

The Gospels and Liturgical Reform¹

In recent scholarship and in popular discourse about that scholarship, the four Gospels of the New Testament have largely played one quite particular role: they have been mined for clues as to what might be said truthfully about the historical Jesus. They have been sources for the latest form of the quest to find out who Jesus really was, what he did, what he said, what he believed. I do not want anything I say in this lecture to indicate impatience with that quest. I myself have learned much from its current forms. It is true that I share the suspicion that this latest form of the quest frequently runs as much risk as did older forms of finally reporting out an image largely made up of the concerns and even the self-image of the researcher. Jesus as a “Mediterranean peasant,” for example, does look a lot like a twentieth-century Irishman resisting the British Empire! But I believe John Dominic Crossan when he argues that he means to find more than his own image in the well of sources into which he is looking, when he argues that the past often pushes back, challenging the interpretations the present inevitably has.² In any case, I have been much helped by insights from his work and the work of many others pursuing this inquiry. I do care profoundly about what can actually be said, with historical probability, about Jesus, whom I do think was a real historical figure, a real co-resident with us of this blue planet. I agree with Crossan that what he calls “sarcophilic Christianity,” the Christianity to which I belong, the Christianity I would call “orthodox,” must ask about the historical Jesus.³ And I am very interested in how that Jesus “pushes back” against the religious and personal conceptions we project on him.

It is just that when that widely reported quest is popularized, it has also had its effect on preaching in the church. I do not mean only that preachers may make some Gospel texts more important, while relativizing others, on the grounds that they can be shown to be closer to or farther from the historical truth of Jesus. That might be interesting, even if it largely misses the point of the Gospels. But I also mean that Jesus also gets turned into only a source for sayings, various wide truths of life, that are then made the basis for the preacher’s own moralisms. And I mean more basically that the quest has often been misunderstood with the result that the Gospels have been taken as themselves biographies. In our positivist era, that seems all that they could be: reports about Jesus from the past. What I want to call their communal — even their *liturgical* character — has been missed. Then preachers have felt that the task was simply to retell the story of “what happened,” or — even more — to fill in the gaps of the story with emotions and even events that are actually not in the text. What was Mary feeling as she was on the way to visit Elizabeth? What was Jesus dreaming about as he lay asleep in the boat? Why was he so brusque with Mary at Cana? In answering such questions, the modern preacher runs an even greater risk

¹ Erindi flutt á vegum Guðfræðistofnunar Háskóla Íslands 9. nóvember 2015.

² John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity*, San Francisco: Harper, 1998, pp. 40–42.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

than does the scholarly pursuer of the quest of telling us more about himself or herself than of Jesus, of giving us a self-projection dominating the text rather than the text itself.

And the texts themselves are not prepared to answer these questions, are not written for this purpose.

For, while the Gospels do certainly provide one source for the research into the historical Jesus question, that is not why they were written. Mark seems to call itself “the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ” (Mark 1:1), the ἀρχή (*archē*), the ground or principle, of a good news that was presumably to be celebrated by the readers and hearers of the book, in their communities and in their lives. Matthew seems to call itself, similarly, “this gospel of the kingdom” (Matt. 24:14; cf. 26:13), evoking something of the same language use. The author of Luke certainly does want us to know that he or she has diligently sorted such sources and accounts as were available, but this book, too, is finally seeking to serve what Luke calls “the word” (Luke 1:2) as that word is heard and encountered in community. And the author of John finally sums up what all of the authors seem to think these books were for by saying that this book is written so that a plural *you* “may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31). The Gospels have communities, communal celebration, current daily life, and faith in mind.

