

The Way of the Gift

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In his classic work on stewardship Helge Brattgard said that "it is only as the Spirit of God, working through Word and Sacrament, leads [people] to be grateful for spiritual and material gifts received, and to see their responsibility for the administration of these gifts, that congregational life can result."¹ Unfortunately, after making this wonderful assertion, he like most other writers on stewardship remained surprisingly silent about how liturgical action and the broader life of the Christian shape one another.²

Given the history of Lutheran polemics regarding sacrifice and offering perhaps the silence should not surprise us. Who would willingly enter that arena of liturgical and theological debate if it could be avoided? And given the controversy over ministry, to which the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is spending five years of study, it might be considered downright foolish to combine reflection on offering and priesthood. Yet the effort is worth making because the issues are central to Christian identity and witness. If the content of the Gospel is God's self-giving, then the nature of the exchange generated between giver and receiver is the heart of theology.

1. Helge Brattgard, *God's Stewards*, trans. Gene J. Lund (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1963) 20.

2. For example, such standard works on stewardship as these provide no interpretation of the role of the offertory: T. A. Kantonen, *A Theology for Christian Stewardship* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1956); Luke T. Johnson, *Sharing Possessions* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981); Redmond Mullin, *The Wealth of Christians* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986); Douglas John Hall, *Imaging God. Dominion as Stewardship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986).

Three broad questions inform this exploration: What is intended by the structure and content of our words and actions when in worship we "offer with joy and thanksgiving . . . our selves, our time and our possessions?" How is this liturgical action connected to the day to day use of the gifts thus offered? And does our common priesthood provide a theological link between the first two questions and their answers?

Keeping the broad questions in mind we shall explore: 1) the common priesthood; 2) the act of offering; 3) the structure of the offertory rite; 4) the texts of the offertory rite; 5) theological commentary; and then 6) draw conclusions.

The Common Priesthood

The images in I Peter 2:9, "you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people," provide perhaps the most compact yet clearest assertion of Christian corporate identity in the New Testament. They are images drawn from a rich heritage of descriptions which interpret the relationship between God and God's people. This passage was the biblical foundation for Luther's understanding of priesthood, and his 1522 sermons on I Peter explain its implications.³ Rather than explore the biblical heritage I will turn directly to Luther since our use of his reflections on priesthood seems to be the source of our never-ending controversy over ministry.

Confusion among Lutherans about what ministry is could easily be resolved if Luther had made a sharp distinction between the tasks of priesthood and the pastoral office. "We are all priests through baptism, but not all are

3. WA 12, 309, 1-10 (LW 30, 55); Cf. WA 12, 189, 17-27 and 40-41 (LW 40, 34); 190, 1-26 (40, 34-35), and WA 6, 408, 11ff. (LW 44, 129). WA = *D. Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Herman Boehlaus Nachfolger); LW = *Luther's Works, American Edition*. Gen. eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press).

pastors," said Luther in the 1520 work *To the Christian Nobility*.⁴ Fine, all are priests and some are pastors. If the functions of each are clearly delineated we can arrive at a differentiation of the two roles. But such differentiation is not accessible in Luther's explanations because the overlapping of his descriptions generates the confusion.

In the sermon on I Peter 2:9 Luther first made it clear that the text was not supporting any clergy-laity distinction, nor was it presenting a case for a twofold priesthood, an "external priesthood" and a "spiritual priesthood."⁵ What Luther wanted to deny was a mediatorial, sacrificial power on the part of some Christians (those externally anointed priests) over against all others (the spiritual priesthood). This argument was still set in the context of the positions enunciated in 1520 concerning the sacrifice of the mass and a sacramental system controlled by an elite group whose access to God was conceived differently from all others who constituted the assembly.

The difficulty is not Luther's denial of a mediatorial priestly class but rather his efforts to state the positive content of the roles of priest and pastor. He could say that because Christ is the only true priest and we are all united with him as brothers and sisters through our baptism, "all Christians have the authority, the command,

4. WA 12, 307, 10-12 (LW 30, 53): "We ask further whether St. Peter is differentiating between spiritual and secular, as today one calls the priests the clergy and the other Christians the laity." Cf. WA 12, 180, 24-28 (LW 40, 22): "But some imagine a twofold priesthood, one spiritual and common to all, the other external and limited, and say that Peter here speaks of the spiritual one. But what is the function of this limited and external office? Is it not to declare the wonderful deeds of God? But this Peter enjoins on the spiritual and universal priesthood."

5. WA 12, 308, 4-7 (LW 30, 54).

and the obligation to preach, to come before God, to pray for one another, and to offer themselves as a sacrifice to God."⁶ The point seems to be that no one can stand between the individual Christian and God by claiming to offer the only efficacious access to God. If Luther were then to make the contrasting point, that to speak publicly rather than privately is the role of the pastoral office, the distinction would be clear. He did make that distinction, but in fact spoke of the roles in ways that seem to combine them: "the first office, that of the ministry of the Word, therefore, is common to all Christians."⁷

Luther undoubtedly wanted to prevent any group from claiming special favor *coram Deo* (before God), for that would be a denial of Christ's saving death and resurrection opening the kingdom of heaven to all believers without regard for status. If ordination resulted in the creation of such a priestly class it was contrary to the Gospel:

This is the true priesthood. As we have heard it embraces these three things: to offer spiritual sacrifices, to pray for the congregation, and to preach. [Whoever] can do this is a priest. They are all obliged to preach the Word, to pray for the congregation, and to sacrifice themselves before God. Let those fools go their way who call the spiritual estate "priests," who, after all, exercise no office other than being tonsured and anointed. If shaving the head and anointing made one a priest,

6. WA 12, 180, 17-18 (LW 40, 21). Cf. 180, 1-6 (LW 40, 21): "Mostly the functions of a priest are these: to teach, to preach and proclaim the word of God, to baptize, to consecrate or administer the Eucharist, to bind and loose sins, to pray for others, to sacrifice, and to judge of all the doctrine and spirits. Certainly these are splendid and royal duties. But the first and foremost of all on which everything else depends, is the teaching of the Word of God."

