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How People Are Treated During Worship: Problems of an Implicit Liturgical Anthropology

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Abstract: Anthropological premises of pastors significantly influence people's experiences in worship services. Pastors' perceptions of people's basic situation, their understanding of people in relation to freedom, love and self-love, sin and repentance, influence the liturgy and the sermon. The implicit anthropology of many services relates to the way they rebuke those present for being human and specifically declare everything that constitutes living as human beings to be a problem. That makes the process of communicating the Gospel appear unconvincing. What matters is to reformulate Christian anthropology in a coherent and contemporary form by communicating with other sciences which raise the question of being human in relation to freedom, dignity and love.

Keywords: Theological anthropology, anthropology of worship, communication of the gospel

Zusammenfassung: Die anthropologischen Prämissen von Pastorinnen und Pastoren nehmen beträchtlichen Einfluss darauf, wie Menschen Gottesdienste erleben. Liturgie und Predigt spiegeln u. a. das Verständnis von Freiheit, Liebe und Selbstliebe, Schuld und Reue wider, mit dem sich die Pastorinnen und Pastoren die Lebenssituation der Gottesdienstteilnehmer zu erschließen versuchen. Dabei weisen Gottesdienste häufig eine implizite Anthropologie auf, die den Anwesenden ihr Menschsein vorhält und ausgerechnet das zum Problem erklärt, was zur Ausübung des Menschseins gehört. Dies lässt den Prozess der Kommunikation des Evangeliums insgesamt unglaublich erscheinen. Demgegenüber kommt es darauf an, die christliche Anthropologie im Dialog mit anderen Wissenschaften, die die Frage nach dem Menschen als Frage nach seiner Freiheit, Würde und Liebe stellen, kohärent und zeitgenössisch zu reformulieren.

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Preliminary Remarks¹

One of the many contexts in which theological reflection on human beings must take place is “the human being in worship services.” For practical theology, a well thought out, plausible anthropology, which can be hoped to do justice to human beings, is of far reaching importance. Indeed, the way in which “humans” are seen in each case, the image of people which pastors bring to their work when drafting a sermon or intervening in a pastoral conversation, determines the way in which they act. If the anthropology of a worship service does not ring true for practical theology, the sermon and the liturgy will not make sense. Then the prayers will not fit, the ideas will be detached from the emotions, the people present will try in vain to follow the introit and set their feet in a “broad place” (Ps 31.8), or to see the table of their lives set and to experience what it is like when the cup overflows (Ps 23.5).

The following approach to the anthropology of worship consists of five steps. We examine (1) how people are treated. We ask (2) whether that might not give rise to human and theological dilemmas. We identify (3) anthropological approaches which would not necessarily lead one to expect the practice outlined at the beginning and (4) look for explanations of the resulting outcome. Finally, (5) a few conclusions for a modern theological anthropology and its significance for worship are spelled out.

1 People in Worship Services

The bells have rung. The organ has stopped playing. The congregation has sung “Liebster Jesu, wir sind hier” (Dearest Jesus, we are here). Accordingly, the people should now be “mit Begier auf die süßen Himmelslehren” (yearning for the sweet heavenly teaching).² “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” The celebrant leads us in prayer.

¹ This is an edited version of a lecture given at the University of Vienna. The German original is titled “Vom Umgang mit Menschen im Gottesdienst. Probleme der impliziten liturgischen Anthropologie,” published in *Evangelische Theologie* 72.2 (2012): 101–117.

² Cf. *Evangelisches Gesangbuch* (Protestant Hymnal [EG]), no. 161, verse 1.

“You have called us and we have not listened to you.
 Your glory has shone out and we have been blind.
 You have stretched out your hand to us and we have drawn back from it [...].
 We are not worthy of your love.”³

I look to one side at the faces of elderly men and women, some of them from the nursing home run by the church’s social service. Among those present, there are also a few visitors, mainly children of the elderly people. They are sitting in the nave in an elevated mood and the morning sun is casting golden light on the choir. It could become a beautiful service. They need it. They feel their lives are increasingly strenuous. They certainly didn’t spare themselves; some survived the war and expatriation, brought up children on their own, supported other people throughout their lives and shared whatever there was to share. And their faith helped them. They know that. Otherwise they would not be here today. Some tired from the journey here. Some with a sense of guilt because they were no longer able to care for their sick parents on their own, and some with pangs of conscience about the children they have left at home. They didn’t want to come with them because they find old people’s homes awful. But, after all, the meal is ready. They only have to warm it up.

The people sitting here do not make any major demands on a service but neither do they come without expectations. So, they could be disappointed. Finding themselves on the defensive each time is part of the familiar ritual. Did they not listen when God called? Did God stretch out his hand to them and they shrank back *from it*? Are they really unworthy of God’s love? The man up at the altar will surely calm down again. A woman on my left is holding her father’s hand with its blotches and smiles at him. It seems as if the “preparatory prayer” has not upset her very much. And the emphatic “nevertheless” of God’s love which consciously overcomes itself did not particularly irritate her. In any case, she joined in singing the Gloria. “God takes delight in us; now peace reigns without end; all enmity has now ceased.” The everlasting battle for the salvation of souls has been won again. Father and daughter follow the prayer of the day with their eyes closed. Part of it states:

“God, you have reasons every day to be cross with us.
 We are too much concerned about ourselves and prefer to listen to ourselves rather than to your word.
 We do what we want and fail to ask what you want. And so we pray to you [...].”⁴

3 Confession of sins from the *Evangelisches Gottesdienstbuch* [Protestant Service Book] (Berlin: Cansteinsche Bibelanstalt, 2000), 495.