But some recent New Testament scholarship — a scholarship not so much in the public eye as the quest for the historical Jesus — has also sought to ascertain what might be said historically about those communities that would have read the Gospels originally. In various ways a number of scholars, especially Philip Harland, Dennis Smith and Luke Timothy Johnson,⁴ have all argued that Hellenistic cities and towns of the time of Christian origins were marked by diverse interest groups, supper clubs, *collegia*, some of which were religious in character, most of which met in houses. This was one major way that social interaction of the time took place. Then the assemblies that Paul called ἐκκλησίαι (*ekklesiai*), the communities that we have thought about as the “house-churches” were not as unique as we have sometimes imagined, at least not in the general outline of their social purposes, their mutual support, their benefactions, and their common meals. It is important to note that such assemblies were not a new or specifically Christian invention. In gathering as associations or clubs, in regarding each other as a kind of family, in meeting in households, in sharing meals, Christians were making use of a widespread pattern in Greco-Roman society, a pattern that was regularly paired with an ideology of mutual support. Such household-based associations were one important way in which people of the time were religious, one important way in which they sought to participate in the benefits of the various gods, one significant basis for social organization in Hellenistic cities. Before the Christian movement and as one model for it, Jewish “synagogues” in the greater Mediterranean world also were organized much like these widespread “Gentile” associations.

Then, given the purpose the Gospels seem to set out for themselves, we might newly ask how the Gospels related to these meetings. In doing so, we may be following a line of inquiry closer to the original intention of the Gospel books. My proposal is that the Gospels were interested in the central content and the ongoing reform of those meetings. Like Paul

⁴ Philip A. Harland, *Associations, Synagogues and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003. See also the work of Wayne Meeks, Richard Ascough, Hal Taussig, and Kathleen Corley.

in his letters before them, the Gospels were written to encourage Christian assemblies — assemblies very like other neighboring Hellenistic *collegia* and associations — to sort, accept, reject, reinterpret elements of their own religious culture,⁵ to re-understand their meetings’ purpose and to refresh its practice, to continually find that purpose and practice realigned more closely with the identity of Jesus Christ. This purpose of the four Gospels can be seen, in each case, in the unique *structure* of each book. I have said this at greater length elsewhere, in a recent book.⁶ But let me repeat something of the argument of that book here.

If one takes seriously the suggestion of Mary Douglas in her remarkable Terry Lectures at Yale, published in 2007 as *Thinking in Circles*⁷ — a suggestion already also found in the work of many New Testament scholars — that the Gospel of Mark is, like many other ancient books of communal importance, a *ring composition*, then several results occur. One finds a purpose for the otherwise puzzling, even frustrating conclusion of the book, that is, one is driven back to the beginning and center of the book in order to “see Jesus” in Galilee, as the young man in the tomb directs. Furthermore, one sees the ways that meaning is set out by circular juxtapositions, small and great, throughout the book: the story of the woman with the 12 year flow of blood surrounded by the story of the dead 12 year old girl, for example, together show us that Jesus means life for women and for all the excluded ones; the tearing open of the heavens at the beginning of the book links with the tearing open of the temple curtain at the end to proclaim that, in ways we did not expect, God is on the earth, among us, seen in baptism and in the cross. There is more, much more, to be seen, once one begins to read the circles. The Gospel according to Mark makes an astonishing and complex use of juxtaposed verbal symbols and metaphors to make its point. But chiefly, as with all ring compositions, one comes to see the weight placed on the center of the ring. In Mark, that center is found in the last scene that takes place in Galilee (9:30-50), the report of the central one of Jesus’ three passion predictions together with the story of the gathering of the disciples in a house, where Jesus says the leadership is to serve and that to welcome a child is to welcome him and so welcome God. Note: just as the end of the book proclaims, the risen Jesus is seen in Galilee. He is seen in the account of his death in the assembly, in the related assembly-service of the leaders, and in the assembly’s welcome to the littlest and least. The important center of the Gospel according to Mark is an *assembly*. And that assembly is called to encounter the crucified and risen one through the account of his death, through the mutual service of the participants, through the refusal of competition with other followers of Jesus, and through hospitality to the littlest ones. The Gospel envisions meetings in a *house* — in fact, such meetings play a very important role in the whole book, the “house” recurring again and again — and thereby the Gospel envisions an ongoing reform of those house-meetings. This is not an historical report from the time of Jesus but a weighty proposal for the time of the reading of the book.