7. WA 12, 309, 24-31 (LW 30, 55).

I could even oil and appoint the hoofs of an ass and make him a priest too.⁸

That there was to be a distinction, however, was somehow rooted in a contrast between the individual priestly responsibility to pray and preach in terms of personal witness and the public pastoral responsibility to speak to and for the whole assembly. In other words the existence of an office distinguished from the priesthood was manifest throughout Luther's argument.

When he explained that the content of the universal priesthood granted to every believer without distinction was to pray and preach, etc., he clearly meant that each person was, as a "little Christ," mediator of the Gospel to any brother or sister. When the assembly gathered as a worshipping community the public role of such Gospel proclamation was to be limited to one "chosen from the whole group and appointed." Luther stated it again later in the sermon when he said that "some can be selected from the congregation who are officeholders and servants and are appointed to preach in the congregation and to administer the sacraments. But we are all priests before God if we are Christians."⁹ He went on to argue that he would like to see the words priest and Christian used synonymously.

The key for making sense of the overlapping definitions and apparent contradictions is the issue of identification. The individual Christian is identified in Baptism as one who has access to the promises of God in Christ, both to speak and hear them. The ordained person, on the other hand, has an identity only in relation to a specific community, but consequently also to the whole Church insofar as that specific community is the local embodiment of it.

8. WA 12, 309, 1-10 (LW 30, 55). Cf. WA 12, 193-195 (LW 40, 40-42).

9. WA 12, 317, 4-7 (LW 30, 63).

The priesthood of individual Christians cannot exist without the community, apart from the story mutually told as an objective "external word" of God over against one's personal subjectivity. But the community's priestly identity extends beyond its visible assembly for worship. Contact with the "priestly" proclamation of the Gospel is not restricted to those moments when the community is assembled.

All Christians are united in their access to God through the one priest Jesus Christ because in being united with him through Baptism all Christians are priests. No one can ever claim to control access to God on behalf of others because it is a public, communal reality. Neither can any individual Christian claim sole possession of the Word separated from the community that bears it. The famous phrase "priesthood of all believers" must be understood as a communal reality before it can be appreciated as an affirmation of the individual's priesthood. Even the latter is necessarily rooted in one's meeting God in Christ through the "external word" so that the communal aspect is never absent. As John's Gospel puts it, no one has ever seen God (1:18). For Christians, revelation--God's gift of self--is always mediated. It is mediated by the community that is the body of Christ in the world--a common priesthood. For that reason "mediate" provides a linguistic clue that leads us to discover the power of Christian eucharistic "offering" as a unique gift exchange that can unite two supposed enemies--sacrifice and sacrament.

Lewis Hyde argued in his provocative book, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*,¹⁰ that gifts can be agents of change (we might say "conversion"), the bearers of new life:

gifts carry an identity with them, and to accept the gift amounts to incorporating the new identity. It is as if such a gift passes through the body and

10. Lewis Hyde, *The Gift* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

leaves us altered. The gift is not merely the witness or guardian to new life, but the creator. I want to speak of "teachings" as my primary example here. I do not mean schoolbook lessons, I mean those infrequent lessons in living that alter, even save, our lives (p. 45).

if the teaching begins to "take," the recipient feels gratitude . . . gratitude [understood] as a labor undertaken by the soul to effect the transformation after a gift has been received. . . . it is only when the gift has worked in us that we can give it away again. Passing the gift along is an act of gratitude accomplished until we have the power to give the gift on our own terms. Therefore, the end of the labor of gratitude is similarity with the gift or with its donor (p. 47).

That may sound a bit too much like Eastern Orthodox divinization to suit some, or even smack of synergism. The truth in such reactions reminds us to be cautious in how we use Hyde's analysis. Yet the relationship of giving and receiving focused in the liturgical act of eucharistic offering *is* the kind of exchange Hyde describes. And it creates week by week a gracious path for Christian life which can well be described as the way of the gift.

In the rather complex act of liturgical "offering" the sacrificial self-giving that Christian priesthood is and the sacramental self-giving that God's incarnation in Jesus is embrace. And the embrace bears witness to the world that God and humanity belong to one another in a particular way. For Christians the *leitourgia* of assembly and the *leitourgia* of daily life are inescapably, inextricably bound to each other because they are one gift--with the one Spirit of one Lord animating both. I want now to argue that in the dialogical act of the eucharistic offering this unity is most richly symbolized.

The Act of Offering

In 1985 the Lutheran Church in America's Division for Parish Services (DPS) published a brief pamphlet titled "The Offering As An Act of Worship."¹¹ The point of the title seems self-evident. The question is why it was thought necessary to make the point at all. Compare the comments of two of our Lutheran predecessors in liturgical study. Paul Strodach in *A Manual on Worship* argued:

The offering of our gifts of money is an act of worship and not merely a "collection." It is to be very carefully emphasized as a formal act of the congregation's worship and a distinct part of The Liturgy, in particular of the Offertory. This action in every part is offering.

The "offering" of the gifts at the altar in behalf of the givers by their pastor with prayer and blessing is a consecration of these gifts to the service of God.¹²

Luther Reed in *The Lutheran Liturgy* stated similarly: "[The Offering] is an act of worship and an acknowledgment of our stewardship. The congregation offers to God the gifts of its substance, as the outward sign of its inner, spiritual dedication to the Lord."¹³

If we need to remind one another that the offering is an act of worship is it because some believe that it is not? The DPS publication made its concern explicit:

11. "The Offering As An Act of Worship," Division for Parish Services, Lutheran Church in America and the Lutheran Laity Movement for Stewardship (Philadelphia: DPS, 1986).

