

The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics

Second Edition

Edited by

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 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

CHAPTER 5

Gathering: Worship, Imagination, and Formation

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No issue is more central to Christian ethics than worship. Moreover, human gatherings always involve worship, and worship always implicates human gatherings.

That many people would regard such assertions as controversial, if not patently false, reveals more about the assumptions and convictions that underwrite Western cultures and societies than it does about the assertions themselves. Two assumptions, in particular, make it difficult to acknowledge both the centrality of worship to human life and the inextricable connection between human gatherings and worship. First, worship is widely assumed to be a “religious” activity that belongs to a specific and circumscribed sphere of human life called “religion.” Because there are many kinds of human gatherings that lie outside this religious sphere, it is assumed that many kinds of human gatherings have nothing to do with worship. Second, human beings are most often regarded fundamentally as individuals and only derivatively as social creatures. As a result, human gatherings are widely considered as primarily *expressive* of common self-understandings rather than being *formative* of them.

This chapter rejects these two assumptions, arguing instead both for a broader, less-circumscribed understanding of worship, and for the fundamentally formative power of human gatherings. Human gatherings powerfully shape the human social imagination, inevitably forming the horizon within which all human action – including worship – takes place. In underscoring the formative power of human gatherings, this chapter identifies some of the considerable resources that Christian worship and its requisite gatherings offer Christian moral reflection and practice. Just as the chapters in this volume take up the specific practices of the Christian liturgy in order to show their potential relevance for Christian ethics, this chapter explores the close connection between, as well as the ethical significance of, the gathering and worship of Christians.

The Pervasiveness of Worship

One of the primary impediments to recognizing the ethical significance of worship is that people in Western societies have been formed to think of worship as a strictly "religious" affair. As such, worship is widely understood to involve participating in certain cultic or ritual practices. Moreover, these practices are routinely circumscribed not only *physically* by taking place in certain "holy spaces," but also *intellectually* and *morally* by finding their rightful place in the so-called "religious sphere." Thus, it is usually assumed that if the activity of worship is to have any bearing on life outside that place or sphere, it will need to be translated into the established discourses of those other spheres (such as the economic, political, or educational spheres). Within the assumptions of this view of religion and worship, therefore, the regular activities associated with economics, politics, and education have nothing inherently to do with worship.

But there is no compelling reason to begin with the assumption that worship is a peculiarly "religious" activity confined to a particular physical location or cultural sphere. Indeed, if we begin with the notion that worship involves, as the etymology of the English word itself suggests, the activity of "ascribing worth," we are quickly led to see that every human endeavor both presupposes and reinforces certain judgments regarding worth. Moreover, the words routinely translated as "worship" in Christian Scripture point in a similar direction, though in an even more vivid way, for they derive from roots that mean "to kiss," "to bow, bend or prostrate oneself," and "to serve." Kissing, bowing, and serving – all are embodied ways of ascribing worth to something or someone. Not surprisingly, therefore, Christian worship has often included these activities as part of its liturgy.

Yet such explicit and ritually intensified examples of ascribing honor and worth in Christian worship should not blind us to the fact that human lives are always formed and shaped in specific ways that either explicitly or implicitly ascribe worth. Every human life is an embodied argument about what things are worth doing, who or what is worthy of attention, who or what is worthy of allegiance and sacrifice, and what projects or endeavors are worthy of human energies. In short, every human life is "bent" toward something. Every human life is an act of worship.

Understood in this way, the inextricable connection between worship and ethics comes more clearly into view. Regardless of how one understands ethics, the human judgments involved will be inseparable from judgments regarding the relative worth and worthiness of certain actions, projects, dispositions, values, principles, persons, or ideas. In many respects, this is what the ancient Greeks were articulating with their notion of "the Good": all human life is bent toward something or someone that defines ultimate worth. All human life, therefore, is doxological, for its shape and direction always ascribe honor and worth to something or someone.

Such an acknowledgment of the pervasiveness of worship suggests that every answer to such typically "ethical" questions as "What should I do?" presumes certain (often unacknowledged or unexamined) judgments about worth. This in turn leads to a further question: "How do human beings learn to what or to whom they should ascribe ultimate and relative worth?" How, in other words, do they come to render the

world as this particular kind of world inhabited by these particular kinds of beings who ought to be engaged in these particular kinds of actions rather than others? Sociologists call this process "socialization"; Christian theologians have often called it "formation." In both instances there is the clear acknowledgment that human beings are shaped or formed by forces and influences beyond the individual.