The structure of the Gospel according to Matthew is quite different, even though it is clear that Matthew made use of Mark and reproduced almost all of the earlier book. But the five discourses of Matthew, around which the book seems to be organized and which seem intended to reflect a continuation and fulfillment of the five books of Moses, can also be read as addressed to Christian assemblies, Christian associations, Christian house

⁵ Cf. Harland, p. 198f.

⁶ *The Four Gospels on Sunday: The New Testament and the Reform of Christian Worship*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012.

⁷ New Haven: Yale, 2007.

churches. So: the first discourse (called “the sermon on the mount”) urges that the house be built upon the rock of Jesus’ teaching (7:24-27); the second (the “mission instructions”) calls upon the house to receive the traveling missionaries who come in the name of the “master of the house” (10:12-14; 25); the third (the Matthean collection of parables) makes clear that preaching in the house will reveal Jesus himself as the meaning and meaning-giver of the parables (13:36); the fourth (the “instructions to the church”) addresses the assembly — called indeed the ἐκκλησία (*ekklēsia*) here — directly, and promises the presence of the crucified risen one in the midst of assembly and its actions of mutual reconciliation and forgiveness — “where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (18:15-20); and the fifth (the eschatological discourse) actually images the assembly as a household holding meals, with the leaders as stewards of the food in the name of the master of the house, stewards who need to avoid imperious or gluttonous behavior (24:45-51), the very behavior Paul had warned against in 1 Corinthians 11. Also the Gospel according to Matthew can be read as a proposal for the ongoing reform of the Christian meetings, meetings to which the risen Christ at the end of the book promises — as he does in the instructions to the church of the fourth discourse — “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (28:20). Baptism and the instruction and the name that go with and transform baptism are to anchor such meetings throughout the world.

It is clear that the author of Luke knew the Gospel according to Mark. I think it is likely that he or she knew book called Matthew as well, that Matthew, too, was among the “orderly accounts” of those “many” he or she drew upon in constructing yet another for “Theophilus” (1:1-4). But this book follows neither the circular pattern nor the discourse structure of the two earlier Gospel books. Many scholars have noted that the unique thing about Luke is its “travel narrative,” running from 9:51 to 19:58. The fascinating thing about this long passage, for our purposes, is that it focusses, again and again, in narrative and in parable, on the welcome of the traveler to a shared meal. The repeated meals in the houses seem intended to image the meal communities which we know the late first century churches to have been. At the heart of this narrative of travel and welcome and food, the author places the very charge to the leaders of the community to serve as stewards of shared food that we have already seen in Matthew (Luke 12:42-48). Only now, amazingly, this charge is preceded by an image of the master of the house returning and himself serving the assembly (12:35-38). These passages, of course, belong in their import not to the time of the historical Jesus but to the time of the church. The image of the serving Lord is a down payment on the Lukan account of the last supper, in its passion story, where the one who is going to be killed makes his body and blood into a meal for the church, saying also, “I am among you as one who serves” (22:27). And it is a down-payment on the unique Lukan resurrection story of the disciples going to Emmaus, where the stranger is welcomed to table, becomes the serving host, and is recognized in the meal. This ending of the Gospel according to Luke makes clear where the whole book has been going. The discourse and meal of the risen one, surrounded by the welcome to the stranger and the return to Jerusalem to tell of the resurrection, echoes Luke’s purpose: that the meetings of the churches be places where the stranger is welcomed, where the scriptures are read and interpreted of the death and resurrection of Jesus, where the common meals become the meal of encounter with him, burning with the meaning of the scriptures, and where the assembly itself be thereby set in mission.