4 From an order of service distributed to the congregation so they could follow the liturgy.

The glimpse of the Promised Land is quickly obscured again; the liturgical dilemma has been set in motion – this time in the form of a prayer wheel. Does God really have reasons to be cross with us every day because we prefer to bother about *ourselves* and don't pay enough attention to *him*? "But we are here nevertheless!" the woman thinks while the celebrant explains the rule of grace according to which there is a way out time and again.

Then comes a sermon the moralistic whine of which is not even adequate to the plausibility of the dimension of the law. The rich young man, who does not lack experience about how to live (cf. Mt 10.17–27) and for whom it seems to be equally obvious and necessary to stick to certain principles of faith and living, is presented as the prototype of an egocentric life. The congregation, which includes people living with dementia, the nursing staff and the visitors, joins in a subdued way in the hymn after the announcements which is intended to be a confession of sins leading up to the Lord's Supper. (Verse 1): "You gave me ears but I cannot hear."⁵ (Verse 2): "You gave me eyes but I cannot see [...]" Then it continues like that with various parts of the body and at the end it says, "You gave me people – *but I cannot love.*"

After the communion, everyone stands up for the prayer of intercession. Three rows in front of me, sitting by the central aisle, a mother takes advantage of the opportunity and calmly puts her small daughter's coat on her. The pastor's petitions now lead into the prayer of discipleship attributed to St. Francis.

"Lord, grant that I may not seek so much to be comforted as to comfort,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love."⁶

God does not even demand that of himself – according to all that we believe and think about God. Always love strongly, but out of spiritual ... generosity (?) do without receiving any love? Human beings *cannot* do that – although they try to do so often enough.⁷ (And they cannot accept it either.) The mother with the child in her arms leaves the church even before the blessing. And yet the *child* did not cry at all.

⁵ EG, no. 236, verses 1–6.

⁶ Also printed as a hymn in EG, no. 416.

⁷ This attitude is an essential feature of "sin" and that is why the main thing that must be preached to sinners is that they are loved.

2 Five Problems of an Implicit Liturgical Anthropology

Whether the prayers from the service book are quoted or use is made of other contemporary liturgical material, in both cases it can happen that individuals find themselves in a quandary after a few sentences. However they may move the pawns around on the game board of their lives, this does not produce any *freedom* of play and, at the same time, on the other side of the playing field, new possibilities keep being opened up at high speed and are then blocked just as quickly.

In such cases, the celebrant resembles a bad doctor who makes his diagnoses within seconds and – gabbling on in technical terms – begins immediately to write out prescriptions. No “history” is required because the most recent case has also been diagnosed before the worship appointment began. “You are a bad person. It is good that you came.” Let us look more closely at some of the snapshots we have just been considering.

2.1 The Reproach for Being Human

The way problems are treated in many liturgical formulations and prayers is limited to a gradual detraction from the niceness of human beings. The survival rate in the practical theology of worship of a limited concept of sin that is almost always moralistic is amazing. “We were not open *enough* to one another, we did not help one another *enough*, we did not display *enough* friendliness although you provided us with *sufficient* love.”⁸ As if “fundamental openness to everyone,” “permanent readiness to help and understand,” “non-stop friendliness” or “understanding everything” were solutions that could reasonably be expected or even the opposite of sin. Who would want or is able to be like that?

In liturgical practice, we come up against the problem that, in fact, our being human – our creatureliness – is held up before us as a blemish. But the fact that we cannot adopt the same positive attitude to every person and sometimes withdraw, that we are not always programmed to understand and help and deliberately refuse to do so, that we do not always react kindly and can sometimes be

⁸ The way the liturgy takes for granted that it can be assumed (in God’s favour) that those attending a worship service have *really experienced* that God always provided them with “sufficient” love, is just as thoughtless as the hasty assurance in relation to God that human beings constantly fail to meet a particular requirement of love.

aggressive – those are not relapses into sin which await forgiveness! They reflect what we must and want to be: namely, human beings. We cannot want to be anything other than human beings. Being like that is part of being the human beings we have become. And we do not want merely to put up with these human beings but to love them.

2.2 Cheap Sin and the Prevention of Penitence

With reference to the practice of forgiveness which sometimes seems ritualised in the worship services of the main line churches, there has – rightly – been a debate about “cheap grace” and people have tended to set themselves up as God’s advocate. Similarly, we need to talk about “cheap sin” and set ourselves up as advocates of human beings. I shall try to do that for you.

You are accused unjustly of succumbing to sin because your behaviour does not correspond to the person that you cannot and do not want to be. According to the liturgical protocol marking off apparent shortcomings, you are not even given the chance of thinking for a moment about the subject, of looking over your own shoulder, catching a glimpse of the possibilities of being different, let alone of feeling penitent or doing penance – and thus taking a step towards freedom. Because recognising that you could have done things differently – about which you feel penitent – always implies discovering some leeway.⁹ No, it is too simple to find fault with your humanness and then also to give you a bad conscience for experiencing inner self-defence.

2.3 Main Item of the Accusation: “Did Not Love Enough”

The staging of certain services appears to be some kind of proclamation of solidarity with an injured, totally gracious one who has to be encouraged yet again to continue to put up with humans who fail week after week to show him the love he is due.¹⁰ I think of the men and women from the old people’s home and the many different relationships in which people like them live. The passion, the tears, the dedication, the daily effort to win attention and care – and the joy

⁹ This naturally presupposes combining a discussion of guilt – e.g. in a prayer of confession or in the celebration of the Eucharist – with possibilities of being different.

¹⁰ In Martin Luther’s worship practice, on the other hand, time and again, God and the devil battle for the souls of people – to the pleasure of the congregation present. The congregation witnesses how it is “rescued” each time.

that fills people *when they experience that they are loving persons*. Is all that too little?

Who really has which problem here? