



## More Worship Words to Wrestle With *Nutrition and Formation*

By Michael Berg

The great questions of life pursue us. When they catch up to us, they grab ahold of us and do not let go. Philosophers muse upon them. Theologians preach about them. Politicians manipulate them. Laypeople think about these big questions too. What is the good life? How shall we live? Where did we come from and where are we going? How do the physical and spiritual interact? At the core of all these questions is an anthropological question: Who am I? This question pursues every person. It can even haunt us.

### Genesis Anthropology

The early chapters of Genesis address this anthropological question. We are embodied souls. We are created in the image of God. This image is lost but a shell remains. This image is regained in Christ. We were created with original righteousness but now have original sin. It is all there. Genesis provides the reader with new angles on this existential question seemingly every time we take it up and read it. No wonder some of the great theologians like Luther and Augustine found their way back to Genesis late in their careers. The great questions grab ahold of us and do not let go.

Among other important doctrines, Genesis subtly tells us that humans are 1) psychosomatic people<sup>1</sup>, 2) people of words, 3) eaters, and 4) worshipers. First, we are psychosomatic people. We are not simply brains on a stick. We have bodies. You cannot get around it. A person cannot simply assert, "I am not spiritual." We do not have a choice. This is as ridiculous as saying "I don't have a body." Yes, you do!

We are people of words. We were created by words. We primarily gain knowledge through words. We interact with each other primarily with words. We interact with God with/through words and are to take him at his Word. No wonder Jesus is the Word through whom all things were made.

We are also eaters. We eat not only to survive physically but to interact with one another. Try to think of a culture that does not gather around the table for important events. You can't. It is how we mark occasions and enjoy each other. Eating is as much spiritual as it is physiological. No wonder God chooses to eat with us and not just speak with us.

Finally, we are worshipers. Every person has a number one in their life. They might not call it a god but it sure acts like one. It might be their nation-state, their political party, their family, their career, or anything else that gives them their identity and answers for them the great anthropological questions. These gods demand their time, their money, and their energy. Another way to say it is that they demand worship. But none of these gods love them back.

### Nutrition and Formation

This Genesis anthropology is quite different than late modern anthropology. Late modern anthropology describes humans as evolved animals, as machines, or, more applicably, as consumers. Work is for production. Rest is to prepare us for work and not contemplation. Eating is for nutrition or fuel. Modern anthropology also tends to see humans as consumers of information. We

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are learners. Most of our activity is located in the brain, not in the heart or the stomach as the ancients saw it. This affects our view of ourselves, the world, God, and worship.

We need spiritual nutrition or as Ambrose famously stated, "Because I always sin, I ought always take the medicine."<sup>2</sup> He was speaking about Holy Communion, but it applies also to absolution and to the Word of God. We need it. Why? Because we are sinner-saints. We need the medicine. We need the nutrition. Jesus quotes a portion of this Old Testament passage during his temptation, "He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord" (Dt 8:3). Jesus is the Bread of Life that keeps us alive spiritually. We need it as much as we need physical bread and water, even more.

*Ambrose: "Because I always sin, I ought always take the medicine."*

We also know that health is not just about putting the right food into our bodies (we are more than machines); it is also habitual. Healthy habits matter as much as calorie counting. We rightly speak about being fed by God's Word, but perhaps a fuller concept than "nutrition" is "formation." We are psychosomatic people that eat, use words, and worship. This means that words, eating, and physical realities like rituals, rites, architecture, and art form us. They make us who we are.

We can be malformed, or we can be formed beneficially. A child who lives in a violent home is malformed. As he grows, he might only express his emotions through violence. A child who grows up surrounded by books is more apt to be a seeker of knowledge. These things form us. Let's take a look at two modern views of humans that (mal)form us. The first is the idea that we are primarily consumers. Advertisers want us to believe that certain products will change our lives and even give us an identity. "I am a Dodge guy" or "We are an Apple family." We are even told



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in times of economic crises that it is our patriotic duty to play our consumer role in the economy. Our patriotism is connected to our consumerism. The second is that we are thinking-things or, more charitably, students. We take in information, and this makes us better people. We are smarter and more apt to be successful. Notice that these two views are connected. We consume information.

Notice also that both consumerism and information-ism affect our view of worship. We are consumers of the spiritual. This is different than seeing ourselves as embodied souls that need to be fed both physically and spiritually. We tend to choose what information we want to consume rather than approaching God to be formed.