Learning to Worship

Human beings are social creatures. As such, they are always being formed and shaped by structures and powers outside themselves, as well as participating in those structures and powers that form and shape others. Aristotle affirmed this long ago, and contemporary social sciences have only deepened our awareness of this central dynamic of human life. An intimate connection exists between how people come to understand themselves and their various gatherings and assemblies. Indeed, the answers that people offer to the "big questions" – Who am I? Who are we? What is the purpose of human life? What is the basic shape and character of the world in which we dwell? – are inseparable from the ways that they have come to understand themselves as the result of social interaction, which by its very nature involves human gatherings.

Because human beings are social creatures, when they gather together they inevitably presuppose and reinforce much about the shape, meaning, and purpose of the world that they understand themselves to inhabit. Indeed, all human gatherings are a kind of worship to the extent that they presuppose and reinforce certain ascriptions of worth. For this reason, human gatherings are inevitably formative, not least because such gatherings construct an imaginative landscape (a "world") within which all future action and reflection upon it will take place. People come to have a world as they gather together and share stories about the shape and meaning of that world, as well as their place and role within it. People come to have a world as they gather together and engage in common practices that only "make sense" within a world so understood. People come to have a world as the above activities presuppose, instill, and intensify certain desires and dispositions, and as certain virtues are commended and instilled as being requisite for flourishing in this kind of world. People come to have a world as they construct and maintain institutions that order and support ways of life that are congruent with the ways they understand the world and their place within it.

Taken as a whole, these multiple features of life together might be called a way of life. As such, a way of life is not simply a particular style of human living, but an entire way of rendering the world as a certain kind of inhabitable space in which people seek to dwell and flourish. For this reason, every way of life is inevitably a form of ascribing worth, a form of worship.

Gatherings, the social imagination, and human action

Another way of underscoring the formative power – and therefore the ethical significance – of human gatherings is to draw attention to the critical role that these

gatherings play in forming the human imagination and, thus, the moral space or horizon within which human beings think and act. Yet such a strategy is impeded by the fact that ethics has so rarely considered the social imagination as central to its concerns.

There are, of course, various competing ways of understanding the human imagination. Prior to Kant and the German idealists, imagination was largely discussed in terms of its *mimetic* and *reproductive* capacities, and as such was largely associated with unreality, fantasy, illusion, and unreason. In contrast, most contemporary discussions of imagination take their bearings from Kant's focus on the *productive* aspects of imagination. This understanding was picked up by the Romantic movement, which went on to associate the imagination with creativity, genius, autonomy, and freedom (Engell, 1981; Kearney, 1994).

However, my arguments in the balance of this chapter concerning the human social imagination take an approach significantly different from either of these two familiar trajectories. In speaking of the human social imagination in what follows, reference will be made to that complex human social capacity to receive and construct an intelligible "whole" of which particular parts are considered to be constituent parts. In many respects, this usage parallels what one scholar has helpfully called the "paradigmatic imagination" (Green, 1989). Within such an understanding, imagination is not set in opposition to a separate human faculty called "reason," but is instead regarded as inseparable from human understanding and human action. In short, the human activity of imagining a "whole" in which any particular action "makes sense" suggests that imagination cannot in any simple way be pitted against practical reason or judgment, since such judgments always assume and make use of prior imaginings.

Understood in this way, it is not difficult to see in what sense the paradigmatic imagination is always social; that is, it is not something that individuals create for themselves, but is something that they largely receive. Human persons are always the recipients of an imaginative world within which they are called to live and through which they are encouraged to understand themselves and their place within that world. This imaginative whole is produced and reproduced by means of various human social structures, institutions, and practices, all of which shape and animate human lives in ways that presuppose and reinforce a particular understanding of how things hang together. Thus, every time that people engage in particular practices, interact with and have their lives shaped by certain institutions, come to believe certain things and hold certain convictions, and in all of this have certain desires instilled or fulfilled, these people are having their imaginations profoundly shaped with regard to what the "whole" of human life is about.

Finally, all this implies that there is no neutral way of narrating or rendering human behavior or the imaginative horizon within which it is engaged. Both social theory and theology, for example, offer a comprehensive rendering of the world and human behavior within it (Milbank, 1990). Both discourses are rooted in fundamental commitments about the shape of the "real" world, what it means to be human, and how those kinds of beings should act in that kind of world. Both discourses are in service to those specific renderings of the world and those who understand themselves to live in those worlds. What neither offers is a value-free or commitment-free rendering of the world. Thus,

even the human activity of rendering the world as a particular kind of inhabitable space within which meaningful human action may take place is itself an act of worship, that is, an act of "ascribing worth."

