The Lord’s Supper as Covenant Renewal

PAUL M. BLOWERS

In primitive Christianity the Eucharist was never a simple reminiscence or ritual simulation of the Last Supper or of the events surrounding Christ’s sacrificial death. Put bluntly, it was never merely a repeated funeral for the martyred Jesus. The Eucharist continued from very early on to be called a mystery (mysterion) because so many layers of action and meaning intersected in a liturgy that from its inception rotated around the seemingly mundane motions of taking, blessing, breaking (and pouring), and distributing— to which Paul added the crucial act of proclaiming (1 Cor 11.26). Clearly an enormous part of the paschal mystery of the Eucharist was its properly sacramental dimension, wherein early Christians believed they experienced their utmost intimacy with the resurrected and glorified Christ. But in this paper I wish to turn attention rather to the Eucharist’s role in establishing and sustaining Christian communal identity in functioning as a covenant renewal for the body of Christ.

When early Christians came together at the Lord’s Supper, not only were they remembering the events of the upper room, they were rehearsing the whole saga of God’s redemptive activity which had first climaxed in Israel’s experience of Passover. Indeed, with Jesus himself in the upper room, they were tapping into Israel’s already gluttoned memory of Yahweh’s many-splendored faithfulness. Passover itself was a case in point, already being pregnant with diverse overlapping themes of liberation, feasting on bread, the sacrifice of a pure lamb, redemptive passage (exodus), pilgrimage, testing, covenant, and future promise. The early church came to celebrate the Lord’s Supper precisely as the “paschal mystery,” the Christian Passover (1 Cor 5.7), and later patristic theologians speculated that the terminology of pascha etymologically derived either from the Hebrew Pasach (Passover) or from the Greek verb paschein (“to suffer”) or from both. The challenge was thoroughly to align the ancient events of the Passover with the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ, something that the second-century bishop Melito of Sardis (Asia Minor) attempted in his groundbreaking homily On Pascha.

But even Passover, however formative, was only one of the master themes of early Christian eucharistic celebration. In 1 Clement (ca. AD 95), we already see how the Old Testament sacrificial cultus was being thoroughly reworked, with Christ as the new high priest putting an end to the old system and introducing new “offerings and services” (prophoras kai leitourgias) for the church. Implicit in all these appropriations from the Hebrew Bible was the conviction that the Lord’s Supper was now for the Christian community a service of covenant renewal. The ancient Israelites had renewed their covenant with God in charismatic, non-routinized

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events like the ritual at Shechem (Josh 24) and Ezra’s proclamation at Jerusalem after the return from exile (Neh 9) by remembering—or better yet reliving—the many instances of God’s past redemptive action on their behalf. The Last Supper had itself been a charismatic event of covenant renewal, indeed of covenant redefinition. As Bryan Spinks summarizes of the NT’s own narratives of the supper, “There is an affinity between Mark and Matthew, with an emphasis on covenant offering of Sinai, and also between Luke and the Pauline account where there are allusions to the new covenant of Jeremiah.” And yet for the diverse early Christian communities, Jesus’ actions in the upper room and subsequently at Golgotha signaled something new and unprecedented, a covenant sealed by the final bloody sacrifice (Heb 9.26; 10.10–13), giving rise to what the churches would offer in return, in their eucharistic practice, as the “bloodless sacrifice”—be it the sacrifice of one’s body (Rom 12.1), the “sacrifice of praise” (Heb 13.15), the sacrifice of repentance (Ps 51.17) and of fervent prayer, the loaf and cup as a sacrifice of the firstfruits from creation, the Eucharist as ritual embodiment of Christ’s passion and propitiation, or—in due course—a combination of these. The density or “thickness” of the Eucharist’s many interrelated meanings not only fired the early Christian liturgical imagination but also inspired the early churches to regularize the Eucharist as crucial to their communal integrity and discipline, and as foundational for their mission in the world.