These books were all most likely written, one after another, in the years from about 70 CE to about 95 CE, four to seven decades after Jesus was killed. After that, probably sometime in the first two decades of the second century, came the Gospel according to John. I argue that the author of this book knew all three of the earlier Gospel books. But, though this author may have drawn the idea of long discourses from Matthew and the accent on Jesus' identity revealed in verbal juxtapositions from Mark, and though many names (Lazarus, Mary and Martha, for example) may have been taken from Luke, once again the structure of the book is unique. Organized as "signs" and "discourses" in alternation and in mutual interpretation, an initial Book of Signs (1:19-12:50) leads to the great Book of Glory (13:1-20:31), in which the great "farewell discourse" is paired with the great sign of Jesus' death and resurrection, the two again functioning in mutual interpretation. For our purposes, however, the most important thing to note in the Gospel according to John, very much unlike any of the other three books, is that no private gathering of the disciples with Jesus — in a house, say, or at a shared meal — takes place in the first eleven chapters of the book at all. None. But then the Book of Signs ends with the little assembly of the meal at Bethany (12:1-8), the Book of Glory begins with the gathering for the footwashing-meal and the long Farewell Discourse (13-17), and the whole book ends (if, as I think, we may take 20:31 as the original ending) with the two meetings in the house on Sunday, meetings in which the church meets the risen one (20:19-31), meetings seeming to inaugurate the Christian practice of regular Sunday meeting. It is as if the entire book has been going toward these assembly accounts and the accounts themselves mean to image what the ongoing Christian meetings are for: remembering the poor whom we always have with us, signs of the body of the crucified; mutual service like the footwashing ("I have given you an example"); hearing, seeing and believing, in the power of the Spirit, the one who comes again to us, the one whom we otherwise no longer see; receiving the meaning of all the signs; sharing the peace and being sent with words of forgiveness; and using the Gospel book itself for all of these purposes. Also the Gospel according to John is written for assemblies. Indeed, it is as if the author of this Gospel clearly saw the purpose of the three earlier books and then even heightened that purpose by the very structure of this fourth book.

Much more could be said in detail about the communal purpose of the four Gospels, studying many more passages of these books. And one could come to even greater clarity about this purpose by contrasting it to what can be seen in several later, probably mid-second century books that have also come to be called "Gospels," *Thomas*, for example, where the sayings of Jesus are mostly to and about individuals, never assemblies, or *Judas*, where the gathered disciples and their thanksgiving over meals are explicitly ridiculed in favor of gnostic revelations to the single person. In the four Gospels of the New Testament, by contrast, *meetings* belong to the purpose of the books. A "sarcophilic" Christianity, interested in the flesh of Jesus, needs also to be interested in real meetings. The four Gospels are sources for both.

But, for our purposes, these central notes of the Gospels, drawn from the structure of each one, may be enough for now. The Gospels are not biographies of Jesus, but testimonies to Jesus *then* becoming Jesus *now*,⁸ in assembly: "See me in the meeting and in this account of my death told in the meeting. Welcome me in the child. As you baptize, I

⁸ See Crossan, p. 32.

am with you always. Know me in the old scriptures interpreted and in the meal. In the power of the Spirit breathed out in the meeting, know in me all the content of the signs: the bread of God, light of God, forgiveness of God. This is why the books were written, to bring you together to this faith.” Such is the central content of the Gospels. The liturgical development in east and west rightly understood that as it brought us to sing to and acclaim the risen Lord when the Gospel book was brought, perhaps with lights and incense, to the midst of the meeting and read. These books are rightly read as liturgical books, with an assembly-based hermeneutic interested in finding in them the presence of Christ. Thus, I think that Martin Luther was also right when he wrote, in his essay published in 1522 and called “A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels”:

When you open the book containing the Gospels and read or hear how Christ comes here or there, or how someone is brought to him, you should therein perceive the sermon or the gospel through which he is coming to you, or you are being brought to him. For the proclamation of the Gospel is nothing else than Christ coming to us, or we being brought to him. When you see how he works, however, and how he helps everyone to whom he comes or who is brought to him, then rest assured that faith is accomplishing this in you and that he is offering your soul exactly the same sort of help and favor through the Gospel. If you pause here and let him do you good, that is, if you believe that he benefits and helps you, then you really have it. Then Christ is yours, presented to you as a gift. After that it is necessary that you turn this into an example and deal with your neighbor in the very same way, be given also to him as a gift and an example.⁹

So, as Luther says, the four Gospels, books which enact the presence of Christ in the meetings, also have counsels for those meetings: the meetings should correspond in their practice to the crucified risen one who is present among them, in the power of the Spirit, as a sign of God’s life-giving grace. They should welcome him in the least and the neediest. They should share forgiveness and food in his name with their neighbors. They should practice their common meal and the washing that joins others to their number in ways that proclaim his death and resurrection. They should temper what they know of his resurrection with the knowledge of his cross, but they should also temper their knowledge of the cross with the proclamation of his resurrection. And they should temper all that might be said in their Hellenistic cities about *God* by means of what may be known in Jesus Christ, what will later be called “the holy trinity”: God is encountered in this crucified man, under the torn heaven, in the life-giving Spirit poured out from his death and resurrection, and in the one to whom Jesus and that Spirit bear witness; and yet there are not three gods, but One, whose mercy is for the life of the world.

Approaching the Gospels in this way, we will find ourselves agreeing with an old catholic assertion: the Gospels are books of the church, created in the course of the life of the churches and read most appropriately in those assemblies of the church. But we will also find ourselves agreeing with an old protestant assertion: the Gospels are books of reform. From the beginning they were addressed to those assemblies with evangelical purpose and communal correction in mind. Reform is not new in the church, but has been needed from the beginning. Thus, we may regard the Gospels as catholic and protestant, ecclesial and evangelical. Both.

Of course, the four books are different. Their Christologies differ slightly, Mark and John being in many ways marked by a “higher” Christology than Matthew and Luke. Their reforming concerns are also different, Luke interested in hospitality and mercy and a

⁹ Martin Luther, “A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels,” *Luther’s Works* 35, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960, p. 121, translation altered. The original German of the phrase “For the proclamation of the Gospel is nothing else . . .” reads “Denn Evangelii predigen ist nicht anders . . .” See *Dr. Martin Luthers Werke* 10.1.1, Weimar: 1910, pp. 13–14.

Christian version of Hellenistic “benefaction,” Matthew fiercely interested in both obedience and forgiveness, Mark articulating the paradoxes of faith and preparing the church for more persecution, and John countering incipient gnosticism and urging the religious individual to come into assembly. Their diversities might be taken in our day as a license for our diversities, a welcome to the differing ways we worship, for example. But, while the argument can be made that each one of the authors of the books thought that his or her book was enough — Matthew included all of Mark, after all; Luke had read the other books and was finally going to do it right; and the appendix to John makes it clear that while the world could be filled with other books about Jesus (21:25), *this* book was enough — and though there was a temptation for a while in the second century to combine them all into a single book, that is not the way the churches went. *Four* books it would be: like the four winds that blow in the world; like the four beasts that surround the throne of God and of the Lamb. The very fourness helps us to treasure diversity. It also helps us to see the purpose of the books: they are testimonies to Jesus in assembly, not biographies.

But while they are four and while their diversity is a treasure for us, they also share common themes. The most important of these is their common concern to enact — to give words to, to *be* — the presence of the crucified risen one in assembly. But implicit in this concern is their shared principal sub-theme: they wish to call the Hellenistic clubs of the Christians to self-criticism in the light of the presence of that crucified-risen one. The religion of these “clubs” is presumed, but it also must be continually inverted, broken, reformed to the purpose of God as God is known in Jesus Christ. If the Gospels have come to be central to any Christian meeting after they were written — and I believe that they rightly have so come to be — then this ritual and communal critique has also been brought to a central place. Also our assemblies are continually invited to the critique and reforming of our ritual and religion.