To see an example of this complex social dynamic of human gatherings, social imagination, and action at work, one need only briefly reflect on a kind of gathering familiar to most readers: an assembly of students, teachers, and staff who gather as a school. Here, regardless of the level of schooling, one sees the complex interaction among – as well as the formative power of – the stories humans tell, the practices in which they engage, the desires, dispositions, and virtues they seek to instill, and the institutions they create and sustain in order to support all of this over time.

Schools function within a matrix of broadly shared cultural stories about why people should attend, stories that structure the curriculum as well as the expectations of what should happen in and out of the classroom. Inseparable from these stories are certain common practices in which people engage that presume and reinforce these stories. A school requires students to read and discuss common texts, master certain information regarded as critically important, and demonstrate certain skills considered to be essential. Moreover, faculty members assess and evaluate this student work, making it possible to rank those students, who, in turn, may use those rankings to impress prospective employers. In this way, the practice of grading in higher education commonly underwrites the widespread cultural story that society is largely a meritocracy, with the best jobs (and best pay) going to those who have earned it by means of their hard work and demonstrated achievement.

The moral and imaginative framework presupposed by such stories and practices also presumes that certain desires, dispositions, and virtues are requisite for flourishing in this world. The desires to excel, compete, "get ahead in life," as well as the virtues of diligence and open-mindedness, are all presupposed and reinforced by the "world of the school." Not surprisingly, ordering these projects toward a common end requires institutions capable of supporting them as "worthy" enterprises over time.

This complex web of stories, practices, institutions, and instilled passions and dispositions reveals schooling as a kind of formation system, for it participates – and requires those who are part of it likewise to participate – in a particular rendering of the world. And to the extent that a school sees itself as offering at least a partial answer to what it means to be a human being and what it means to live a good life, the school commends this understanding and way of life to all people, not just to those immediately engaged in the enterprise.

The relative power of gatherings

Schools are not, of course, the only kind of gathering; human beings gather in lots of different places for lots of different purposes. These manifold gatherings also differ enormously with respect to their formative impact. The gathering of a group of strangers at a subway station likely has less transformative potential than does a group of fellow employees gathered at a workplace. Similarly, a gathering of fellow devoted fans at a sporting event is likely to have less influence on one's view of the world than the

regular gathering of one's family around the dinner table. The difference in relative impact among gatherings is the result of many factors, including such things as their frequency (how often these gatherings take place), their stability over time (whether a relatively stable group of persons gathers), their intended scope (how much of human life this gathering seeks to influence and order), the type and intensity of interaction fostered (the kind of social relations those gathering engage in and the potentially formative influence of that intimacy), and the willingness on the part of those gathered to be caught up in vision of the world being presupposed and reinforced by that gathering.

For example, consider the relative differences in formative power between a military boot camp and an amusement park. A boot camp is a gathering of human beings for a purpose so specific and focused that this shared purpose becomes capable of guiding everything that happens during and after that gathering. By contrast, a gathering of human beings at an amusement park is a much more diffuse and therefore much less potentially transformative gathering than the boot camp. That is, although the gathering at the amusement park still has woven into it some shared judgments regarding purpose and relative worth, the intended outcomes of the gathering are not nearly so tightly controlled or circumscribed.

Of course, the relative differences between the transformative power of the amusement park and of the boot camp are also due to a number of other factors. These include such things as the relative differences in the intensity of social interaction constitutive of each, as well as the vastly different degree to which each demands a total commitment or "conversion" in order to be initiated into a peculiar, distinctive, and comprehensive way of life.

This raises an obvious question. Should Christian formation, in terms of scope and focus, look more like an amusement park or more like a boot camp? That is, should gatherings of disciples understand themselves primarily as loosely knit aggregates of individuals who come together for assorted reasons and purposes, and whose fundamental orientation is dictated primarily by concerns other than the right worship of the triune God? Or is the way of Jesus Christ a peculiar and distinctive way, requiring an intentional and disciplined formation, the central component of which is the Christian liturgy? The chapters in this volume affirm the latter view. A person does not simply wake up one day and find she is a disciple of Jesus Christ any more than a person wakes up one day and find she is a Marine. Although this formation takes place in various ways and in different venues, a certain priority is given to the community gathered for worship, for here, more clearly than in any other context, disciples of Jesus Christ are initiated into the comprehensive vision, the social imagination, that animates Christian life. Because this priority underwrites the approach of this entire volume, a couple of clarifying comments are in order.

