

The Arrangement of the Divine Service in the Early Church

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Some years ago, as I was fishing on a jetty by the sea, I was accosted by an intense, purposive young man. He did not introduce himself, let alone ask me, as often happens, whether I had caught anything. He simply said hallo and then asked me bluntly whether I was a born-again, Spirit-filled Christian. Without hesitation I said I was and gave him the date of my Baptism. At that he asked me equally bluntly if my church followed the apostolic order of worship. That put me on the spot. So I stalled for time and asked him what that was. I said, “1 Corinthians 14:26!” Then he fished a small New Testament from his pocket, opened it up with a dramatic flourish and read, “When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation.” I looked him in the eye and said, “No, we don’t do that! We follow the Pentecostal order of service from Acts 2:42.” He fell silent, turned back down the jetty for some distance, stopped, and opened up his New Testament to find what that was.

That odd encounter, which came soon after I had first noticed this passage as I was preparing an introductory course on worship, motivated me to study that passage more closely. The more I studied it, the more I realized how significant it was for our understanding of the divine service and how little had been written about it.¹ I have therefore returned to it again and again to make sense of it and its implications. This essay is the outcome of that quest. In it I consider the rather controversial and unfashionable question of whether the New Testament teaches that there is divinely given “order” of worship, a divinely instituted pattern for the performance of the Divine Service, and what that is. I offer these reflections to Art Just as a token of my appreciation for his encouraging friendship and a warm tribute to him for his passionate concern for the vital role of the

¹ Four Lutheran scholars have been most useful for me in my examination of this passage as a description of the divine service in the Early Church. The most extensive analysis of it is by Theodosius Harnack in *Der christliche Gemeindegottesdienst im apostolischen und altkatholischen Zeitalter (The Divine Service of the Christian Congregation in the Apostolic and Early Catholic Age)*, 1854, 78-95. Two other shorter summaries are provided by Oscar Cullmann, in *Early Christian Worship*, 1953, 12-20, and Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, 118-121. See also Gustav Stählin, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, 1968, 56-57.

Divine Service in the life of the church, a concern that has been shown by him as a scholar in his commentary on Luke and in his book *Heaven on Earth*, and as a churchman in his work as the dean of chapel and teacher of liturgics for some years at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne (CTSFW).²

Six Features of Acts 2:42

In Acts Luke uses two unusual terms to describe the activity of the mother congregation in Jerusalem. On the one hand he mentions that all its members all assembled together “in the same place” (ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ) in Jerusalem (1:15; 2:1, 44). On the other hand he notes that they acted “unanimously” (ὁμοθυμαδὸν) as a community engaged in a common worship (1:14; 2:1, 46; 4:24; 5:12).³ Well, what was it that they did communally?

Luke reports what they did in Acts 2:42. There he recall his earlier report in Acts 1:12-14 that after the Ascension of Jesus 120 of his first disciples used to meet in an upper room in Jerusalem for communal prayer. Then after Pentecost those who believed the good news of Jesus and were baptized formed a larger congregation in which all members devoted themselves to four components of what we now call the divine service.⁴

Before I look more closely at the four parts of the service I want to consider six features of the carefully crafted sentence in Acts 2:42:

ἦσαν δὲ προσκατεροῦντες
τῇ διδαχῇ τῶν ἀποστόλων καὶ τῇ κοινωνίᾳ,
τῇ κλάσει τοῦ ἄρτου καὶ ταῖς προσευχαῖς.

And they were devoting themselves
to the apostles’ teaching and the common offering,
to the breaking of the bread and the prayers.

First, here Luke focuses our attention on what the newly baptized disciples did together with each other as a congregation of believers. Luke does not refer to how they

² Arthur A. Jr., Luke 1:1-9:50, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1996; Luke 9:51-24:53, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1997); and *Heaven on Earth. The Gifts of Christ in the Divine Service* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2008. Arthur Just has been teaching at CTSFW since 1984; he served as dean of chapel from 2000-2007.

³ See also the use of the same term in Acts 7:57; 8:8; 12:20; 15:25; 18:12; 19:29; Rom 15:6.

⁴ “Divine Service” is widely used in the Lutheran Church for the primary worship service of the church that consists of God’s service to us through Word and Sacrament; see Just, *Heaven on Earth*, 180-236.

lived, let alone what they thought or felt or believed, but how they joined together in a common endeavor, like workers in a common task or the crew of sailors manning a ship.

Second, Luke says that “were devoting themselves” to that task. This unusual combination of the imperfect tense of verb “to be” (ἦσαν) with a present participle (προσκατεροῦντες) indicates that this was a customary practice. It was something that persisted in doing as a regular enactment, like engaging in work with other people each day.

