**LITURGICAL THEOLOGY FOR CHURCH MUSICIANS**.

We musicians are very practical people, and even the thought of formal theology can send chills up and down our spines. However, as persons who work in the church, it is helpful to us if we understand the theology which underlies our art and craft. Over the years, Liturgical Theology has become a sub-discipline of Christian thought, which tries to bring understanding to our worship activity and thinking.

This workshop will look at several modern liturgical theologians: Aidan Kavanagh (Roman Catholic) Alexander Schmemann (Orthodox), David Fagerberg (formerly Lutheran, now Roman Catholic), David Newman (United Church of Canada), and Graham Hughes (United Church of Australia) to endeavour to make sense of this discipline for the practising church musician.

Dr. Donald C. Nevile, a retired pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada, holds degrees from the University of Manitoba, Lutheran Theological Seminary (Saskatoon, Saskatchewan), McGill University, and the Toronto School of Theology in the University of Toronto. He is presently Director of Music at St. James Lutheran Church, St. Jacob’s Village, near Waterloo Ontario.

**LITURGICAL THEOLOGY QUOTES:**

1. ***Ut legem credendi lex statuit supplicandi.***  Prosper of Aquitaine (d. 460). Often shortened to ***lex orandi, lex credendi,*** *or* ***lex supplicandi legem statuat credendi***, “the rule of prayer determines/establishes the rule of belief.”

2. “Two questions immediately plague one who sets off in search of liturgical theology. The 1st is the question, what is liturgy? The 2nd is then, in that case, what is theology? Both liturgy & theology are highly equivocal terms today. Liturgy is applied to almost any ceremonialized human gathering, sacred or secular. Theology has come to designate almost any sort of religious discourse, in particular those arguments one wishes to denigrate as being hopelessly ideological & thus out of touch with reality ...” (Kavangh, On Lit Theo, p. 73)

3. As language exists first of all not to be written or analysed, but to be spoken, so also a liturgy exists first of all not to be read or studied but to be done. If they are anything at all, liturgy & language are media of communication, & to communicate is to do something, to act.(OLT, 96).”

4. A liturgical theology is doxological due to the liturgy’s festal quality. It is historical due to the liturgy’s formal & ordered qualities. It requires critique of the sonic, visual, spatial, & kinetic arts due to the liturgy’s immersion in space & time. It involves disciplined reflection on the present & actual state of life in the faithful assembly due to the liturgy’s quality of canonicity - which means that a liturgical theology is inherently pastoral. And it involves no less disciplined reflection on the assembly’s future discharge of its obligations in service as a corporate ministry of reconciliation according to grace & promise due to the liturgy’s eschatological quality (OLT 143-44)

5. Liturgical theology is ... an independent theological discipline, with its own special subject - the liturgical tradition of the Church, & requiring its own corresponding & special method, distinct from the methods of other theological disciplines. Without liturgical theology our understanding of the Church’s faith & doctrine is bound to be incomplete.” (A. Schmemann, “Introduction to Liturgical Theology”, p.19)

6. The subject matter of liturgical theology is not liturgy, it is God, humanity, & the world, & the vortex in which these three existentially entangle is liturgy. ... Liturgy is theological precisely because here is where God’s revelation occurs steadfastly.”( Fagerberg, “What is L. T.?”, p.10)

7. “The words of Holy Scripture are also directly proclaimed in psalmody & hymnody. When the choir fulfills its ministering role of presenting the Scriptural words to the congregation, ‘the singing of psalms represents a prime type of participation in the charismatic-prophetic service of participation by non-ordained members of the congregation.’ And when the congregation joins in the action, ‘this type of presentation of the Word may effect a meditative appropriation, a spiritual eating of the Word such as is achieved in hardly any other form of proclamation in worship.’ In congregational hymns the congregation preaches to itself ...” (Fagerberg, quoting Peter Brunner, “Worship in the Name of Jesus.”

8. “... in the performance of the liturgical rite (symbolic acts & speech acts) {& also musical acts?} the reality comes to be, it does not merely come to expression. This is the ground for the unilateral relation between *lex orandi* & *lex credendi.* The law of prayer establishes the law of belief not because ... worship is the place where the vision comes to sharp focus, & is found appealing, but because here is where faith comes to be.” (Fagerberg , p.141)

9. “Not all worship is liturgical, but there is liturgical worship. Not all assemblies are liturgical, but there is one which is, it is called Church. Not all doxology or prayer is liturgical, but there is liturgical doxology & liturgical prayer. And, as we have claimed, not all theology is liturgical, but there is liturgical theology.” (Fagerberg, p. 287)

10. “Lay people assume theology is beyond their ken because Sunday after Sunday they sit through liturgies so anemic that no one is provoked to furrow their brows & wonder what has happened. If nothing happens, one cannot ask the theological questions of the rite. If liturgy does not make the kingdom symbolic, like a kiss makes one’s love symbolic, then its *lex orandi* cannot establish the *lex credendi.*” (Fagerberg, p.294)

11. “In this age of power, when various revolutionary forces are at work, ... worship too can be understood as a power for freedom & change in the world. It is a power that, unlike many of the revolutions of our day, keeps life human in the midst of change because life is more human when it acknowledges its source in the creative will of a gracious & loving God. Worship acknowledges this givenness in an act of praise. At the same time, by celebrating God’s gift of life as a call into the future God has in store for the world, worship empowers people for living in the world as agents of the love & justice that characterizes the reign of God. Worship, then, is both praise & empowerment. ... I want to help bring to the fore of liturgical thinking the issue of how the worship of God relates to its mission of pursuing the justice of God’s rule in the world. This concern has come to us most strongly in the theologies of liberation arising out of the struggles of the poor of this world.” (Newman, pp.6-7)

12. “We have ... observed in the Bible a challenge to the separation of cult from history & an affirmation of worship as renewing the worshipper’s commitment to historical existence & God’s call for justice in relationships among human beings & toward nature.” (Newman, p. 33)

13. “The Disenchantment of the World” (Max Weber). “Western technological society is a way of being in the world which has detached that world from any enveloping skein of religious reference. ‘Disenchantment’ means two things: 1st, that the world is no longer seen religiously & 2nd that the fundamental mechanisms of society - legislature, judiciary, economy, medicine & education, - once held within that encompassing web of meaning have, in their detachment from it, become discreet ‘disciplines’, each functioning in its own right & without perceived obligation to a larger social enterprise.” (Hughes, p. 2)

14. “A consideration of meaning in terms of cry, shout, groan or laughter is thus leading me to ask whether the *music* of the liturgy - arguably much closer to these forms of human expressiveness than our shaping of meaning linguistically - might not be a more powerful medium of meaning than all, or many, of the verbal communications. Prudence ... suggests that it is the words of a hymn, song or chant that are crucial as the carriers of the song’s meaning. Protestants have naturally insisted on this. But *why do we sing?* What does the actual musicality of the music do in terms of generation, or bearing, the meaning of the song? Why are sung responses almost always experienced as more meaningful than the same words spoken? Is music conceivably a deep & ancient, instinctive response to moments of high elation & terrifying solemnity? Is this a form of ‘grasping’, lying deeper & more primitively than the kinds of meaning-making & meaning-appropriation we ordinarily identify, practically exclusively, with language.? (Hughes. Pp.110-11)

15. “Liturgical meaning is effected at the extremity of what we can manage or comprehend as human beings. Worship is a journey ‘to the edge of chaos.’ It is something liminal, standing on the borderline of finitude & the infinite. It is both the terror & the ecstasy of coming to the edge of ourselves. It is thus ... that liturgical theology is equally *cognizable* from within universal human experience &, simultaneously attuned to the *inalienable alterity* by which we are confronted when we dare or are driven to approach this place of radical marginality.” (Hughes, p. 257)

16. “ ... we have learned to be reconciled to pictures of reality; not final, definite ones, but pictures which allow us to grasp into some sort of whole the ‘making’ & the ‘discovery’ aspects of our project of meaning. One such picture which seems both true to our common experience & to be fruitful in comprehending liturgical events, envisages us as constantly constructing a great raft of meaning or meanings, a platform which at its centre is relatively stable & safe, but at its edges, is simultaneously frightening yet exhilarating, hence fascinating. Worship, we think, belongs with the sorts of daunting but thrilling adventures which turn outward from the safe centre towards the scary perimeter.(301).”

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & THOUGHT**

1. What is going on in worship at your place? How does your music work? What does it mean? What kind of transaction with reality is taking place?