First, priority is given to the community at worship not because the actions practiced there are in themselves *inherently more important* than the actions engaged in outside of the liturgy, but because the actions of the community at worship are taken to be *paradigmatic* for all other actions. That is, the community of disciples gathered for worship seeks to have its imagination so shaped by these formative liturgical actions that its entire life outside the liturgy will itself be a powerful expression of the worship

of this God. In short, the reason the liturgy is given priority is not because offering praise and adoration to a deity is inherently more important than feeding the hungry or sheltering the homeless, but because learning to praise and adore this God who was revealed most fully in the flesh and blood of a first-century carpenter from Nazareth has everything to do with the care we offer our neighbors.

Second, granting the liturgy priority in the formation of those gathered is not itself sufficient, for engaging in the liturgy does not automatically shape those gathered in the desired ways. Those gathered rightly confess that the liturgy may be a powerful means of grace in God's economy of salvation, but the *ekklesia* also rightly confesses that the God it worships is not coercive. Just as Mary's consent was necessary for the Spirit to come upon her, so the *ekklesia* must consent to its own *re*-formation. One of the *ekklesia*'s central and continuing concerns, therefore, will always be not simply *if* it gathers and engages in the liturgy, but also *how* it gathers and engages in the liturgy. This central concern will always demand discernments regarding the spirits that animate this gathering.

This final concern is not unique to our age; indeed, it informs one of Paul's sternest admonitions to the disciples in Corinth (1 Cor. 11:17–22). Paul insists that it is not enough that they simply gather to celebrate the Lord's Supper; they must also attend to *how* they gather, that is, to the spirit that animates and therefore shapes their gathering. The Lord's table, which is intended to draw together and reconcile those whom society divides, has been dishonored because this occasion has been used to reinforce the social divisions between rich and poor. Because Paul is convinced that they gather in a spirit that violates the very purpose of the table, he can maintain that they are not in fact eating of the Lord's table. Paul's warning stands as a sober reminder to the gathered community, for it underscores the need not only to engage in certain practices, but also to attend to the spirit that animates and directs them.

The *Ekklesia* as Formative Gathering

In order to illustrate the potentially formative power of Christian worship, as well as its pivotal role in matters of Christian ethics, the remainder of this chapter identifies some of the crucial skills, convictions, and dispositions that are nurtured in and through the community of disciples gathered for worship. As would be expected, the specific liturgical practices and contexts within which many of these are nurtured will be discussed and illustrated more directly and explicitly in the chapters that follow. The remainder of this chapter will of necessity, therefore, paint with rather broad strokes, with the understanding that the following chapters will use finer and more detailed ones.

In what follows, I refer to the community of disciples of Jesus Christ as "the *ekklesia*." The reason for doing so is straightforward. When most people hear the word "church" (the word most commonly used to translate the New Testament Greek term *ekklesia*), they quite naturally think of a special building set aside for "religious" gatherings and activities. Because such usage presupposes and reinforces an understanding I am arguing against, I have chosen simply to transliterate the Greek word in the hope of offering a modest linguistic restraint against too quickly foreclosing on the scope and

purposes of this assembly. In its New Testament context, the word "*ekklesia*" did not refer to a "religious" gathering, but rather to any assembly gathered to engage in important business. Thus, in what follows, this assembly is understood to be the primary context in which disciples of Jesus Christ learn the skills, convictions, and dispositions that animate its life in the world. It is within this communal form of life that it learns how to make the prudential judgments necessary for living out the *ekklesia's* mission in the world: to be an embodied sign and foretaste of God's continuing work of reconciliation and healing in the world.

Learning to glorify and enjoy God

Christians affirm that all human life— including gatherings for engaging in intentional and ritually focused practices of worship — has as its ultimate horizon the glory of the triune God and the enjoying of communion with that God. Or, as stated succinctly in the Westminster Shorter Catechism of 1647: "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."