Rather than delving here into the complicated developmental history whereby the Eucharist took on increasing liturgical consistency, with recognizably enduring elements in most locales, I want now to focus on the one component of ancient eucharistic worship that proved pivotal for maintaining the Eucharist as a covenant renewal: the anaphora, or eucharistic prayer. To call it a prayer actually seems somewhat limiting, for even though its discourse was euchological—the language of prayer and blessing—and it was directed foremost to God the Father with due reference to the work of the Son, it ultimately combined (notwithstanding individual variations) invitation of the faithful, ritual simulation of the Last Supper, the contextualization of the supper within biblical salvation history, the express invocation of the Holy Spirit to descend on the bread and the wine to assure their redemptive efficacy, and the offering of the elements to God on behalf of the gathered community, all within a strongly eschatological frame of reference in expectation of the heavenly banquet in which believers would commune with Christ face-to-face.

There are multiple reasons for the momentum toward a fixed eucharistic prayer. In the Greco-Roman cultural context, the churches were in some cases accused of orgiastic feasting and of the use of magical incantations. Defending the integrity of their rites was imperative. Justin Martyr tried to turn the table on such allegations and in so doing indicated confidence in the apostolic precedent for a eucharistic prayer:

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5 Do This in Remembrance of Me: The Eucharist from the Early Church to the Present Day (London: SCM, 2013), 16.
6 Coined by the apologist Athenagoras of Athens, Plea for the Christians 13.4. Variations of it reappear consistently in early Christian sources, e.g. the Egyptian Liturgy of St. Mark (Jasper and Cuming, 59); Liturgy of St. James in Jerusalem (ibid., 92).
7 Athenagoras (ibid.) explicitly refers to this Pauline image in connection with the “bloodless sacrifice.”
8 E.g. Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho 117; Origen, Against Celsus 8.21.
9 See Irenaeus of Lyons, Against Heresies 4.17.5.
10 Early on see Cyprian of Carthage, Epistle 63.14, 17; later Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechesis 23.8–10.
The apostles, in their memoirs which are called gospels, have handed down that they were commanded to this: Jesus took bread, and, after giving thanks, said ‘Do this in remembrance of me; this is my body.’ In like manner, he took also the cup, gave thanks, and said ‘This is my blood.’ And to them alone did he communicate this. The evil demons, in imitation of this, have ordered the same thing to be performed in the Mithraic mysteries. For, as you know or may easily learn, bread and a cup of water, along with some incantations, are used in their mystic initiation rites.\(^{15}\)

The prayer would thus rehearse the rite of the Last Supper, with special focus on Jesus’ words of institution (Matt 26.26–29), and in the later, much more elaborate versions of the anaphora, this still remained the cornerstone.

 Needless to say, the fixing of a eucharistic prayer would also assure the maintenance of the Eucharist as a covenantal meal in the fullest sense, complete with its own canonical blessing of the bread and wine. It would also institute a needed discipline or structure for eucharistic worship in the spirit of Paul himself (1 Cor 11.23ff). Liturgical historians have long attempted to understand both Jesus’ words of institution and their appropriation in earliest Christian eucharistic prayers like that found in the Didache\(^{16}\) against the background of biblical and later Jewish festive meals and their attendant blessings.\(^{17}\) While there were undoubted influences on some versions of the anaphora more than others, scholarly consensus disparages any mechanical imitation of prototypes, especially in a liturgical culture where variability and consistency went hand in hand. Rejected as well has been the postulation of an Ur-anaphora, a presumably original text of the eucharistic prayer from which multiple variations evolved chronologically and geographically. There is an interesting parallel here with the early renditions of the so-called rule of faith (regula fidei) or canon of truth (kanôn alêtheias) in pre-Nicene Christianity. Not to be confused with a creed, the rule was a syllabus of the digested content of biblical revelation used in teaching and preaching contexts. When referenced in the writings of influential church fathers like Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen,\(^{18}\) the rule of faith often contained shared content (e.g. affirmations of God as Creator, the Son’s incarnation and redemptive work, etc.) but in variable wording and even with some different emphases of content. In the case of both the rule of faith and the eucharistic prayer, the combination of consistency and variability, of tradition and adaptability, served the churches well.