This then leads me to take one further step. I think that the Gospels are still central to our meetings — to what we call our liturgies — and I think they still bear the presence of the crucified risen one and the implied liturgical criticism to us. For me the Gospels are still forces for liturgical reform in our time, a fountain from which the liturgical movement may yet again flow with refreshment for our time.

What do I mean? The Gospels call diverse assemblies to reform. They propose that the heart of this reform must be the encounter with the crucified risen one. They make this risen presence to be the central mystery in the assemblies, the genesis of what later generations of Christians will call “sacramentality” as well as what will be called “the doctrine of the Trinity.” They make symbol, metaphor and verbal juxtaposition the most basic ways they articulate the meaning of Jesus and of the Spirit poured out in the assembly from Jesus. And they mirror the openness they call for in the assembly by the open-ended character of each book.

Let me say a little more, as one sketch of some of the characteristics of a biblically-based and renewed liturgical movement in our time.

The Gospels call diverse assemblies to reform. And so they call us. We have encountered some of the concerns of this call simply by looking at the structure of the books: that the assemblies be focused on scripture reading, shared meals, prayer, teaching and baptism in such a way that all of these practices faithfully bear witness to Jesus Christ and to the mercy of God as it is known in Jesus; that the poor be remembered and actively assisted; that leaders in the assembly serve; that the assembly avoid competition; and that the doors be

open. But in the Gospels these calls to reform are addressed to a variety of different groups, at different times in the development of early Christianity. Inevitably, these were groups with different ways of eating together, different practices in baptism, different accents in teaching, probably different ways of gathering together at all. Nonetheless, the common interest of the Gospels in reform remains. There is for us here an important model. We, too, have diverse assemblies, existing often side-by-side in the same town or city, in any case in the same time. Our time has rightly been marked by a new welcome to this diversity. But the call to reform can unite us as well. It is not that by reading the four different Gospels we are urged toward a single model. It is rather that those very diverse books, held as scripture by all of us and held together, do urge a few shared things upon us and do urge us to see, encourage and rejoice in our unity-in-diversity. So, we ask: are these few things — baptism, word, meal, care for the wretched poor — done with such a largeness in our meetings that it is clear this is what our gatherings are for?

Then, the Gospels propose that the heart of this reform must be the encounter with the crucified risen one. And that proposal comes to us. All of the other reforms are centered here. The central passage of the Markan ring composition, the Matthean “where two or three are gathered together,” the meals of Luke, and the repeating Sundays of John all urge the assemblies to see the crucified risen Christ at the heart of preaching, scripture-interpreting, praying, meal-making, healing, forgiving, baptizing and turning toward the marginalized and the poor. The Gospels have a diversity in this theme: the crucified and risen Christ is encountered in the Gospel book, in the welcomed child and in the wretched poor, in the meal, in mutual forgiveness, in the active participation of the assembly itself, and in the apostolic ministers. But the encounter with that presence is both what all four of the Gospels mean by the resurrection and the very heart of what they urge as reforms for the Christian groups of the late first and early second centuries. The reforming way in which the Second Vatican Council summarized a major concern of the twentieth century liturgical movement by accentuating the “presences” of Christ, not only in the bread and wine of the eucharist, but also in scripture reading, in baptizing, in the praying and singing assembly, and in its ministers,¹⁰ may be taken also as responding to an idea already found in the Gospels. Such an accent on the presence of Christ in assembly belongs centrally to a biblical-liturgical movement in our time. So we ask: are we seeing, preaching and teaching this presence?