From the time of the call of Abraham, God has moved to create a gathering of people from all the nations that would do precisely that. Just as ancient Israel was called to be a light to the nations, so the *ekklesia* is called to embody before the world God's deepest desires for all of creation. That desire is for communion, for participation in the very life of the triune God. Such communion, such participation is rooted in the very relationship within the triune God, where the Son serves the will of the Father and the Spirit bears witness to the Son in such a way that both bring glory to the Father. To the extent that the *ekklesia* likewise serves the will of the Father, bears witness to the Son, and opens its life continually to the animation of the Spirit, it too participates in the life of God, anticipating in embodied form the eschatological gathering of the people of God.

Thus, the first petition of the Lord's Prayer — "Hallowed be thy name" — when read against the background of ancient Israel's Scripture, is a call for God to sanctify God's own name by gathering and renewing the people of God. As one New Testament scholar has noted, it means "Gather to yourself a renewed people that is truly holy, so that the reign of God can shine forth and your holy name may stand in its full glory before the eyes of all peoples" (Lohfink, 1984: 124). Therefore, when the *ekklesia* in any concrete time and place gathers to worship, it does so not at its own initiative, but in response to the triune God's continuing work of gathering a sanctified people who will participate in the very life of God, thus bringing glory and honor to God. Seen from this perspective, the gathering of the *ekklesia* does not begin at the processional, or with the call to worship, but with God's determination to call out a sanctified people. God's work of sanctification — God's work of bringing wholeness, healing, and reconciliation to the entire cosmos — does not happen by means of magic, but rather by means of a people who have been formed and animated by the Spirit of God in Christian worship to serve as agents of God's reconciling work in the world.

Consequently, the regular gathering of the *ekklesia* for worship is always already an embodied response to God's prior action: it is an act of trust that God will, through these

people and practices, form the *ekklesia* in ways that will edify it for further service and embodied witness in the world. Rightly understood, therefore, the gathering of the *ekklesia* is not simply a prerequisite to worship, but is already itself an act of worship. The *ekklesia* gathers the gifts of the people of God – both the gifts and stories they bring and the gifts and stories they are – as a witness to God's continued work in and care for the world. The triune God's action in the world has a certain shape, direction, taste, aroma, and tenor, and the *ekklesia* gathers to learn to recognize, acknowledge, and participate in that action.

Learning to pay attention

More than one cultural commentator has noted that we live in an age of distraction. More and more, people in contemporary Western societies find that their attention is increasingly fragmented, diverted, and unfocused. Although every society demands that certain things be given proper attention, contemporary Western societies are incredibly proficient at bombarding their citizens with vast arrays of objects that compete for their attention. It is within this context that the *ekklesia* gathers to learn to attend to the right things rightly.

Although this critical process of formation takes place throughout the liturgy, most ecclesial traditions seek to focus the attention of gathered worshipers from the moment they enter that space set aside for the practice of the liturgy. As a result, liturgical space itself is typically arranged to focus the attention of those gathered on certain vital matters. For example, Christian liturgical space is usually arranged so that focal attention is drawn to the altar or communion table, the pulpit and lectern, and to the central symbol of the Christian faith, the cross of Jesus Christ.

The centrality of the cross to ecclesial attention is underscored in many concrete ways. Crosses not only frequently adorn the steeples and domes of church buildings and cathedrals, but also provide the architectural pattern for those buildings whose cruciform shape itself bears material witness to this central focus. Moreover, the liturgy in many ecclesial traditions begins with a procession in which the cross, followed by the Gospel, leads the procession. By following the cross and the Gospel into (and, later, out of) the sanctuary, the *ekklesia* dramatizes not only the focus of this gathering, but also the deliberate direction of its life. Hence, in many concrete ways the *ekklesia* is reminded that the way of Jesus Christ is the way of the cross.

Yet, for Christians, the way of the cross is never one traveled alone. The *ekklesia* gathers as part of the communion of saints across time and space, a communion whose reality is powerfully evoked by means of the stained glass windows or icons that often appear prominently within the liturgical space of the *ekklesia*. In each case, the *ekklesia* is encouraged to have its understanding of the world transformed by viewing it *through* these renderings of the saints, who offer the *ekklesia* much needed perspective by reminding it that the grace of God is sufficient for those who embark on the way of the cross. Moreover, the liturgy as a whole is an enterprise engaged in together. In entering this space, those who gather as the *ekklesia* are drawn out of their private and narcissistic worlds in order to enter the cosmic arena of God's reconciling purposes. That

God's purposes and initiative, rather than their own, are the focal point of this gathering is underscored by the call to worship, which appropriately uses words from Scripture to remind those gathered that they do so in response to God's call on their lives.