The information matters, but we need to be more than informed; we need to be formed. We tend to privilege the information over the formation. We privilege the teaching over the ritual. This is an anthropological mistake. It assumes that we are primarily thinking-things, hearers, or, at best, students. It assumes that we are consumers of information. This is a mistake because we are embodied souls. The body matters. Christ comes to us not just in Word but in physical-Word. He knows who we really are despite our modern anthropology.

Let's think about ritual and teaching for a moment. There are three options when it comes to the relationship between information and formation. Option number one is *ritual without teaching*. Scripture repeatedly warns us about this. "You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings" (Ps 51:16). This only ends in shallow work-righteousness. We go through the motions, and this somehow benefits us. The second option is *teaching without ritual*. Theoretically this can work. A person can hear the Word of God and believe it. But this option is mediocre and, I would argue, not possible. We still occupy time and space. Every church is liturgical. The pastor has to wear something! The congregation has to gather somewhere! There must be an order of service even if it is sitting with Quakers in a bare room waiting for the Spirit to move someone to speak. That's a liturgy and that liturgy proclaims a theology and forms the worshiper. The third option is *ritual with teaching*. This is the best option because it fully embraces our anthropological reality: we are embodied souls that occupy time and space and are formed not just by information but by art, architecture, movement, song, and prayer.

Explaining ritual also provides an opportunity to teach that forgiveness is not a reminder of an ancient event but a delivery of that forgiveness. The saving actions of Christ are not merely for us to recall intellectually but for us to receive in the here and now with real ears from real voices. Forgiveness is a present reality, medicine, and nutrition that continually forms us and maintains

our status with God. Absolution is a good case study. I prefer when the absolution is spoken in the first person, present tense, "I forgive," rather than in the third person, past tense, "God forgave." I am not arguing that one is more valid than the other. It's not. Yet there is something special about the pronouncement of forgiveness in the present moment instead of a slight degree of separation between the repentant Christian and the forgiveness. It is as if the minister says to the penitent, "Make no mistake about it, right here and right now, these sins are forgiven." It is not a reminder of a past event or even a declaration of a present event occurring elsewhere. It's an event that is occurring right here and right now.

Not only does the different subject in the absolution teach us about the tangible means by which God delivers his grace, but ritual can as well. If taught properly, liturgical actions like kneeling for confession, the sign of the cross employed with absolution, and bowing the head also teach the present reality of the forgiveness delivered through the voice of the minister (Jn 20:21-23). The same can be true of other rituals. Think of an eight-sided baptismal font that points to the eight people in the ark (1 Peter 3:20) and to our eternal life.<sup>3</sup> Or consider the musical contrast between the Sanctus and the Agnus Dei? The heavenly "Holy, Holy, Holy" (Rv 4:8) joins the heavenly choir with the choir of worshipers in the local congregation in great anticipation of a foretaste of the heavenly banquet while the Agnus Dei sobers the worshiper. Christ must die and we must carry a cross. All of this forms us.

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With this reality in mind, it seems that the best course of action is to thoughtfully and deliberately plan—and teach—worship so that all five senses are engaged, proclaiming the gospel clearly and boldly to embodied souls. What follows are a few simple examples of how we can be thoughtful about such matters without falling into the trap of empty ritual. As we go forward, remember that we are either formed or malformed. Everything we do matters. It is a heavy burden for the worship planner to carry but a delightful cross at the same time.

## Examples

Let's start with hymnody. What follows is an oversimplification but helpful. Early Reformation hymnody was largely didactic. Think of Luther's hymns based on the Small Catechism. There was a need for teaching at that moment. When we jump to Pietism, we see a move from the objective to the subjective. The subject of the sentences becomes "I" instead of "God." These hymns reflect the

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heart. Then there is the sweet spot exemplified by the hymns of Paul Gerhardt. The doctrine is applied. The information doesn't only teach but forms as it engages the heart.

Movement and posture matter as well. Whether you sing an introit, process in behind a crucifix, or walk up the steps to the altar at the beginning of the service, this movement teaches the observer about the presence of God. Yes, God is everywhere but he chooses to be sought in certain places. For New Testament believers, it is in Word and Meal, Baptism and Absolution. Our liturgical movements form us. If we truly believe that Christ is present in the Supper, our actions around the elements will form the worshipers' view of the reality of the Supper. We stand to show respect. We also stand to confess the faith and be counted among the faithful who have gone before us. We kneel to confess our sins and ask for mercy. We sit to receive. Movements and posture matter.

