powerful forces in the world – such as war and capitalism. After that come three chapters that meditate on the practice of eating together as the definitive form of Christian witness, and the way in which this simple but profound activity might shape a wide range of issues from euthanasia to homosexuality. The last two chapters in this section all consider the "conclusion" of the meal, and include differing notions of how the meal ends and the way those different endings offer significant statements about the Church's understanding of its membership, purpose, and witness.

The final group of practices concerns the two principal ways in which the service as a whole is completed. There are two reflections on being blessed, one that addresses the notion of blessing as material abundance, another that treats blessing in terms of having and rearing children. Last comes the dismissal, and the comprehensive understanding of how what has taken place in the service has informed, shaped, changed, or transformed the body and whether it will now better carry out its vocation in the world.

## A Story

Some years ago, one of us became the priest-in-charge of a small church in a notoriously marginalized and antagonistic neighborhood. One distressing aspect of life there was that services would frequently be interrupted by children and young people who were not interested in participating, but nonetheless took to bursting in, looking for attention and hoping to get some kind of a reaction. On one particular occasion, at the Sunday Eucharist, things became more sinister. A gang of seven surly 12- and 13-year-old boys entered the church purposefully just as the prayer of consecration had been completed and the bread was being broken. They strode up and stood tall across the altar. The leader, pointing at the consecrated bread, said, "Are you going to give us some

of that?” The congregation winced – not just from horror (sadly, this was no more than an extreme example of confrontational behavior), but because the question of how best to respond in such circumstances had for some time caused a good deal of conflict amongst the regular church members. It was time to put the consecrated bread down for a few moments, and try persuasion. The words flowed. “If you look behind you, you will see a small group of people who are here to do the most important thing in their lives. I don’t think this is the most important thing in your life. I hope it may become so one day. But for now, I suggest you wait outside until we’ve finished, and then we’ll have a chat about what things are really important and how we learn how to do them.” Contrary to expectation, the boys did exactly as they were asked. A conversation followed the service, about what things matter, how to treat oneself, people, and things, and whom to trust.

This book is written to inform such a conversation. It is written to show how the Eucharist really is the most important thing we do in our lives. And it is inspired by the congregation in that challenging neighborhood, and others like them, who have allowed their characters to be shaped by the worship of the living God, who accompanies God’s disciples, and is made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

## Reference

Donovan, Vincent (1982) *Christianity Rediscovered* (London: SCM).