Further, the Gospels make this risen presence to be the central mystery in the assemblies, the genesis of what later generations of Christians will call “sacramentality” as well as what will be called “the doctrine of the Trinity.” In the Gospels, “church” is coming to be as various gatherings or clubs are transformed by the presence of the crucified risen one, in the power of the Spirit, changing the practices of these meetings and drawing these assemblies to be people before God on behalf of the world and witnesses in the world to what God is doing. Thus, it is the resurrection which continually is founding and creating the church. Thus also, the question of the “institution” of the eucharist or of baptism, as if one could find the historical moment of the creation of these sacraments, is no longer a very helpful question. The Lord’s Supper is being created wherever the word and presence of the crucified Jesus Christ and the Spirit poured out from him are encountering and

¹⁰ *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* 7. See Judith M. Kubicki, *The Presence of Christ in the Gathered Assembly*, New York: Continuum, 2006.

changing our meal practice. Baptism is being created wherever the word and presence of the triune God — God as God is known in the Gospel story of the baptism of Jesus and the Gospel account of the cross of Jesus as a baptism — are encountering and breaking open our initiatory practices, our ways of joining people to our assemblies. “The word comes to the element and so there is a sacrament,” as Augustine said.¹¹ Thus diverse meal practices and diverse initiatory practices inevitably describe the churches. Meals are always local. So are ways in which communities are constituted. But what unites us is the shared critique of the Gospels and the gospel, the shared challenge to our practices and their shared transformation when the God we know in the Spirit of Jesus Christ comes near. This enveloping nearness of the holy Trinity is the central mystery of Christian worship, making our ritual practices to bear the very presence of the one who is transforming death and sin into life and reconciliation, the one who is turning us toward the needs of our neighbor. Thus these practices come to be called “sacraments.” And “Trinity” may be considered as the way Christians, because of the resurrection, came to know God encountered in assembly as God for us and for all the world. Such trinitarian challenge and transformation of our practices belong to a biblical-liturgical movement in our time, a movement that welcomes ritual critique and the inversion of the ordinary expectations of religion. So we ask: in our liturgical reforms, are we seeking — as Alexander Schmemmann puts it — “to make the liturgical experience of the churches again one of the life-giving sources of the knowledge of God,”¹² that is, the knowledge of God as God is known in Jesus and encountered both in the sacraments and in places where we thought God could not be?

Then, the Gospels make symbol, metaphor and verbal juxtaposition the most basic ways they articulate the meaning of Jesus and of the Spirit poured out in the assembly from Jesus. Thus such symbol and juxtaposition have become primary means of liturgical meaning also for us. Biblical speech patterns well before the Gospels were marked by what Austin Farrer has called “a rebirth of images,” metaphors and stories intertextually linked in reinterpretive chains.¹³ Biblical speech is also noted for what Harold Bloom has called “parataxis,” putting one phrase next to another, one image next to another, in a way that both builds meaning and creates space, like the space between the cherubim on the ark, the “mercy seat” where God meets Israel (Exodus 25:17-22). The Psalms, for example, have “a way of juxtaposing phrases that is central to Biblical Hebrew,” establishing speech about God as “a living labyrinth of parallelisms and parataxis,” and setting out “a way of thinking that is not ours.”¹⁴ This is the way of thinking alive in the Gospels. Mark’s ring composition demonstrates the large pattern of juxtaposition set out to carry the meaning of the book. Beyond that structure, yet further parallel images occur. The whole action of Mark, for example, occurs between the torn heavens of the baptism (1:10) and the torn curtain of the temple (15:38), as if these were the new cherubim to a new mercy seat. The recurring image of water in John, the recurring “welcome” of Luke — from Simeon welcoming the child to Jesus welcoming the crowd and then the thief and then the Emmaus pilgrims who also welcome him — and the reuse of the biblical idea of five books in Matthew all set out examples of meaning by rebirth of images and by juxtaposition or parataxis. That water of

¹¹ *Accedit verbum ad elementum, et fit sacramentum.* Augustine, *In Johannis Evangelium* 80:4. See my *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993, p. 164ff.

¹² Alexander Schmemmann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1973, p. 19.

¹³ Austin Farrer, *A Rebirth of Images*, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1949. See also Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Things*, p. 24.