I would suggest that the single most compelling reason for the early churches’ gravitation toward a fixed eucharistic prayer was its intramural function both to enhance the definitive themes of eucharistic worship and to coordinate its decisive actions of thanksgiving, blessing, offering/sacrificing, remembering, interceding, invoking, and preparing. The anaphora sought to capture the moment by connecting the present ritual celebration of the supper with the faithful witnesses of the past (including the pre-Christian past) and with the anticipated future banquet of the church triumphant. The anaphora followed Paul’s injunction to “proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor 11.26), and in its developed forms, especially from the fourth century on, it became in some respects the sacramental sermon par excellence, eclipsing the homily that preceded the eucharistic liturgy in the service of the sacred readings (“liturgy of the Word”).

The anaphora often considered truly formative for the mature liturgies of Eastern and Western churches is found in the Apostolic Tradition, a work traditionally attributed to Hippolytus of Rome (ca. 200) and believed to have represented the early Roman church. Many scholars are now convinced that this was a composite work with elements from both the third and fourth centuries, and that its actual provenance was Eastern, perhaps Antiochene.\(^{19}\)

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15 1 Apology 66 from The Eucharist, trans. Sheerin, 34.
16 See Didache 9–10 (Holmes, 356–60).
18 Cf. Irenaeus, Epideixis 3, 6; Against Heresies 1.9.4; 1.10.1–3; 3.4.2; Tertullian, Prescription of Heretics 13.1–6; Veiling of Virgins 1; Against Praxeas 2.1–20; Origen, On First Principles 1, Pref. 1–8; Commentary on John 32.16.
19 For a brief synopsis of the relevant scholarship, see Spinks, Do This in Remembrance of Me, 63–64. See also the expansive study by Paul Bradshaw, Maxwell Johnson, and Edward Phillips, The Apostolic Tradition: A Commentary, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002). Mazza (The Celebration of the Eucharist, 51) asserts that the earliest parts of the anaphora in the Apostolic Tradition are datable to the second half of the second century. See also Mazza, The Origins of the Eucharistic Prayer, 98–176, on the anaphora in the Apostolic Tradition.
At any rate, its two renditions of the anaphora, considered aggregately, give evidence of an emerging template, certain components of which are found widely in ancient eucharistic liturgies.

| Invitation / Sursum Corda | Presider: “The Lord be with you.”
|                          | All: “And with your spirit.”
|                          | Presider: “Lift up your hearts.”
|                          | All: “We have them with the Lord.”
|                          | Presider: “Let us give thanks to the Lord.”
|                          | All: “It is fitting and right.”
| Preface                  | “We render thanks to you, O God, through your beloved child Jesus Christ, whom in the last times you sent to us as Savior and Redeemer and angel of your will; who is your inseparable Word, through whom you made all things, and in whom you were well pleased . . . (etc.)”
| Institution Narrative    | Concise, using Jesus’s words of institution
| Remembrance (anamnēsis)  | [“Do this in remembrance of me . . .”] “Remembering therefore his death and resurrection, we offer to you the bread and the cup, giving you thanks because you have held us worthy to stand before you and minister to you.”
| Epiclêsis (Invocation of the Holy Spirit) | “And we ask that you would send your Holy Spirit upon the offering of your holy church; that, gathering her into one, you would grant to all who receive the holy things (to receive) for the fullness of the Holy Spirit for the strengthening of faith in truth; that we may praise and glorify you through your child Jesus Christ . . .”
| Doxology                | “. . . through whom be glory and honor to you, to the Father and the Son, with the Holy Spirit, in your holy church, both now and to the ages of ages. Amen.”

The Sursum Corda, in variable forms, was pervasive among the emerging anaphoras even before the fourth century, when the so-called cathedral eucharistic liturgies began to consolidate in major Christian centers (viz., the Pentarchy: Antioch, Alexandria, Jerusalem, Constantinople, and Rome, sees of the patriarchal bishops). The preface became important, and was frequently expanded in length (and eventually varied according to the festal calendar), because it set the theological tone of the anaphora and framed the celebration of Christ’s passion more broadly within the economy of creation and redemption. The preface also staged the whole eucharistic celebration as an offering to God (the very term anaphora itself technically means “offering”). Among the more consistent themes that appear in the prefaces of the early anaphoras are:

20 Translated in Jasper and Cuming, 34–35. The reference to Jesus as a “child” (pais) is already found in Didache 9.
• Praise for and blessing of the transcendent God, worshipped by the heavenly beings and angels, by cherubim and seraphim, a God who is ineffable and incomprehensible.21
• Praise for God as the Creator of all things (creation being the first act of God in the salvation history that climaxed in Christ’s incarnation and passion).22
• Thanksgiving for redemption with a focus on the incarnation and/or sacrificial death of Jesus Christ; addressed to the Father (for the gift of the Son) or even to the Son himself; often using the language of the Eucharist now being the bloodless sacrifice24 offered in worship.