The *ekklesia* likewise learns to pay attention rightly through its practice of prayer. Correctly understood, prayer is not simply a speaking to God, but a deep and abiding communion with God. Such communion requires that we both listen to God and open ourselves up to the transforming power of God's Spirit. In short, prayer invites us to attend to the desires of God and to make those desires our desires. This is one reason why the *ekklesia* gathered for worship often prays using words from other times and places: such words have the power both to focus our attention and to serve as models for our own prayers. In this way, those gathered learn how to attend more faithfully to the things of God.

Learning to speak truthfully

Contemporary life is filled not only with distraction, but also with deception and falsehood. Few citizens expect to hear the truth from their elected leaders; most people are daily subjected to a steady stream of inflated and deceptive claims from advertisers; and nearly every one of us, in our quiet moments, is painfully aware of our own capacity for falsehood and self-deception. In contrast, Christian worship offers those gathered important resources for learning to speak truthfully about God, the world, and themselves.

First, and most importantly, in worship the *ekklesia* learns to speak truthfully about God. The *ekklesia's* truest speech *about* God is its speech directed *to* God. That is, in offering its ultimate praise, adoration, and thanksgiving to the triune God, the *ekklesia* truthfully embodies the cornerstone of Christian worship: this God alone is worthy of all honor and glory and praise; this God alone is worthy of complete devotion and allegiance; this God alone is worthy of being the axis around which all life revolves. Such speech, as well as human embodiment consonant with that speech, has far-reaching formative potential. To proclaim in the gathered assembly that God is the source of all life, as well as the source of every good and perfect gift, is to affirm a fundamental orientation deeply at odds with contemporary society. In this way, the liturgy potentially reconfigures the imaginative landscape within which those gathered think and act.

For this reason, the *ekklesia's* truthful speech does not stop with its praise and adoration of the triune God. The *ekklesia* also seeks to speak truthfully about the world as the arena of God's redemptive purposes, as the realm of God's work of transforming the kingdoms of this world into the kingdoms of our Lord. Gathering to worship reminds those gathered of this larger horizon within which they live and serve. The *ekklesia* gathers to participate in something it did not initiate and which it will not bring to completion, but which nonetheless has the power to shape it profoundly. In the liturgy, the *ekklesia* learns to see the world as the realm of God's work and God's glory, as well as learning to see a world that is passing away in its current form, being transformed by God's grace into the reign of God. This recognition, which is itself an act of worship,

an activity of ascribing worth, relativizes in an important sense all other loyalties and commitments, demanding that they become subordinate to God's ultimate purposes rather than become themselves ultimate, absolute, and controlling.

Thus, in gathering, the *ekklesia* confesses that it can only know its true identity and purpose as it finds its story within the more comprehensive story of God's work in the world. In gathering, the *ekklesia* embodies its continued willingness to see itself first of all as a participant in God's cosmic drama rather than as a participant in the puny, if not petty, dramas that humans script for themselves in which they play the leading role. In gathering, the *ekklesia* confesses that God plays the leading role in this cosmic drama, while the *ekklesia* is cast in a supporting role. To participate in the life of God is to participate in the life that God offers to the world, a life that the *ekklesia* is called not only to enjoy but also to serve. In short, in gathering, the *ekklesia* learns to receive its true identity as the Body of Christ. In so doing, the *ekklesia* confesses that there is no "I" apart from that body: that every person receives his or her truest identity as a part of the Body of Christ. This is why gathering is neither secondary nor incidental, for in so doing, vital and life-giving connections are nurtured and sustained.

Finally, it is precisely in the light of such truthful speech that the *ekklesia* is able to speak truthfully about its own waywardness, its own sinfulness and resistance to the purposes of God. It is only in the light of the *ekklesia*'s rightful praise of God and the revelation of God's reconciling purposes for the world that the *ekklesia* becomes fully enabled to confess its sin as sin. In other words, it is by means of the formation that takes place most fundamentally in worship that the *ekklesia* learns to recognize and name its idolatry as idolatry. Whereas much contemporary life is devoted to exalting and extending the reign of the gods of fashion, convenience, efficiency, novelty, violence, excess, fear, and insecurity, the *ekklesia* is called to devote itself to worshipping the only true and living God. The gospel announces the good news that these false gods need no longer hold us in bondage. Like the idols that Isaiah satirically mocked (Isa. 44:9–20), these gods are the work of our own hands. In a world in bondage to gods of its own making, the *ekklesia* dares to gather, both to give praise and honor to the only one worthy of such worship and to denounce and confess its own idolatrous life. In so doing, the *ekklesia* learns the rudiments of truthful speech.