2. Do you find the idea of liturgy as primary theology & the raw material for secondary, academic theology, liberating or frightening? Keeping in mind the importance of tradition & “right worship” to us, governed by the canons, how do we as musicians deal with the potential freedom or chaos of this proposition?

3. “ ... liturgics ... is a stethoscope placed on the heart of a church.” (Kavanagh, OLT p.149) What do you hear when you place your stethoscope on the heart of your congregation’s worship & music?

4. Kavanagh says that liturgical theology involves disciplined reflection on the present & actual state of life in the assembly’s worship; its sonic, visual, spatial & kinetic arts, which are a consequence of our immersion in space & time. Can you reflect on the influence of your music, a “sonic art”, on the worship & liturgy of the church?

5. Schmemann speaks of how a change in liturgical piety, influenced by psychological, social, cultural, & spiritual contexts can “transpose” the intended original experience of liturgy, whether text, gesture, environment, or song, into another key. Is this good, bad, or neutral? Do you see examples of this in the church at large & your church today? What has gone in to the formation of your particular liturgical-musical piety? Has your liturgical-musical piety changed in the course of your years in music ministry? Do you see patterns or trends or ”transpositions” in liturgical piety around you that are discouraging or encouraging to you?

6. Using Schmemann’s definitions of “inner solemnity” & “outer solemnity”, have we arrived at a time when large pompous & almost frightening, awesome musical gestures should give way to smaller, more subtle, transparent, & intimate musical gestures which avoid the appearance & sound of musical pomp & ceremony? Given that the large musical gesture may have been appropriate for large crowds in huge buildings, how does this musical style continue to fit into our large buildings, many of which are now much emptier? (Some examples of “outer solemnity”: “Ein Feste Burg”; “Onward Christian Soldiers”; “Battle Hymn of the Republic”; J. S. Bach’s “Toccata in D minor”)

7. Schmemann suggests that early Christian worship, following Constantine, adopted many pagan & Imperial rites, customs, & gestures, mainly because, with the demise of paganism & the Imperial Roman Court, the church had to fill a spiritual & ritual/ceremonial vacuum. Can we compare this in any way to our musical adoption today of the music & ritual of our culture? Or is this an entirely different phenomenon? (note: it was at this time that singing was first introduced into the church’s worship. Before this time, singing other than chant was forbidden because of its association with Imperial power and allegiance, secular theatre, and pagan cults.)

8. Schmemann points to two possible roles of music in Orthodox liturgy: (1) Music as the heart & servant of liturgy, the *ancilla* which underlies & is buried within liturgy seen as a great “song”. (2) music in liturgy as something “over against” other parts, particularly the spoken word, which gives music an autonomy not recognized in (1). Do you see any reflections of this in any contemporary debate over the role of music in worship? How much autonomy & “over against” can we recognize & tolerate in worship music today? Are there limits? What are they, & why are they?

9. “People mean with language. That is, they use language to transact their business with reality ... People mean with liturgies, & liturgical theologians analyse the structure of a liturgy already in place.” (Fagerberg, 19-20) People also **mean** with music in liturgy. Can you reflect on the meaning of music for you & your community in its liturgy? Does your liturgical music already have a structure which embodies theological meaning for you?

10. Every liturgical theology proposes a twofold movement in worship: initially, from God to humankind, & later, from humankind to God. What role does your music play in this: one, or the other, or both? What restrictions, if any, does this place on your music? (e.g., the guy who requested that “I Did It My Way” be played at his funeral.)

11. “There is nothing problematic about private devotion, but that is not what constitutes *leitourgia.* ... *Leitourgia* creates a people, a people called *ekklesia* (Church). The church might develop liturgy, but *leitourgia* creates Church.” (Fagerberg, p.185, 186) Do you agree with this, that liturgy creates church? How much of your music during worship is designed to serve the liturgy in creating Church, & how much is determined by the demand for a stimulus towards private devotion? (One might possibly think of this in terms of “we” music, and “I” music.)

12. Fagerberg uses a clever gaming image to describe the tension between the two approaches to worship/liturgy of theologians & liturgists. “One player has set his or her presuppositions on red squares, the other on black squares, & although theologians & liturgists scurry around the board on their respective disciplinary squares, they can’t jump each other.” (p. 196) In your ministry & work with clergy, administrators, & committees, have you ever had this sense that you were playing on different coloured squares of the Church “checkerboard” than some others?