12. Paul Zeller Strodach, *A Manual on Worship* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1946) 227.

13. Luther D. Reed, *The Lutheran Liturgy* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1947) 309.

It becomes obvious that to speak of this act of worship as a "collection" is to miss the point of the offering. Yet many congregations employ terms and practices that make the offering nothing more than an interlude at best (and an interruption at worst) in the liturgy. Often an impression is given that the offering is "passing the hat" to support the pastor, keep the lights on in the church building, and make sure the lawn is fertilized. Or, in other situations, it is a pleasant time to give the choir a chance to sing an anthem.¹⁴

All of us here can resonate with such a description. But we also know there is more to it than that. It is not enough, however, to lay claim to the consequences of the polemics of the 16th century Reformation against sacrifice and argue simply that long overdue reclamation of a specific sacrificial act has been in process in 20th century American Lutheranism, and that comments such as those cited above about the offering as an act of worship simply make the case explicitly. It may be necessary to make and argue that point but it is not enough. The issue is also broader than the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship (ILCW) debates about eucharistic offering and the place of the Great Thanksgiving as represented by the interchanges among Oliver Olson, Robert Jenson, Gerhard Forde, and others, including some of you here.¹⁵

Yet despite all our explanations to the contrary the giving of money in Lutheran congregations is perceived by most to be an ecclesiastically self-directed act. We give

14. "The Offering As An Act of Worship," 3.

15. See the collection of the interchanges between Jenson and Forde in the ILCW's publication, "A 'Great Thanksgiving' For Lutherans? Theological Conversations in Progress." The articles first appeared in *Response*. See also Oliver K. Olson, "Contemporary Trends in Liturgy Viewed From the Perspective of Classical Lutheran Theology," *Lutheran Quarterly* XXVI, 2 (1974) 110-157; other articles in that issue also address these concerns.

money (yes, representing time, talent, self) *to* the Church in support *of* the Church. The fact that a portion of this money is for "benevolence" does not overcome the overwhelming and primary budgetary reality ingrained in the church-goer's mind: "How far ahead or behind expenses are we this week? year to date? compared to last year?" Sunday bulletin pronouncements often display weekly budget updates with detailed facts and figures. All of which gives rise to comments like, "All we ever hear about in church is money!" or to the annual frustration reported by so many parishioners during a stewardship "Every Member Response" or "Every Member Visitation." What are we to make of envelopes, pledging, quarterly statements, tax records for "charitable giving," and all the rest? Are we so functionally predisposed that it is impossible to appropriate the symbolic value of gift exchange embodied in the offertory rite?

To re-examine the liturgical dimensions of "offering" we must ask again both what are we saying and doing and why? Rather than rehash material with which you are all familiar on the history and theology of sacrifice and offering, I simply direct your attention again to Jungmann's *The Mass of the Roman Rite*, Taft's *The Great Entrance*, and most recently the survey by Kenneth Stevenson, *Eucharist and Offering*, as well as the many journal essays which have addressed the issue.¹⁶ Instead I will begin with something even more familiar, the Sunday morning service as represented by *Lutheran Book of Worship* and *Lutheran Worship*. What follows is not new information, but reflecting on it in the context of our opening questions may provide new perspectives.

16. Joseph Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origins and Development*, 2 vols. (New York: Benziger, 1951) 2: 1-100 contains analysis of the Offertory Rite; Robert Taft, *The Great Entrance*, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 200 (Rome, 1978); Kenneth Stevenson, *Eucharist and Offering* (New York: Pueblo, 1986).

The Structure of the Offertory Rite

Everyone recognizes the clear structural stability in the Sunday eucharistic rite in the West. Where does the offertory fit? When working on this section of the liturgy the ILCW did not contradict the analysis of Strodach and Reed. And they for their part had only restated the basic insight of earlier tradition. Strodach explained the offertory this way:

The Offertory consists of three parts: The Sentences . . . the making, reception, and placing of the Offering; and the General Prayer.

As appointed in The Service [CSB], each of these appears as a separate liturgical or service action, although in reality the three are but so many parts of one.¹⁷

Reed made the same point:

The Service of the Word ends with the Votum after the Sermon. The Offertory as a whole includes the Offering, the Offertory sentences and the Prayer of the Church; as such it begins a new and prevaillingly sacrificial part of the Service [SBH]. In a broad and comprehensive view of the liturgy we may think of the Offertory and all that follows it as a response to the sacramental reading and preaching of the Word. But actually it looks forward and not backward; with it a new division of the liturgy begins.¹⁸

For the moment let us agree that the phrase "offertory rite" is the broadest label which, like the term "entrance rite," is a shorthand way of referring to a specific liturgical complex. Although I appreciate Robert Taft's suggestion that we use the phrase "pre-anaphoral rites" as

17. Strodach 225.

18. Reed 308.

more theologically neutral, that presupposes a eucharistic context which is not always applicable for Lutherans. Similarly, to use the post-Vatican II phrase "preparation of the altar and the gifts" focuses too narrowly, neglecting the role of the prayer of the church and the peace within the offertory.

For our purpose, therefore, the offertory rite from the common service tradition described by Strodach and Reed includes the act of offering money and/or bread and wine (or other gifts in kind), the offertory song (the congregational "sentences"), and the prayer of the church. *Lutheran Book of Worship* incorporates the peace and a specific offertory prayer in the eucharistic liturgy, although neither of these is part of the service when the Eucharist is not celebrated. *Lutheran Worship* has neither the peace nor an offertory prayer within the offertory rite, although the peace can occur prior to communion. There is also provision (e.g., in the *LBW's Minister's Desk Edition*) for weekly choral offertory sentences to be used in place of the congregational offertory songs.¹⁹ We will not consider the other services which provide for an offering: the Service of the Word, Morning Prayer, and Evening Prayer.

The structure of the offertory rite in *LBW* and *LW* is as follows.