¹⁴ Harold Bloom, “Who Will Praise the Lord?” *New York Review of Books* 54:18 (November 22, 2007), p. 20–21.

John, for example, flowing at Cana, at the well in Samaria, on the temple mount, in the pool at Siloam, at the footwashing, and from the side of the crucified, and thereby echoing and rearranging many other biblical uses of the water image, speaks to us of Jesus himself, of the Spirit that is from him and of the baptism that is into him. Such poetics of juxtaposition belongs to the history of Christian liturgy,¹⁵ as the Gospels were set next to all the old scriptures still read with authority in the meeting and as new texts and new juxtapositions of text and action were created. Such a poetics has come to expression recently, for example, in the brilliant combination of texts that make up the now widespread ecumenical lectionary, the Revised Common Lectionary. A continued recovery of this poetics in prayer texts, in hymnody and music, in lectionary knowledge, in preaching, in the visual arts on the walls of the meeting room and in the gracious kinetic arts of assembly presiding belongs to the biblical-liturgical movement in our time. So we ask: are we teaching the use of biblical imagery as we teach the practice of the liturgy?

And the Gospels mirror the openness they call for in the assembly by the open-ended character of each book. Each of the Gospels tells an open-ended tale. At the same time, paradoxically, at the heart of this openness and enabling it we find a decisive encounter with the risen one.¹⁶ Mark's women-witnesses run away afraid, leaving the story to us while also urging us back to Galilee to see Jesus risen. At the heart of Galilee is an encounter with Jesus in the house-meeting, where the cross is to be preached, the leaders are to serve, competition is to be renounced, and Christ is received in the child. Around this decisive meeting circles the open story, and the meeting itself is to be open. Mark, in the very structure of the book, images an assembly of strong center and yet open door. Something like the same structure is found in each of the other Gospels. Matthew ends with "I am with you always" (28:20). There is no going away. The book simply ends there, openly, yet thereby the meeting where "two or three are gathered in my name" (18:20), the meeting of a disciplined reconciliation, is recalled. Luke's ending presses us on to Acts, and yet Acts itself does not really end, opening up to the continuing works of the risen Christ, the Christ who breaks the bread and interprets the scriptures, in all the churches. And John's Sunday meeting after Sunday meeting opens onto our continuing Sundays, while nonetheless exercising the judgment, the life-giving *kerisis*, that comes with any encounter with the risen one in the heart of these meetings. Open meetings, centered on the crucified and risen Christ and thus on the triune God, imaged and convoked by the Gospels, welcoming the child or the Emmaus pilgrims or Thomas or us all, belong to the biblical-liturgical movement of our time. Open meetings, centered on Jesus Christ, inevitably find that they are centered on the one who identifies with all of the excluded, all of the marginalized. So we ask: are we at work to make of all the diverse Christian assemblies places of strong center and open door?

The recovered central matters of the church; the accent on the presence of the risen one in those central matters; the mystery of the Trinity understood as the mystery of the assembly's gathering and the assembly's sacraments; the continually recovered poetics of parataxis and juxtaposition; and renewed work on the strong center and open door of our meetings — such are some characteristics of a biblical-liturgical movement in our time that will have learned from the Gospels and their coherence with assemblies.

¹⁵ Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Things*, p. 82.

¹⁶ Harold W. Attridge, "Genre Bending in the Fourth Gospel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 121:1/2002, p. 19.

The four Gospels were indeed written to tell us who Jesus is. But they were not so much written to give us information about the historical Jesus as to again and again invite our assemblies to see-in-faith Jesus-*then* becoming here Jesus-*now*, to gift us with the life-giving encounter with the triune God that follows from this vision, and then to invite us to shape our assemblies in response. To say the matter with Martin Luther: in the Christ of the Gospels we meet the triune God going out to the world as a gift. We in turn are to shape our assemblies and ourselves as such a gift to our neighbors.