Third, Luke has chosen a rather unusual Greek verb προσκατερέω to describe their activity as devotion to what is given for them to do. Here this Greek verb has religious connotations. In its secular use it refers to persistent commitment to doing something, like the disciples of Jesus who kept their boat ready for Jesus to use in Mark 3:9, or the two household servants and the devout soldier who represented Cornelius the Roman centurion in Acts 10:7 by visiting Peter in Joppa and inviting him to come and meet with their master. But in the New Testament it is more commonly used as a technical religious term for the devotion of Christians to common prayer (Acts 1:14; Rom 12:12; Col 4:2; Eph 6:18), the devotion of the congregation in Jerusalem to attendance of worship at the temple (Acts 2:45), and the devotion of the apostles to preaching and prayer (Acts 6:4).⁵ That is how this term is used by Luke in Acts 2:42. There it describes the involvement of the whole congregation in corporate worship.⁶

Fourth, Luke’s use of the definite article “the” in his list of these four items indicates that these are not general terms for the religious life of the disciples but particular names for four practices that were well-known to his audience. Wallace gives this explanation of how the definite article functioned here: “Either this pattern of worship was well known in the early church because it was the *common* manner in which it was done, or Luke was attempting to convey that each element of worship was the only one deserving that name (*par excellence*).”⁷ Because they were technical terms for familiar liturgical matters, they did not need to be explained.

⁵ See Gustav Stählin, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, 78-82. Joachim Jeremias argues that this verb describes the faithful observance of a religious rite in *The Prayers of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1967), 79.

⁶ See Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, 119, who claims that ‘the four phrases used here, in pairs and dependent on προσκατεροῦντες, describe the sequence of an early Christian service.’

⁷ See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 225 (emphasis original).

Fifth, the four terms for this description of worship in the early church are arranged in a two sets of pairs that combine two separate and yet related elements. The two main items are “the teaching of the apostles” and “the breaking of the bread.” Each of these is associated with two other practices that depend on them and respond to them. Thus the congregational offering is given in response to the teaching, and the prayers are made in the light of the congregational meal. By his use of this device Luke invites his readers to reflect on each of them and their interconnection. So, for example, the use of the plural noun for prayers suggests that prayers does not just connected with the meal but are also associated with the teaching and the offering.

Sixth, all this data helps us pin down the precise sense of *koinonia* in Acts 2:42. Like the other items in this list, it does not refer to the experience of fellowship as an expression of friendliness, like sharing a drink and a snack after worship, or even to a subjective sense of togetherness and warm community, but to a part of the divine service that is similar to participation in common prayers. Even though some scholars claim that it refers a congregational meal before or after the service which Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 11:17-22, that is most unlikely as the so-called love feasts were not a regular part of the divine service everywhere. What’s more, where they were provided before or after the service, they were never called by this name. I maintain that this is most likely a technical liturgical term for the common offering, the collection of gifts of food and money as ‘alms’ in the service.

Since this claim is rather unfashionable and controversial I need to explain why this is so linguistically and biblically. The Greek noun κοινωμία is derived from the adjective κοινός which means something common, something that belongs to a group of people. It is used in that sense by Luke in Acts 2:44 and 4:32 for common possessions of church in Jerusalem and by Paul in Titus 1:4 for their common faith. In keeping with that basic sense the New Testament uses κοινωμία to signify things that are held or done in common by all Christians as members of God’s family. It can therefore describe a wide range of commonalities, such as the common relationship with God the Father through union with his Son and each other through him (1 Cor 1:9; 1 John 1:3, 6-7), the common reception of Christ’s body and blood in the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor 10:16) and of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 13:14; Phil 2:2), the common possession of faith (Philemon 8), the common work of spreading the gospel (Phil

1:5), the common apostolic ministry (Gal 2:9), and Paul's common experience of suffering with Christ (Phil 3:10).

How does this help us to understand Acts 2:42? In four places in the New Testament *κοινωνία* is used for the presentation of gifts to God in the divine service, once for the work of the congregation (Heb 13:16) and three times for the relief of impoverished Christians in Jerusalem (Rom 15:26; 2 Cor 8:4; 9:13). This meaning is confirmed the use of the verb *κοινωνέω* for the contribution by the members of the congregation to its common offerings in Romans 12:26; Galatians 6:6, and Philippians 4:15.⁸

In conclusion: the list of four items in Acts 2:42 describes how baptized believers were all involved in the divine service with four kinds of liturgical devotion. On the one hand, they all received the gifts of God by his service of them through the ministry of the apostolic word and the administration of Christ's body and blood. On the other hand, they all responded to what they received by the offering of gifts and prayers.