Eucharistic Liturgy (in each case preceding the dialogue, preface, etc.):

LW I--offering > song > prayer of the church
LW II, III--prayer of the church > offering > song
LBW--prayer of the church > peace > offering > song
> offertory prayer

19. *Ministers Desk Edition* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978). See pp. 120-188 for the weekly offertory texts. *LBW* = *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978); *LW* = *Lutheran Worship* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1982).

Non-eucharistic Liturgy:

LW I--offering > song > prayer of the church >
Lord's Prayer > Benediction
LW II, III--offering > song > prayer of the church >
Lord's Prayer > Benediction
LBW--offering > song > prayer of the church > Lord's
Prayer > Benediction

It is quite clear structurally that the offertory rite does not function in the same way in these two basic forms of Lutheran Sunday morning worship. In the celebration of the Eucharist it is a transitional moment leading to the communion to follow and, as Reed noted, perhaps also providing response to the Word just heard. The variations in *LBW* and *LW* also reveal flexibility in interpreting what ought to occur within the offertory rite.

In the non-eucharistic celebration the offertory rite is the conclusion of the service. The functional distinction between eucharistic and non-eucharistic services is not rooted in the fact that in the former bread and wine are included in the gifts offered. Unless we think that the *place* of a particular action within a larger whole makes no difference in how that action is understood and experienced--in other words unless we believe that context does not contribute to interpretation--it should be clear that the consequence of the structural variations is that the point of the "offering as an act of worship" is confused.

We may want to lament the fact that Lutherans truncated what had always been a liturgical whole by using the "first part" of the Word--Sacrament celebration for Sunday worship (although I have argued elsewhere that the traditional bipolar division of the liturgy is not a necessary consequence of its internal structure).²⁰ But that is the

20. R. Frederick Smith, "Playful Reflections on the Structure of Eucharistic Liturgy," *Worship* 60, 1 (1986) 38-46.

way it is, with recent statistics indicating some two-thirds to three-fourths of ELCA congregations celebrate communion once or twice monthly, only about twenty-five percent weekly.²¹

Reed was already warning about structural misinterpretation when he lamented the fact that the *CSB*'s placing of the offertory sentences before the actual offering resulted in "popular misunderstanding . . . [of] these sentences as a response to the Sermon."²² Reed interpreted the sentences as a substitute for the offertory procession on the one hand, and on the other as a substitute for the offertory prayers of the mass which the Reformers had rejected. But his primary focus was on what he called the "forward-looking" role of the offertory rite and its transitional function in inaugurating "a new division of the liturgy" which, as we heard in the quotation above, was the "prevailingly sacrificial part of the service." Apart from Reed's theological presuppositions the point he made about the relationship of structure and meaning is on target here.

When we compare the rubrics of the *CSB-SBH-LBW/LW* tradition we find some variations, but the offertory rite retains its basic shape.²³ The *SBH* addressed Reed's

21. "Worship Trends," adapted from *Findings*, a series of reports provided by the Department for Research, Planning and Evaluation of the Division for Parish Services (Philadelphia: DPS, undated).

22. Reed 308.

23. *Common Service Book of the Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: The Board of Publication, United Lutheran Church in America, 1917); *CSB* rubrics (pp. 17-18): "After the Sermon the Congregation shall rise and the Minister shall say: [Votum]; Then shall the Offertory be sung, at the close of which the Congregation shall be seated; One of the Offertories here following, or any other suitable

concern about misinterpretation by reversing the order so that the offertory sentence followed the act of offering, as is also the case in the *LBW* and *LW*. The structural

[Fn. 23, cont'd.]

Offertory, may be used [Psalm 51:17-19--"The sacrifices of God" and Psalm 51:10-12--"Create in me" are provided]; Then shall the Offering be received and placed by the Minister upon the Altar [The Offering]; Then shall follow the General Prayer."

Service Book and Hymnal (Philadelphia: Board of Publication, LCA, 1958); SBH rubrics (pp. 26-28): "[Sermon, Votum] Then shall the Offering be received and presented at the altar; [The Offering] Then shall follow the Offertory, the Congregation standing meanwhile. One of the Offertories here following, or any other suitable Offertory, shall be sung or said; When there is a Communion, the Minister, after Silent Prayer, and during the singing of the Offertory, shall uncover the Vessels and reverently prepare for the Administration of the Holy Sacrament; The Offertory [Psalm 51:17-19; Psalm 116: 12-19--"What shall I render"; and Psalm 51:10-12 are provided]; Then shall follow the Prayer of the Church."

LBW rubrics (pp. 65-68): "22. [Sermon, Hymn, Creed] THE PRAYERS are said; 23. The PEACE is shared at this time or after the Lord's Prayer, prior to the distribution [The Peace]; 24. The OFFERING is received as the Lord's table is prepared; 25. The appointed OFFERTORY may be sung by the choir as the gifts are presented, or the congregation may sing one of the following offertories, or an appropriate hymn or psalm may be sung ["Let the vineyards be fruitful" and Psalm 116: 12-19 are provided; when there is no communion rite the following rubrics apply (pp. 75-76): 45. The OFFERING is received and may be presented at the altar; 46. The following Psalm or an appropriate hymn may be sung when the gifts are presented [Psalm 51: 10-12 is provided]; 47. THE PRAYERS are said. One of the following or another form of prayer may be used]; 26. After the gifts have been presented, one of these prayers is said ["Merciful Father" and "Blessed are you" are provided]; 27. The ministers make ready the bread and wine.

result is that the offertory sentence interprets the action of offering which preceded it. In all cases the prayer of the church comes after the offering and offertory sentence when there is no communion. In the *LBW* and *LW* II, III the prayer of the church precedes these when there is a Eucharist. That the prayers are part of the offertory rite is not unequivocally clear structurally, but I believe they are critical to the interpretation of what offering is. We shall return to this point.