As far back as Aristotle, ethics was understood to be centrally about praise and blame. Ethics is about learning to recognize, praise, and commend the right actions done in the right way, as well as learning to praise those who engage in such action, while also learning the proper use of the language of blame. When praise and blame are rightly spoken, those who hear and are guided by such truthful speech are rightly formed to make the judgments necessary to live well. Seen in this light, the adoration and praise of God in worship, as well as the confession of human sin, are profoundly moral activities.

Learning good posture

As already noted, the gathering of the *ekklesia* for worship is itself a response to God's prior action. The Christian liturgy assumes that God, by virtue of who God is and what

God has done, is worthy of praise, adoration, and thanksgiving. Such an assumption has important ethical implications to the extent that the liturgy forms those gathered with a particular orientation or posture toward God, the world, and other people that flows from and is consonant with the *ekklesia's* practice of worship.

First, worship cultivates a posture of dependence. It matters enormously for Christian ethics whether human beings see themselves as autonomous and independent of God and each other, or whether they see their lives as gifts from God that in turn might be offered for the life of the world to the glory of God. The *ekklesia* confesses that human flourishing is best understood as and sustained through participation in the circulation of God's good gifts; in contrast, much contemporary life assumes that human flourishing is best understood and sustained through participation in human self-making. People who dwell in these very different imaginative moral spaces will inevitably find themselves making very different kinds of practical moral judgments.

For example, the imaginative moral space within which much contemporary ethical reflection takes place assumes that the highest human good is something called "freedom," understood as the capacity to create, choose, and pursue one's own purposes and goals. However, within the imaginative moral space fostered by Christian worship, the notion of being required to create and live out one's own self-chosen purpose is regarded as a form of bondage. In this sense, the Christian worship of God may itself be liberating, for it forms those gathered to acknowledge that human life has a transcendent purpose and goal that is not simply self-created and self-chosen.

Furthermore, the regular gathering of the *ekklesia* fosters a posture of dependence in that it affirms our need not only for God but also for each other. In contrast to those many voices that encourage us to construct our identities primarily by purchasing various products ("I am what I buy"), the gathering of the *ekklesia* for worship encourages us to have our identities forged both through the reception of word and sacrament, and through the reception of guidance and admonition offered by the communion of saints. Thus, whereas for many kinds of human gatherings the interaction among persons is relatively minimal and incidental, the gathering of the *ekklesia* in a particular time and place calls for a relatively consistent group of people who are open to both the gifts and demands brought by those gathered.

A second and corollary posture nurtured in worship is that of humility. If human beings truly and profoundly are dependent upon God and other people, as Christian worship affirms, then such an affirmation should foster a deep sense of humility. As an assembly of creatures gathered to worship their Creator, the *ekklesia* rightly bends its will to the One whom it confesses as Lord of all. As an assembly of sinners gathered to worship a righteous, holy, yet merciful God, the *ekklesia* falls on its face to honor the judge and justifier of all that is. Such willful submission presupposes and reinforces a posture of humility, one that is physically embodied, for example, in those traditions where genuflecting and kneeling remain critically important gestures.

Although worship nurtures a number of other postures, two more may be briefly mentioned: trust and hope. Both are closely tied to what has already been noted. If the triune God is who the *ekklesia* confesses God to be – the one who unrelentingly pursues our well-being – then the *ekklesia* is right to place its trust in that God and wait patiently and hopefully upon that God and the future that God is bringing. In the liturgy the

ekklesia rehearses the story of this triune God, a story that testifies that this God is worthy of our trust and deepest hopes.

As a result, the *ekklesia* gathers to wait. In a world that urges people to be always doing something productive with their time and energies – something that makes a noticeable difference in the world – the *ekklesia* dares to gather and wait upon God. At the heart of the liturgy stands a kind of waiting, a kind of disciplined inactivity. In the liturgy Christians learn to hold together two important, yet seemingly contradictory, affirmations: the *ekklesia* waits for God's reign; the *ekklesia* offers itself to be used by God to extend that reign. The coming of God's reign is not driven by human initiative; however, God is capable of sanctifying human action in ways that extend God's purposes. The *ekklesia* has not been given the task of engineering a future of its own devising, but instead one of recognizing, announcing, welcoming, and "midwifing" a future that God is bringing. The *ekklesia* gathers both to honor and praise the One who promises that future, and to be shaped and formed for its part within that future.