FOUR KINDS OF LITURGICAL DEVOTION

According to Acts 2:42 there are four components that combine for the regular performance of the divine service by the congregation in a particular location.

The Teaching of The Apostles

The first of these is "the teaching of the apostles." This tells us that that the disciples listened to the apostles as their teachers as well as to what they taught. In his Gospel, Luke had shown how the teaching of Jesus had differed in its use of the Old Testament and its content from the teaching of the law in the synagogue. In 4:15-21, Luke tells how Jesus taught in his townsfolk in the synagogue at Nazareth on a Sabbath day. When he was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah he unrolled it, read the prophecy of the coming Messiah in Isaiah 60: 1-2, and applied it to himself as the Christ, the anointed preacher of good news of God's pardon to oppressed people. He taught himself and the good news from God to them. Then in Luke 24:25-27 we are told that on Easter Sunday Jesus taught

⁸ This meaning is also supported by Paul's use of the adjective *κοινωνικός* in apposition with *εὐμετάδοτος*, "very generous," "well-willing to give," in 1 Timothy 6:18 where he urges the rich members of the church in Ephesus to be "ready to share" their wealth with others. See the use of the verb *μεταδίδωμι* by Paul in Eph 4:28.

about himself as the crucified and risen Christ from the Pentateuch and the prophets in the Old Testament to his two disciples on the road to Emmaus. In this way, he modelled a new kind of teaching for them. Luke then tells us that on the evening of the same day he appeared to the eleven apostles in Jerusalem and appointed them to use the Old Testament to bear witness to him and his fulfilment of it by the proclamation of repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name (24:36-49). They then teach as Jesus had taught. In fact, the risen Lord Jesus taught himself to his disciples, just as he had done with his two disciples on the road to Emmaus.

That teaching occurred in three different ways in the early church. It was first done by the eleven apostles under the leadership of Peter in Jerusalem. They used the Old Testament and their memories of the words and deeds of Jesus to teach the gospel to his disciples. As the church grew and the apostles died, the teaching of Jesus was done by the legates of the apostles, such as Mark, Luke, and the other apostolic ministers in the churches. They read a passage, or some passages from God's Word in the Old Testament, and recalled what they had been taught orally from the apostles about what Jesus has said and done in teaching. Then finally they handed on the teaching of the apostles as it was written in their letters to the churches and in the four synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. These written documents were readily recognized as authoritative for teaching in the Divine Service and later assembled in what we now call the New Testament.

That combination of a text from the Old Testament with the apostolic testimony to Jesus has formed "the pattern of teaching" in the divine service to the present day (Rom 6:17). As a steward of that teaching, every pastor is required to hold on to "the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in doctrine and rebuke those who contradict it" (Tit 1:9). The teaching of the apostles comes first in this outline of the Divine Service because it provides the foundation for the other three practices. They depend on it and are aligned with it.

The Common Offering

The second component of the Divine Service that is paired with the teaching of the apostles is "the common offering." This response to what was taught was established by Jesus as one of the four acts of righteousness in Matthew 6:2-4. He calls it an act of mercy, a

gift that was given in response to God's mercy in mercy to others.⁹ This was not an impost on each disciple, like the Jewish temple tax (Matt 17:24-27), but was given voluntarily to the apostles by those who were well off to provide for people in need (Acts 2:44-45). It consisted mainly of food and money. The food was distributed as daily bread for widows who were destitute (Acts 4:32-37). This common offering does not mean that private property was abolished in the early church. Rather, it indicates that all members of the congregation were part of God's family in which all members shared its resources. Like a human family, its foodstuff and other necessities were available to all its members as they required them.¹⁰

The common offering was not just an occasional measure but was a regular part of the service. That is evident from the instructions in Romans 12:13 and Hebrews 13:16. It was gathered to provide the livelihood for teachers in the congregation as well as for destitute members (Gal 6:6). It was also offered beyond the congregation to support the work of missionaries, like the regular contribution of money by the church in Philippi to Paul (Phil 4:15). Likewise the Gentile daughter churches that Paul established in Achaia, Macedonia and Galatia gathered of money for the relief of the mother church in Jerusalem that had become impoverished by a severe drought and its aftermath (Acts 11:27-30; 24:17; Rom 15:25-32; 1 Cor 16:1; 2 Cor 8-9; Gal 2:10).