How the offertory rite functions and is interpreted depends in part on the choices made. One might argue that there is a rising and falling rhythm to the liturgy. The primary beats of the rhythm interplay differently depending on a wealth of ritual variables. When the offertory rite concludes the service it is difficult to escape the sense that it is a response to all that has preceded. In this case the offertory has no specific, subsequent liturgical resolution. The giver has no ritual way in which to celebrate and interpret where the symbolic gifts go or how they are used. Switching metaphors, one might say we are left with a kind of liturgical dangling modifier.

The internal structure of the offertory rite creates its own rhythm. That structure is altered when a choir anthem or other "special music" accompanies the act of receiving the offering or occurs between the receiving and the congregational singing of the offertory sentence (rarely in my experience has a choral offertory or anthem replaced the congregational offertory sentence; usually both take place). The way in which the offering is received similarly affects its function. An offertory procession of the whole congregation communicates something quite different from passing a plate or basket down the pew. Consider this comment by Gerhard Cartford in an article titled "Liturgy is for Children" in the December (1986) issue of *The Lutheran*:

Another action children appreciate is walking. I will never forget my delight as a boy when the whole congregation processed with its offerings on Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. Some people thought it smacked too much of a parade, a chance to show off. Perhaps. But its value outweighed the objections.

The act of offering takes on greater significance if worshippers walk to the altar and place their gifts there than it does when they simply put it into a receptacle passed down the pew. Children like to carry the offering forward. What a chance to teach about giving, love and helping others.²⁴

This is not just sentimental reflection. All of us here are sensitive to legitimate criticisms of the lack of movement in worship and the limitations inherent in our being locked in unmovable pews. There are problems with offertory processions, as the discussions in England from Gregory Dix on, resulting in W. Jardine Grisbrooke's articles in *Studia Liturgica* indicate.²⁵ But there is some wisdom in them too.

If there is to be a ritual collection, who does the collecting (official ushers? council members? families? children?) also says something about the assembly's self-understanding. Not actually collecting the gifts as a

24. Gerhard M. Cartford, "Liturgy is for Children," *The Lutheran* (December, 1986) 18.

25. W. Jardine Grisbrooke, "Oblation at the Eucharist," *Studia Liturgica* III, 4 (1964) 227-239; and IV, 1 (1965) 37-55. With regard to the wisdom of such processions, compare the comment by Frank Senn, "Contemporary Liturgical Theology," *Response XIV*, 1 (1974) 13: "[Luther] did not want the elements identified as the *hostia altaris* which the priest could offer, especially for novel ends. That also explains his reticence to revive the ancient offertory procession of the faithful. The gifts of bread and wine, as expressions of the self-offering of the people of God, would likely have been confused in the popular mind with the *hostia altaris*. But what Lutheran today, after 400 years, would be confused about this (especially if the bread and wine were offered out of his own larder)? Since it is once again necessary for the faithful to contribute their offerings, it would not be a harmful but a beneficial thing to restore the offertory procession of the faithful."

ritual act within the liturgy, but rather having them given prior to entering the nave or when departing represents yet another liturgical, and therefore theological choice. Romano Guardini explained it this way:

The basic question then is this: of what does the integrated liturgical act consist?

This becomes clearest when it is a matter of "doing", for instance, the offertory procession, where this is customary. It makes all the difference whether the faithful look on this procession as a mere means to an end which could have been achieved equally well by someone coming round with the collection-plate, or whether they know that the act of bringing their gifts is a "prayer" in itself, a readiness toward God.

The act of "doing" can also incorporate a thing, in this case a coin; or holy water for the sign of the cross; and the celebrant has the bread and the chalice with the wine. There is no need for words to give the "meaning", for it is realized in the act itself.²⁶

If the offertory rite is to be an integral part of a coherent whole its parts and its place in the unfolding of the liturgy need to be clear. Is it response, transition, "interlude or interruption" as the DPS publication lamented, or something else?

The offertory rite is, I would argue, primarily an act of response because it is an act of gratitude. But gratitude as liturgical response is not tied to a specific sequential norm. In other words the offertory is not only, nor perhaps even primarily, a response to what has immediately preceded (readings, sermon). Reed was correct

26. Romano Guardini, "Letter," reprinted in *Assembly* 12, 4 (April, 1986) 323. First published in the English version of the Herder Correspondence (August, 1964) 237-239.

in reminding us of its "forward looking" character (and I would add "outward looking"). It also is a preparatory or anticipatory response. Thus it is a ritual and theological point of transition focusing the gift-exchange which the divine/human encounter of Christian worship expresses.

The movement of transition is also effected by the passing of the peace. Its position after the intercessory prayer, before the offering and presentation of the gifts (attested by Justin, I Apology, 65) evokes Matthew 5: 23-24: "If you are offering your gift at the altar . . . first be reconciled . . . and then come and offer your gift." Thus the *pax* was both a seal of unity among those who had prayed together *and* a gesture of reconciliation prior to the shared meal. The fact that the peace was moved to the conclusion of the eucharistic prayer in the West sometime between Justin (150 C.E.) and Pope Innocent I (416 C.E.) indicates that its meaning and significance could be variously interpreted. Augustine explained that having the *pax vobiscum* and mutual kiss of greeting after the Lord's Prayer committed the people to the prayer recited (Sermon 227).

In either position the action embodies reconciliation. By doing so within the offertory rite it is response to God's gracious Word just proclaimed and anticipation of the further realization of God's reconciling act in Jesus celebrated in the communion. It seems to me a powerful expression within the offertory rite of our gift of ourselves to one another for Jesus' sake, whether we like one another or not. The fact that the *LBW* does not include the peace in the offertory rite in the non-eucharistic liturgy heightens the sense that something is missing in our ritual realization of the implications of offering ourselves in our corporate life as the body of Christ.