Conclusion

There are, of course, many other ways in which formation takes place when the Body of Christ gathers to worship; many of these will be taken up in considerable detail in the chapters that follow. Yet perhaps an adequate enough sketch has been offered in this brief chapter to suggest why the gathering of the *ekklesia* is vital to its very identity and purpose, an identity and purpose that are themselves irreducibly ethical. The *ekklesia* gathers to worship the triune God, and, in so doing, bears embodied witness that this God alone is worthy of undivided allegiance and devotion. For this reason, the *ekklesia* gathers to have its potentially idolatrous imagination renewed by the narratives of Scripture and the practices of the Christian tradition. Such renewal makes possible the confession of idolatry, as well as the opportunity to assume a more appropriate posture toward God and the world. When the *ekklesia* gathers to worship, it does not gather to grumble, compete, or secure for itself what is needed; rather, the *ekklesia* gathers to rest and be renewed by giving thanks and praise to the One who so graciously supplies all its needs. In gathering to worship, the *ekklesia* opens itself up to receive the proper orientation to all that is, in order that it might live in *that* world in ways consonant with the reign of the triune God. In gathering to pay attention to the right things, to speak the truth, and to adopt the proper posture toward God and the world, the *ekklesia* opens itself up to being formed into the kind of people who can glorify and enjoy God forever.

Over the centuries, the people of God have gathered to worship the God revealed in Jesus Christ. By the grace and power of God, such worship has often transformed the lives of those who have prayed "your kingdom come, your will be done," nurturing within them an alternative social imagination and thereby enabling them to bear embodied witness to the desires and purposes of God. In this way, such worship across the centuries has created and sustained new identities. For example, countless Christians across time and space have learned what their African American sisters and brothers learned through their experience of worship: that they were "no longer named by the

world but named by the Spirit of Jesus" (Cone, 1978: 140). Such worship has also encouraged those gathered to see their lives not as something to be grasped, but as gifts to be given for the service of God. As a result, such worship has led countless gatherings, animated by the Spirit of Christ, to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, cloth the naked, take in the stranger, bind up the wounded, and share their possessions with those in need. Such worship, by making focal God's reconciling work in Jesus Christ, has also led countless Christians to seek reconciliation with their enemies and to offer forgiveness to those who have sinned against them. Likewise, such worship has nurtured the imaginations of those who have non-violently resisted oppressive regimes and powers in the name of the coming reign of God, often at the price of their own lives. No less importantly, such worship has, across the centuries, also enabled those gathered to name and confess their own sin. At times, such worship has even empowered those gathered to denounce the unfaithfulness of their own brothers and sisters, as was the case with the Confessing Church in Germany.

Has the gathering of the *ekklesia* and the worship of God always in all places led to the transformation of those gathered into the image of Christ and to the further manifestation of God's reign? Certainly not. Nor can such failures be simply ignored. Disciples of Jesus Christ who rightly understand their purpose in the world can neither glibly excuse themselves nor hide behind the privatization of modern "religion," protected by the anonymity that such privacy affords. Indeed, the act of gathering itself sets in motion a complex social dynamic that may lead to transformation not only by means of the liturgy, but also by means of heightened expectations and critique. By gathering to worship the triune God, the *ekklesia* offers an embodied witness to its primary allegiance and so raises its own and the world's expectations. For if disciples of Jesus Christ really gather to be transformed and to make themselves available to be used by God to transform the kingdoms of this world into the kingdoms of our Lord, then the *ekklesia* and the world should rightly expect to be able to see some of this transformation taking place. So, in gathering, the *ekklesia* becomes visible and addressable, opening itself up to being probed and criticized, not only by God, but also by the world.

Yet this is as it should be. The *ekklesia*, as an imperfect anticipation of what God desires for all of creation, seeks to conceal neither its faithfulness nor its unfaithfulness. For if the *ekklesia* exists for God's glory and not its own, then its willingness to name its own sinfulness – as well as have its sinfulness named by others – is itself a form of faithful witness to this God and this God's work. Thus, the *ekklesia* has its own reasons, internal to its own story and vocation, for carefully examining and critiquing the shape of its own embodied life. In other words, it is precisely *because* the *ekklesia* believes that its embodied life is part of the gospel that it must ask about the *shape* of that life, asking hard questions about how it might more faithfully devote its entire life to the right worship of the triune God.

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