Some congregations no longer "pass the plate." It is an archaic tradition considering online giving (and COVID), but there is still value in bringing the offering up to the Lord's altar. Does not this physical movement teach us about stewardship and therefore form us as we watch the movement to the altar?

The Prayer of the Church is a general prayer. It may connect to the theme of the day but also should include petitions for the world, the congregation, and individuals in the worshipping community. It is a good practice to consistently pray for governmental officials by name especially those elected officials for whom some congregants didn't vote. This teaches us about God's Two Kingdoms. It forms us. It helps the worshiper broaden their sympathy as well. It is also a good practice to pray for disasters and tragedies around the globe and not just events in America or Europe. Can we pray for Ethiopia as much as we do for Ukraine? This forms us.

Finally a word on preaching. There is a difference between preaching the gospel and preaching *about* the gospel. The former proclaims, "This is for you!" The latter informs. It tells us about



the gospel in an academic way, but there is a subtle degree of separation between the gospel and the listener. It is primarily for the brain and not the whole person. The sermon may be considered an extension of confession/absolution. It terrifies and then heals. This is the dynamic Word Paul speaks about in Romans 1. It is the power (dynamis) to save. It does something. It is dynamic. It is not merely to be learned. If we see the listener as a person with a free will who only needs the correct information to change their lives or make the right decisions, we have the wrong anthropology. We preach to sinner-saints who need to die and who will rise. Perhaps the language should be less "Here is some information" and more "This is who you already are in Christ, a saint." It is the difference between proclamation and formation on the one hand and mere information on the other hand.

## Embodied souls or thinking-things?

Genesis anthropology insists that we see ourselves as embodied souls and not just thinking-things. Biblical worship always involved movement, rituals, a meal or sacrifice, along with hymns, prayers, readings, and preaching. It is healthy for us to examine and critique the anthropology we inherit from our culture. There simply is no such thing as a spiritual but not physical being or the opposite, a physical but not spiritual person. Nor is there such a thing as a church without liturgy or ritual. We are therefore called to plan worship with this anthropological reality in mind with the sober reminder that all we do will form or malform the worshiper. A heavy burden, indeed. But also an opportunity. Let's teach the ritual. It will bear much fruit as we both provide the nutrition

## Cleansed and Fed: The Sacramental Life

Could your congregation benefit from deeper exposure to the ideas in this article? This could happen through comments in sermons or through a Bible class. See WTL 62:a-c for an eight-part study based on a synod convention essay, "Cleansed and Fed: The Sacramental Life." Free download at [worship.welsrc.net/download-worship/wtl-confessional-perspectives](http://worship.welsrc.net/download-worship/wtl-confessional-perspectives). Selected quotations:

At this meal God will provide us his antidote for sin's poison. Here he will serve real food for starving sinners. (15)

A preacher may find himself explaining the saving work of Jesus rather than preaching Jesus. Faith does involve knowing things. And yes, it's true: explanations of Law and Gospel are still Law and Gospel, and so they are still powerful. But if all the preacher ever does is explain God's saving plan, his listeners will soon gain the impression that faith is primarily a matter of understanding explanations.

But then why should they keep listening to the same explanations about Jesus' saving work over and over again? In time they'll begin to think of their pastor as though he were **a restaurant that only hands out menus but never actually serves food**. They'll listen to his sermons and say, "Sounds good, but I'm still hungry!" If they're loyal, they'll keep coming to listen anyway, out of duty. But no one will gladly listen for long. (18)

burdened souls so desperately need and help them answer the great anthropological questions that pursue us all.

<sup>1</sup> Psychosomatic medicine explores how social, psychological, and behavioral factors affect physical health, mental health, and quality of life.

<sup>2</sup> *De Sacramentis* V, 4, 25. Also AC XXIV, 33.

<sup>3</sup> "Early Christian theologians interpreted ... baptisteries and pools symbolically. Eight was the number of Noah's family saved in the Flood. The Eighth Day, Sunday, referred to the day of Christ's resurrection and the coming of the New Age which we enter in Baptism." Huffman and Stauffer, *Where We Worship*, Augsburg (1987).