The Texts of the LBW Offertory Rite

Liturgical action is coupled with text. What do the texts used within the offertory rite reveal about its purpose? The offertory "sentences" provided in the *LBW*

are familiar: "Let the vineyards be fruitful," "What shall I render," and "Create in me."²⁷ Of the three, "Create in me" is the least specific in calling to mind the ritual act of actually offering something, and it contains no references which point directly to communion. It is rather an individualistic, confessional expression of hope. Because it is printed as the option to be used when there is no Eucharist its lack of "offer" language reinforces the sense that offering functions differently here than in eucharistic celebrations. Its interpretive role is relatively weak. It does not help to make sense of the ritual action, but it does have the weight of tradition behind it with regard to regular use.

The first two alternatives, printed deliberately on the pages to indicate that they lead into the Eucharist, contain language explicitly evocative of what is about to occur. This is especially true of John Arthur's "Let the vineyards be fruitful," with its eschatological tone,

27. The full texts are as follows (*LBW*, 66-67, 75):

- I. Let the vineyards be fruitful, Lord, and fill to the brim our cup of blessing [I Cor. 10:16]. Gather a harvest from the seeds that were sown, that we may be fed with the bread of life [John 6:48ff.]. Gather the hopes and dreams of all; unite them with the prayers we offer. Grace our table with your presence, and give us a foretaste of the feast to come.
- II. (Psalm 116:12-19) What shall I render to the Lord for all his benefits to me: I will offer the sacrifice of thanksgiving and will call on the name of the Lord. I will take the cup of salvation and will call on the name of the Lord. I will pay my vows to the Lord now in the presence of all his people, in the courts of the Lord's house, in the midst of you, O Jerusalem.
- III. (Psalm 51:10-12) Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with your free Spirit.

recalling the earlier hymn of praise "Worthy is Christ" and its eschatological imagery. It also serves effectively to connect the action of offering gifts with both the preceding prayer of the church and the eucharistic prayer about to occur ("unite them with the prayers we offer"). Its imperative style indicates a directness rooted in an assurance that comes with the celebration of the Lord's promised presence in the meal of bread and wine. The interrogative form of "What shall I render" obviously generates reflection on what we are in fact up to at the moment. Its immediate answer, "I will offer the sacrifice of thanksgiving . . . etc.," also serves well to link the act of offering with the Great Thanksgiving and communion.

In all three cases the offertory song ("sentence") is congregational. Because it is a corporate act, as are the prayer of the church (although its sometimes being called the "pastoral prayer" reminds us that its history is not unequivocal) and the communion, the interrelationship of the three is reinforced. These are things we do and say together, things which we really cannot do and say alone and which serve to interpret one another. An external interpretation we should always avoid if our liturgical activity is to have any integrity is the type reflected by *Contemporary Worship 2* when it stated that "a sung offertory 'covers' the action of presentation and further preparation."²⁸ The point is not that we cannot do two things at once, it is simply that the things should be related to one another.

28. *Contemporary Worship 2. Services, The Holy Communion* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1970) xvi. Compare this comment in the letter by Romano Guardini cited above: "As long as liturgical actions are merely 'celebrated' objectively and texts are merely 'got through', everything will go smoothly because there is no question of an integrated religious act. But once serious prayer is joined to the action, the parts that have no living appeal become apparent (p. 323)."

The two new *LBW* "offertory prayers" are similarly corporate (although introduced by the Assisting Minister or Presider), but they have nevertheless caused the most question. As Edgar Brown argues:

it is in that which precedes the Great Thanks-giving that concerns are aroused to ask questions: Who gives? What is given? With what intention or purpose? In the *LBW* offertory rite, it appears that the giver in every case is the worshiper. He, she or they give money, bread and wine, song and spoken words promising a giving of self, time, possessions and services. . . . And this offering, this action set to the words of the prayers prescribed in the rite clearly expects no other motive than one of joy and thanksgiving on the part of those who give. God is not being manipulated or coerced. These are voices of grateful children. What then is the problem?²⁹

With the first prayer indeed there is no theological problem:

Merciful Father, we offer with joy and thanksgiving what you have first given us--our selves, our time, and our possessions, signs of your gracious love. Receive them for the sake of him who offered himself for us, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The fact that this prayer is to occur immediately after the gifts have been presented at the table clearly indicates its focus: we are praying about the action we have just completed and what it represents--recognition that all gifts come from God and whatever use we put them to must be rooted in the One who offered himself for us. That alone "sanctifies" human activity of whatever sort, within the liturgy or outside it.

29. Edgar Brown, "Sequence and Meaning: the Offertory Rite of the *Lutheran Book of Worship*," *Studia Liturgica* 17 (1987) 42.

The second prayer, recalling the Jewish *berakah* formula, raises an interesting point:

Blessed are you, O Lord our God, maker of all things. Through your goodness you have blessed us with these gifts. With them we offer ourselves to your service and dedicate our lives to the care and redemption of all that you have made, for the sake of him who gave himself for us, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I was once asked by a systematic theologian, "If in the liturgy we pray to dedicate our lives to the care and redemption of all that God has made, tell me how we are to go about redeeming quasars and quarks?" This is a colorful example of how criticism like that of Oliver Olson hits home: "One of the most important concerns for Lutheran theology is that our self offering and that of Christ be kept theologically and liturgically separate from each other."³⁰ From such a confessional perspective it is not simply inappropriate but heretical to claim that we have a role in *redeeming* any part of creation; caring for it yes, but redeeming it, no. It is another reminder that liturgy and theology need always to stand in mutually critical correlation.

Edgar Brown states a remaining concern with regard to the link of word and act at this point:

is it not appropriate that our liturgical rite set forth clearly what our part in all this is by the words that are spoken and by the actions done?