The donation of the congregation was a holy offering that was presented to God for holy use in the divine service. It was an act of liturgical service (2 Cor 9:12)¹¹ that was offered to him by his holy people who had consecrated it with their prayers (1 Tim 4:5). It was given as a gift to God for his saints, the holy people of God (Rom 12:13; 16:2; 1 Cor 16:1). Since it had been presented to God in the Divine Service, it was a God-pleasing sacrifice in response to Christ's self-sacrifice (Phil 4:18), a sacrifice of praise and

⁹ Here the Greek word for this offering is ἐλεημοσύνη. See its use in Acts for personal gifts of charity to a beggar (3:2, 10) or destitute people (9:36; 10:2, 4, 31) and the offering of the Gentile churches to the congregation in Jerusalem (24:17).

¹⁰ The best treatment of this somewhat controversial measure is by Gustav Stählin, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, 78-82. He argues that this practice was based on the life of the disciples who left everything to follow Jesus and depended on hospitality and charity for their livelihood (Matt 4:20, 22; 10:8-13; Luke 5:11, 28; 18:22, 28-30).

¹¹ The literal wording of this verse is: "For the administration of this liturgical service not only supplies the need of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God." I take this to mean that the money which had been given as a thank offering by the church in Philippi would be received with thanksgiving by the church in Jerusalem. In the NT λειτουργία is used for the liturgical service of priests in the temple (Luke 1:23; Heb 9:21), Jesus as high priest in the heavenly sanctuary (Heb 8:6), and the congregation in Philippi with its offering for Paul (Phil 2:17, 30).

thanksgiving to God through Jesus (Heb 13:15-16; 2 Cor 9:11-15),¹² an “act of grace” in response to God’s gift of grace in his Son (2 Cor 8:6-7, 9, 19; 9:8, 14, 15). The common offering was therefore a holy gift from the holy members of God’s family for the benefit of his household, his holy family.

The Breaking of the Bread

The third component of the divine service was “the breaking of the bread.” This was the name for the celebration of a formal meal, such as the family banquet that ushered in the Sabbath on Friday evening. It came from the Jewish custom of beginning a meal formally with a blessing. Before the meal began, the head of a household would take a loaf of bread, say a blessing over it, and break it up for distribution to the guests.

By his use of this term in Acts 2:42 Luke recalls the seven banquets of Jesus that he describes at some length in his gospel.¹³ On four occasions Jesus was either the guest of unrighteous sinners, such as Matthew (Luke 5:27-32), and Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10), or of law-abiding Pharisees, such as Simon (Luke 7:36-50) and another unnamed leader (Luke 14:1-24).¹⁴ He himself was also the host of a miraculous meal in which he fed five thousand disciples at Bethesda with five loaves and two fish in 9:10-17 as well as a new holy banquet in his final Passover meal with his eleven apostles in which he provided them with the bread of his body to eat and the wine of his blood to drink in 22:14-38. Then in the last, conclusive meal recorded in Luke’s gospel, the risen Lord Jesus was both the guest and the host of two disciples at Emmaus on Easter Evening. At that meal he made himself known to them in “the breaking of the bread” (24:35).

For Luke this was his designation for the communal celebration of the Lord’s Supper as a unique sacrificial meal (Acts 2:42; 20:7). This name recalls what Jesus had done when he instituted the sacrament (Matt 26:20; Mark 14:27; Luke 22:19; 1 Cor 11:24), and how he still hosted its ongoing celebration as its unseen host (Luke 24:30).

¹² See the analysis of Heb 13:15-16 by John W. Kleinig, *Hebrews*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 708-711.

¹³ For an analysis of these meals in Luke and their relationship with the Lord’s Supper see Arthur A. Just, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 231-241 and John W. Kleinig, *The Lord’s Supper: A Guide to the Heavenly Feast, Christian Essentials* (Lexham: Bellingham, 2025), 75-85.

¹⁴ See Arthur A. Just, *Heaven on Earth*, 71. He notes that these four meals were most likely the Seder meals that were held on the Sabbath evening in which the host broke the loaf of bread for the meal as he blessed it by saying: “Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the universe, who brings forth the bread from the earth.”

Taken together with “the teaching of the apostles,” it recalls Luke’s account in 24:13-35 of the disclosure of the risen Lord Jesus to the two disciples on the evening of Easter Sunday in two stages, first by his proclamation of himself from the Old Testament, and then by serving them as their host at their evening meal. For us Lutherans that combination of teaching God’s word with the Lord’s Supper is the origin of our description of corporate worship as the Service of Word and Sacrament.