Early in this history of the eucharistic prayers, usually as a culmination of the preface, the Sanctus (“Holy, Holy, Holy”) was introduced, an acclamation based on the seraphic hymn in the divine throne room (Isa 6.1–4; Rev 4.2–8). By the end of the fourth century it was pervasive in the East and West. It served to bring together the liturgies of heaven and earth, and further accentuated the transcending mystery of God. And yet balancing this lofty image with another emphasizing God’s radical condescension to humanity, some versions of the Sanctus added the so-called Benedictus, the Palm Sunday acclamation: “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest” (Matt 21.9).25 The striking contrast between the heavenly throne room, the native seat of the Son of God, and the rocky road covered with cloaks and palms for Jesus’ historic entry into Jerusalem was not lost on ancient audiences.

Another mainstay of the ancient anaphoras was the combined institution narrative and anamnēsis (remembrance).26 I have already noted the early Christian appropriation of the Last Supper as a meal of covenant renewal. Much attention has rightly been paid to the precise meaning of the remembrance (anamnēsis). The overall character of the anaphora precludes viewing this as a simple retrospect or recall of the upper room. The deep memory of salvation history already weighed upon Jesus in the Last Supper as he proposed to carry forward God’s faithfulness even into the eschaton. Now in the eucharistic anamnēsis the church’s collective and covenantal memory of God’s wondrous deeds (some of those deeds already broached in the anaphora as

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21 Cf. Liturgy of Addai and Mari, eastern Syria, 3rd century (Jasper and Cuming, 42); Third Anaphora of St. Peter, western Syria, fourth century (ibid., 47); Euchologion of Serapion, Egypt, fourth century (ibid., 76–77); Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechesis 5, fourth century (ibid., 85); Liturgy of St. James, Jerusalem, fourth century (ibid., 90–91).

22 This apophaticism (use of negative predicates to glorify God) appears in Euchologion of Serapion (Jasper and Cuming, 76); Liturgy of St. Basil, Byzantium, fourth century (ibid., 116); Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, Byzantium, late fourth century, but not consolidated until the tenth century (ibid., 132).

23 Cf. Liturgy of Addai and Mari (Jasper and Cuming, 42), Liturgy of St. Mark, Egypt, fourth century or earlier (ibid., 59); Apostolic Constitutions, bk. 8, Syria, fourth century (ibid., 105–7), an especially extensive exposition of creation within the preface of the anaphora; Anaphora of the Twelve Apostles, Syria, fourth century (ibid., 125). The anaphoral preface in the Gallican Liturgy (Charlemagne’s Frankish rite, ca.800) contains an eloquent and compelling thanksgiving for the God who “overcame chaos and the confused elements and darkness in which things swam, [and who] gave wonderful forms to the amazed elements: the tender world flushed at the fires of the sun, and the rude earth wondered at the dealings of the moon. And lest no inhabitant should adorn all this, and the sun’s orb shine on emptiness, your hands made from clay a more excellent likeness, which a holy fire quickened within, and a lively soul brought to life throughout its idle parts. We may not look, Father, into the inner mysteries. To you alone is known the majesty of your work . . .”

24 See footnote 6.

25 For the Sanctus without Benedictus, see the Liturgy of Addai and Mari (Jasper and Cuming, 42); Third Anaphora of St. Peter (ibid., 47); Liturgy of St. Mark (ibid., 64); Coptic Anaphora of St. Basil, late third or fourth century, Egypt (ibid., 70); Euchologion of Serapion (ibid., 77); Apostolic Constitutions, bk. 8 (ibid., 109). With the Benedictus, see the Liturgy of St. James (ibid., 91) Byzantine Liturgy of St. Basil (ibid., 117); Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom (ibid., 132); Gallican Rite (ibid., 149); Mozarabic Rite, Spain, fifth–seventh centuries (ibid., 153); canon of the Roman Rite, fifth century and later (ibid., 163–4).