This means for one, providing a locus for offering money in the liturgy, for who would seriously divorce that act which financially supports the church and its institution from that action which is the corporate assembling of the community? We need to make an offering, to take up a collection and if that is not action, what is? It is also

30. Olson 156.

well--because actions can be misinterpreted--that the words of our Great Thanksgiving somehow allow us to make an offering of ourselves as we present our gifts (not the bread and wine!).³¹

In other words, the point of confusion for some is that bread and wine are offered in a ritual act, rather than simply provided in a functional way for their subsequent use in the Eucharist. Because this concern has been debated by many of you before, I will move on, registering my own opinion that an offertory procession in which a few members of the congregation come forward with bread, wine, and money can fulfill the function of getting the needed elements to the table just as readily as having an Assisting Minister bring them from a credence table. The simple fact that the materials come from the midst of the community does not in itself create theological confusion about who is offering what to whom. If the fear is that we might think we are "buying off" God in some unhealthy sacrificial way, it seems to me that the gifts of money are the more problematic offense in our culture.

On the other hand, prayers such as "Merciful Father" and "Blessed are you," whether there is a procession and presentation or not, play no integral role in the offertory rite because they duplicate in spoken words what the offertory sentence accomplishes in song--interpreting the action of the whole of the offertory rite. One might also ask why the content of these prayers ought to be separated from the prayer of the church as an invariable part of the offertory. The fact that the *LBW* includes the two offertory prayers only when there is a celebration of the Eucharist does create confusion about why the giving of gifts is interpreted differently when the Eucharist follows. Despite the history of the *oratio super oblata*

31. Brown 45.

there is sound structural reason for eliminating these *LBW* prayers.³² The underlying question being begged here is whether the assumption, articulated persuasively in the comments by Edgar Brown quoted above, that a collection of gifts ought to occur as a specific ritual act within the liturgy is indeed valid. We shall return to that assumption below.

This brings us to the last textual portion of the offertory rite, the prayer of the church. Does the offering of intercessions help to interpret the broader action of offering? It should! Whether it does of course depends on the prayer's form and content. In his recent work, *The Prayer of the Faithful*, Walter Huffman explains that:

The close proximity of the prayers, the peace, and the offering is a natural and provocative one. In some literature, the prayers have been contextualized as an offertory element because they spring from the same basic motivation--to remember the world to God.

As in the offering of the gifts of bread and wine, so the intercessions grow out of everyday life--wherever the people of God find themselves during the week. [Huffman here quotes J.A.T. Robinson]

It is no accident that this particular moment . . . should be the special charge of the laity, for it is a movement that must have its origin at the very heart of the everyday world of work and leisure. The offertory . . . should not start in the sanctuary--if it does our religion is losing its roots in the stuff and muck of life.

32. Jungmann 44ff. for the history of the *oratio super oblata*. See also Hans Joachim Schulz, "Structures of Offering," (unpublished essay presented at *Societas Liturgica* congress).

What we are doing at the offertory is simply letting God get [a] hand on . . . that . . . which is represented by our lives, so that through us, [God's] new community, the whole world with which it in contact may ultimately be changed.³³

That seems to me to be good common sense and proper theological perspective. A few pages earlier Huffman noted that "in our own day, contemporary liturgical revision has displayed a strong trend toward restoring some form of the prayer of the faithful to its place as offertory hinge between *synaxis* (service of gathering and the Word) and the liturgy of the eucharistic meal."³⁴ If so, perhaps here we can see the link of form and content, structure and movement within the offertory rite. Where the offertory sentence serves as an internal reference, speaking to the ritual action at hand, the prayer of the faithful provides the external reference--a world in need of prayer and action. In other words within the offertory rite itself an integration of the cultic and ethical dimensions of Christian *diakonia* occurs. The textual keys for such integration are the offertory song and the prayer of the church.

Denominational Theological Commentary

To this point we have been reflecting on the internal structure and content of the liturgy, how the offertory rite functions in terms of the interrelationship of its own parts as well as within the larger context in which it is situated. Before conclusions can be drawn the evidence of the more or less "official" commentary on the rites represented by denominationally sanctioned publications must be considered.

33. Walter C. Huffman, *The Prayer of the Faithful* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986) 32.

34. Huffman 28.

We can begin with the work of our colleague Philip Pfatteicher in the *Minister's Desk Edition (MDE)* and *Manual on the Liturgy*.³⁵ The MDE comments on rubric 25: "The gifts symbolize the 'reasonable service' (Romans 12:1) of our Christian lives offered in response to God's grace in Christ (p.28)." The *Manual* elaborates a bit:

As a response to God's goodness, Christians offer their gifts and their very lives to him. The gifts of money or gifts in kind should be gathered with as little ostentation as possible. It is the presentation of the gifts which has liturgical significance (p. 228).

The offering of bread and wine is a sign of what human labor has done to the gifts of God--making wheat into bread and grapes into wine. Thus we offer our whole selves and our whole lives to him (p. 231).

The main points of the theological interpretation at work here are 1) that what we do and say is response, and 2) that the focus is on presenting the gifts (not at all on the giving/collecting of them). If we push the logic of the latter point we might end up making the case that collection as a ritual act should be abandoned.

The DPS publication which prompted some of our exploration has a bit more to say, and it is worth quoting at length:

Worship is an offering. The offering is an act of worship. . . . Worship is an offering of ourselves. Paul appealed to the Christians in Rome to offer themselves "as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is . . . spiritual worship" (Romans 12:1). In worship we return, as it were, what we were first given--our very lives.

35. Philip Pfatteicher and Carlos Messerli, *Manual on the Liturgy* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979).

When the gifts of bread, wine, and money are brought forward in the offertory procession, it is we who are presented before God's presence. The money represents our time and abilities--engaged in worthwhile endeavor, returned as wages--offered to God as symbols of our selves. . . . These gifts [bread and wine] symbolize what we have done with what God has first given. Now they are offered to God, who uses them as a blessing to us. They become a means of grace. . . . We continue to be blessed. And we respond. Now we who are blessed are called to be a blessing to others. . . .