The Prayers

The fourth set of communal acts was the devotion of the congregation to “the prayers” that were associated with “the breaking of the bread” and prayed in response to the teaching of God’s Word. The term used by Luke indicates that these were mainly petitions for help.¹⁵ It recalls the frequent mention in his Gospel that Jesus sought the help his heavenly Father at each stage of his earthly ministry (3:21; 5:16; 6:12; 9:8, 28-29; 11:1; 22:41-44). As well as that he instructed his disciples to pray regularly for vindication by God (18:1) and gave them his own prayer for them to pray to God the Father for all that they needed (11:2-4; see also Matt 6:5-15).

Luke’s use of the rather unusual plural “prayers” indicates that he does not just refer to a single prayer at one point in the service but alludes to a wide range of corporate prayers at different stages in it.¹⁶ It includes saying the Lord’s Prayer and other liturgical prayers, such as praying ‘Maranatha’ (which means “Our Lord, come!”) before the reception the Christ’s body and blood (1 Cor 16:22; Rev 20:22) ; chanting canticles, such as the Song of Mary in Luke 1:46-55, the Song of Zechariah in 1: 67-79 and the song of Simeon in 2:29-32; singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (Eph 5:18-20; Col 3:16-17); and offering all kinds of prayers for the church in all places, for all people, and even for the enemies of the church (1 Tim 2:1-6).¹⁷ From its very beginning the mother congregation in Jerusalem devoted itself to common prayer in its service of worship as taught by Christ with

¹⁵ See the frequent use of the same term in Acts for corporate prayer (1:24; 6:4, 6; 8:15; 12:12; 13:3; 14:23; and the personal petitions (Acts 9:11, 40; 10:2, 4, 9, 30; 11:1, 5, 30, 31; 12:5

¹⁶ See Oscar Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship*, 12-14.

¹⁷ In the *First Epistle of Clement*, chapters 59-61, the author quotes a fully scripted congregational prayer that was used about 96 AD in the Divine Service of the church in Rome.

by his words (Luke 11:9-10; John 15:7; Col 3:16) and prompted by the Holy Spirit (Luke 11:11-13; Rom 8:26-27; Eph 5:18-20).¹⁸

COMMON PARTICIPATION

Whenever people combine for engagement in a common undertaking, they can only accomplish what they intend to do if they follow an accepted pattern, an agreed agenda for what they wish to do. That agenda allows those who are in charge of endeavor to provide a lead in it and those who are their partners to make their contribution.

Consider a formal meal for an important social occasion, such as a dinner to celebrate a birthday. The host presides over the meal and ensures that due respect is paid to the guest of honor with the proper participation of all the other guests and its full enjoyment by everybody. The birthday dinner falls into three main parts – an entrée, the main course, and a desert that is eaten together with a piece of the birthday cake. Each of these three parts are accompanied by the drinking of wine and other beverages. The advantage of this order or pattern of celebration is that it provides a familiar structure with room for considerable variation and space for comfortable participation.

The pattern for the divine service in Acts 2:42 is like the order of a birthday dinner. It is a mysterious meal with a human host who fronts Jesus, who He is invisible host who teaches his guests as well as the guest of honor who provides supernatural food for his guests. The celebration comes in three parts – the teaching God's Word by Jesus, the presentation of a common offering to God through him, and participation in his Holy Supper. These main parts are accompanied by a wide range of spoken and sung communal prayers to God that fit their context and maximize receptive and responsive participation.

According to Luke, who most likely wrote the book of Acts at some time between 60-65 AD, this pattern of worship and communal devotion goes back to the very beginning of the church at Pentecost. Besides this full service of worship, there were also other minor services of worship and meetings that could include some parts of this, such services of prayer (Acts 12:12), praise and prayer (4:23-31), proclamation and instruction (5:42), and the appointment of office bearers (6:2-6). But the main service in each congregation was the service of Word and Sacrament together with the offering of alms and prayers to God.

¹⁸ See John W. Kleinig, *Grace upon Grace* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2008), 156-175.

This claim is supported by a large range of data from the early church¹⁹ and confirmed by the first full description of the divine service in Rome by Justin at about 150 AD. In his *Apology*, chapter 67, he gives us this summary:

On the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation²⁰ of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons. And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who succours the orphans and widows and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need. But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Saviour on the same day rose from the dead.²¹

¹⁹ See John W. Kleinig, "Hebrews on Liturgical Leadership," in *Take Courage: Essays in Honor of Harold L. Senkbeil*, ed. Timothy J. Pauls and Mark A. Pierson (Irvine: New Reformation Publications, 2016), 1-18, and Gordon W. Lathrop, *A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 33- 50.

²⁰ The word that is used here describes the outline or a word or sentence that is given by a teacher for a student to learn to write by copying it.

²¹ Translation from The Ante-Nicene Christian Library, vol. 1, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1870).