26 For good examples besides the Apostolic Tradition, see Liturgy of St. Mark (Jasper and Cuming, 65); Liturgy of St. James (ibid., 91–92); Apostolic Constitutions, bk. 8 (ibid., 110); Liturgy of St. Basil (ibid., 119); Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom (ibid., 132–3); canon of the Roman Rite (ibid., 165).
objects of thanksgiving) weighed upon believers as they committed to share in Christ’s sacrifice. The passion was an unrepeatable past event, but it was also an event with cosmic repercussions, and among its benefits was the promise of Christ’s abiding and gracious presence with his people. As Kevin Irwin has observed,

The Eucharistic action is always both the selfsame paschal sacrifice of Christ and at the same time a new action, a new event of salvation and sanctification in the here and now. Every act of liturgical memorial places proper emphasis on what has been accomplished, what is being accomplished, and what will yet be accomplished when God will be all in all and we are drawn to the kingdom of heaven for eternity. In essence, what the Eucharistic prayers say we “make memory of” . . . is the obedient life, betrayal, humiliation, suffering, passion, death, resurrection, ascension, and second coming of Christ—and of our participating (taking part) in those paschal events through the Eucharist.27

“Making memory” is an excellent way of putting it. Anamnêsis implied (and implies) that Christians’ eucharistic remembrance of Christ is a continuing and participatory action. In returning through memory to the events of Jesus’s passion, believers are effectively going back to their future since the Eucharist collapses together the past, the present, and the age to come.

Still another mainstay taking shape in these early Christian anaphoras was the epiclêsis, the formal invocation of the Holy Spirit to descend upon the bread and wine and on their partakers. A mature example in antiquity appears in the anaphora of the Byzantine Liturgy of St. Basil (still in use among the Orthodox Churches):

. . . We pray and beseech you, O holy of holies, in the good pleasure of your bounty, that your [all-] Holy Spirit may come upon us and upon these gifts set forth, and bless them and sanctify them and make this bread the precious body of our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. And this cup the precious blood of our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ, which is shed for the life of the world . . .29

In one sense, the epiclêsis filled out the trinitarian character of the anaphora. It also represented an intensified intercession on behalf of the church, a devout public call for God’s immediate presence and aid. The Didache had ended the Eucharist with the Aramaic phrase “maranatha!” which may have originally been understood in a perfect tense—“The Lord has come”—rather than as an imperative “Come, Lord.”30 In the later anaphora of the Euchologion of Serapion from fourth-century Egypt, the Word or Logos rather than the Spirit was petitioned to descend on the bread and the cup to make them the Lord’s body and blood.31 In the vast majority of cases in the East and West, however, the Holy Spirit remained the object of the petition.32 The epiclêsis furthermore brought into focus the issue of the so-called real presence, how and when the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ. This is a vast theme in the history of

28 For a good historical introduction to the epiclêsis and its origins, see John McKenna, The Eucharistic Epiclesis: A Detailed History from the Patristic to the Modern Era, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2009).
31 Euchologion of Serapion (Jasper and Cuming, 77–78). The author clearly does not mean to ignore the Holy Spirit, which he invokes elsewhere in the anaphora.
32 Besides the Apostolic Tradition, cf. Liturgy of Addai and Mari (Jasper and Cuming, 43); Liturgy of St. Mark (ibid., 64, 65, giving two epiclêses); Coptic Anaphora of St. Basil (ibid., 71); Liturgy of St. James (ibid., 93); Apostolic Constitutions, bk. 8 (ibid., 111); Liturgy of St. Basil (ibid., 119); Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom (ibid., 133).
eucharistic theology, but patristic theologians seem to have been less interested in actually explaining this mystery than were the later medieval and Protestant scholastics. Suffice it to say that generally speaking, the Roman Catholic tradition has settled on the words of institution as the moment when the elements are transubstantiated, while the Eastern Churches have understood the epiclēsis to culminates this mystery.