The offering is the ritual focal point of stewardship. As stewardship is both love to God and to neighbor, so Eugene Brand rightly calls the offering "the cultic intersection between liturgy and ethics". . . .

In the eucharistic liturgy of the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, the offering comes after the Creed and the intercessory prayers. We confess our faith, present our intercessions which identify us with the poor, the needy, the disenfranchised, and then, in the offering, we take action: we offer ourselves and our possessions in service to God's world. . . .

Our praise is love to God, the vertical dimension between ourselves and the One whose we are. Our offering is love to neighbor, the horizontal dimension in which we who are blessed now become a blessing to others.³⁶

Apart from the texts of the offertory sentences, the only biblical passage noted explicitly as a foundation for what we do is Romans 12:1. But these quotations are as detailed a theological rationale as one will find in officially published companions to the *LBW*. The gift-response dynamic expressed above is clear and in itself presents no theological problems. In contrast to the *DPS*

36. "The Offering As An Act of Worship" 2-3.

statement's focus on the offering as a cultic-ethical intersection (assuming the word "offering" is used in reference to the receiving of gifts rather than to the whole offertory complex). Huffman sees the intercessions as that point of intersection:

"Intercession," said Martin Marty, "is loving your neighbor on your knees." In other words, intercessory prayer and our social ministry are made of the same cloth. In intercession the essential connection between liturgy and life is made and celebrated. Nowhere else do we give such regular ritual focus to this intersection and to the missionary impulse at the heart of Christian worship.³⁷

Taking these observations together we can argue that it is the *whole* of the offertory rite that symbolizes, accomplishes, and points to such intersection and integration within the liturgy. Indeed, this is the purpose of the offertory rite in both structure and content.

Conclusions

With regard to liturgical structure I would contend that an offertory rite is an integral part of the eucharistic liturgy. By this I mean that a particular ritual act, symbolizing the offering of self as a response to the call of God which the whole of Christian worship is, constitutes a necessary structural dimension of the worshipping community's identity as the body of Christ. I do not mean it is essential in the sense of the old argument about "offertory, consecration, and communion" being the three essential elements of the mass. This ritual action can take a variety of forms and be accomplished with a variety of giving.

Whatever the specific content of the ritual act of offering, we should be clear that it cannot bear the entire burden of realizing in action what Christian sacrifice and stewardship are about, just as the ritual act of

37. Huffman 29.

passing the peace cannot bear the burden of creating a sense of community, reconciliation, and belonging that is not otherwise sustained. Rather than being expressions of thanks and praise, ritual acts become pronouncements of judgment in such contexts, as the prophets well remind us. Liturgy can reveal to us what we really are. That is also why the exercising of our common priesthood in the offertory has the power to reveal to others both who we are and who God is.

I am afraid there is no way out of the dilemma of the liturgical dangling modifier I mentioned earlier, namely having an offertory at the end of a non-eucharistic "communion" service. I would like to argue that a ritual act of offering is out of place in any gathering except the Sunday assembly's Eucharist. This presupposes the Sunday assembly's liturgy is always eucharistic. When it is not, we Lutherans are left with a ritual experience that is troublesome in terms of the internal relationship of its parts and can lead more quickly to misinterpretation about who is offering what to whom and why. Within the Eucharist the ritual focus on Christ's "once for all" self-giving as the *raison d'être* for our gathering provides the context for properly interpreting our response *as* response.

In terms of texts coupled with action I agree with Guardini that liturgical action can speak for itself and does not always need words to supply its meaning. An offertory song is not essential to the rite, but the act of offering and the prayer of the church are. If we cannot pray for others we cannot give, and if we cannot give we cannot pray for others. Both the giving and the praying are integral to what it means to be priests for one another and for the world.

Concerning broader issues of stewardship, people are not blind to the fact that much of our giving goes to institutional maintenance, perhaps too much. But no sensible person would argue that all institutional maintenance is unnecessary. Social structures are inescapable in human community, can be vehicles of good as well as ill, and demand appropriate preservation. But the ill they do is not always apparent. The ritual act of offering can become a form of subtle coercion (and often not so

subtle!). It is not difficult to recognize how appeals to religious and ethical conscience for sacrificing are a successful way to force contributions of time and money. There is no place for such coercion in the Christian community. If giving is the response of faith, then attention to the story of faith is the Church's primary privilege and task.

There is a side of me that wants to call a moratorium on any mention of money, tithing, stewardship, budgets, and EMR's in Sunday worship. But it is a culturally generated bias, a reaction to my own complicity in succumbing to the materialism of our day and my reluctance to celebrate and share the sheer giftedness of life. I have no delusions about the consequences of radically restructuring how we think and speak about financial giving and stewardship in the Church. Initially, lots of things might die, institutionally and otherwise, were we to take such a moratorium seriously. Yet such a moratorium would in fact constitute the self-delusion which the presence of an offertory rite helps us overcome--the attempt to divorce sacrifice and the giving and receiving of gifts (the material stuff of life) from the assembly's prayer and so alienate our response in faith from its source.

As Barbara Schmich well reminds us:

The goal of all sacrifice is, as the derivation of the word suggests, "to make sacred," "to make holy," "to make whole." It is not any *thing* which is sacrificed; it is the offerer who is sacrificed, made whole by the renunciation, made holy by contact with the Holy One who calls us to wholeness.³⁸

Wholeness comes whenever and wherever we exercise our common priesthood. And we can do so only in the name of the One whose gift generates our gifts. For the Christian to miss this connection is to miss life itself and to walk on a path other than the way of the gift. To make the

38. Barbara Schmich, "Sacrifice and Fasting," *Assembly* 10, 4 (April, 1984) 243.

connection is to recognize Jesus, as gift and giver, and in humble gratitude to lift our hearts, hands, and voices in his name. Maybe an offertory rite helps us to do just that.