13. “The liturgical transmits the Christian experience, deeply felt & demanding, in which God makes his claims upon us. (Fagerberg, 205)” Can you reflect on what part your musical experience plays in the claims God makes upon us?

14. Fagerberg suggests that “theology is the search for words appropriate to God” (212) and, if so,“then the Sunday morning worshipper who searches for the right words, & who struggles to use these words rightly in order to praise God, pray to God & glorify God, finds herself or himself under a discipline of theology equally as rigorous as that imposed upon the second order theologian, only it is not analytical.(212)” Is the musician’s struggle/search for the right sounds analogous to this struggle for words? Do you find yourself struggling for the right “words” to “speak” musically to God & your people?

15. “To **celebrate** means to **accomplish** or **repeat.** The pervading reality is focussed & consciously remembered, as when birthdays or anniversaries celebrate the life or relationship which extends throughout one’s existence. The celebration does not create the reality within its borders, as if someone were only really alive on his or her birthday, or really married on the anniversary day; rather the celebration enables one to express in specific moments what is constantly real.” (Fagerberg 224) Can you understand your music as celebrating/remembering/marking what is real? Can you see your music as expressing/incarnating/mirroring/welcoming a liturgical/spiritual reality?

16. Newman speaks of the **passive** & the **active** in worship. Most of our music-making in worship would appear to be an active thing which hampers passive reflection in our own worship. Can you reflect on how a musician might recover a passive dimension of response in worship?

17. Newman refers to the “loss of transcendence” resulting from the Enlightenment view of the world. In contrast, however, the musician’s life & art at its best is steeped in the experience of transcendence. Still, is there a sense in which the routine of providing a weekly supply of music can dull our sense of transcendence? How do you cope with or overcome this? And how do we assist the church, through our art, in recovering a sense of transcendence?

18. In this time when post-modernism questions traditional interpretations of meaning, even denying that there is any meaning in anything, people still search for meaning. Hughes quotes Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor saying that it is our responsibility to give the “*Best Account*” of reality that we can. Taylor says, “‘making the best sense’ here includes not only offering the best, most realistic orientation about the good, but also allowing us best to understand & make sense of the actions & feelings of ourselves & others.” (Hughes, p.71). Do you have trouble assigning meaning to your musical work? What is your “best account” of your music’s meaning?

19. In the quotation numbered “14" above, Hughes asks questions about music in worship which virtually stand alone as questions for all of us. He does not, however, satisfactorily answer them. St. Augustine may have been onto something with his aphorism, **qui cantat, bis orat.** (whoever sings, prays twice) What would you respond to Hughes’ questions?

20. Hughes insists that there is meaning that does not have to be reduced to linguistic categories. “So that the possibility is raised of a hymn’s *melody* contributing meaning, not just its words.” (Hughes, p.145) How would you go about trying to describe the non-linguistic “meaning” of melody, without simply resorting to emotional categories, i.e. “joyful”, “uplifting”, “happy”, “sad”? Would un-emotional terms such as “tense”, “balanced”, “flowing”,”terse”, be expressively adequate & sufficiently sensual to lead us away from a strictly emotional interpretation of music’s meaning?

21. “...we need to be wholly vigilant to the traps contained in notions such as ‘performance’ & ‘communication’; even ‘education’ & edification’ are not beyond suspicion. These coalesce all too easily with the prevalent social tendencies ... to gull worship leaders into a false sense that the action is contained entirely within the room; that is, that the language (prayers included) are for the people’s consumption, that the actions are either those of entertainers making sure that their congregation should ‘enjoy the show’, or of agents of social change intent on making sure people ‘get the point’. There is no iconicity here; & the indexicality will be disastrously revealing.” (Hughes, 175) If we agree that worship, including worship music, is not entertainment or a show, or aimed at achieving social goals, how does one ensure that one’s music avoids these traps?

**FOR FURTHER READING ..**.

Kavanagh, Aidan, “On Liturgical Theology” (N.Y., Pueblo Publishing Company, 1984)

Schmemann, Alexander, “Introduction to Liturgical Theology” (Crestwood, N.Y., St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1986)

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