From the fourth century on, most of the major episcopal centers of the Christian world had settled on a more or less canonical version of the eucharistic prayer, and therein affirmed that it was the nucleus of the entire liturgy. Because of the sense that it climaxed the church’s intimacy with the living Christ, the most sacrosanct elements of the prayer began in some traditions to be uttered inaudibly by the priest. Particularly in the classic Byzantine anaphoras, however, the priest also explicitly acted and spoke as chief penitent, interceding on behalf of all other repentant believers, for whom Christ himself was the true host at the supper. In many cases, the epiclēsis was followed up by intercessions on behalf of the political authorities, the ecclesiastical hierarchs and bishops, and other groupings among the living and the dead.

Also by the end of the fourth century, as Jasper and Cuming note, the overall pattern of the anaphora in both the East and West, notwithstanding some variations, included the following: (1) Sursum Corda; (2) preface; (3) pre-Sanctus; (4) Sanctus; (5) post-Sanctus; (6) institution narrative; (7) anamnēsis; (8) offering [of the elements]; (9) epiclēsis; (10) intercessions; and (11) doxology. The anaphora then gave way to the actual communion of the elements among clergy and laity, which contained its own protocols filling out the eucharistic liturgy.

**Postscript: A Challenge to the Stone-Campbell Churches**

Historically, despite their seriousness about the regular celebration of the Lord’s Supper, the Stone-Campbell churches have not, despite their roots in the Reformed tradition, carried forward an elaborated eucharistic liturgy nor opted to maintain a fixed celebratory prayer. In the work of the early pioneers of the Stone-Campbell Movement (including Alexander Campbell himself) there was nonetheless a strong sense that the Lord’s Supper should include, at the very least, the words of institution and a demonstrative breaking of the bread and pouring of the cup, with accompanying prayers for each—all believed to be key components of apostolic practice. For Campbell, the solemnity and consistency of the celebration was built into its simplicity. Arguably the sermonic aspect of the Lord’s Supper factored strongly into Campbell’s teaching on it. “This institution,” he wrote, “commemorates the love which reconciled us to God, and always furnishes us with a new argument to live for him who died for us. Him who feels not the eloquence and power of this argument, all other arguments assail in vain.” In time, many churches adopted the habit of a presider (usually an elder) offering a communion meditation intended to amplify the meaning of the Lord’s Supper, perhaps as a concrete means of “proclaiming the Lord’s death until he comes.” The prayers which accompany the meditation have normally been extemporaneous, not standardized.

My criticism is that, in the sincere effort to augment the logocentric aspect of the Lord’s Supper, our churches have lost touch with the many other dimensions of eucharistic action and meaning which the ancient anaphoras did, in fact, seek to honor and convey: i.e., not only proclaiming, but also remembering in the sense of vital and biblically-enriched memory (anamnēsis); invoking the power of God’s Spirit; extolling the presence of Jesus Christ in and through the bread and cup; interceding for the whole church in heaven and on earth; and projecting the joyful anticipation of partaking of the Lord’s Supper face-to-face with Christ in eternity. Mechanically imitating the ancient liturgies or appropriating the classical anaphoras will not in itself resolve the problem. Churches must open discussion, however, of constructive ways to recover the sacramentality of the Last

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33 Jasper and Cuming, 6. The pre- and post-Sanctus components consist in anaphoral thanksgivings, blessings, and intercessions which couch the Sanctus itself.

Supper that was so vital to the early Christians, for whom the Eucharist was indeed a covenant renewal in which both the Lord and his people recommitted to one another. Discussion within congregations of moving toward a relatively fixed and comprehensive eucharistic prayer might be a positive step forward, though the more basic struggle in some churches, at least, will be toward granting the Lord’s Supper the absolute and non-negotiable centrality in worship which is already a first principle of worship within the Stone-Campbell heritage. Perhaps congregations might begin this work of reappraisal and reform by studying the excellent work of Robert Webber, and especially his book *Ancient-Future Worship: Proclaiming and Enacting God’s Narrative*, which provides marvelous guidance for churches looking to renew and enrich their worship.35

**Paul M. Blowers** teaches church history at Emmanuel Christian Seminary, Johnson City, Tennessee, where he teaches a course on the history of worship and sacraments. He is the author of *Drama of the Divine Economy: Creator and Creation in Early Christian Theology and Piety* (2012), *Exegesis and Spiritual Pedagogy in Maximus the Confessor* (1991), and numerous essays on early Christian and patristic themes in journals and books (pblowers@ecs.edu).

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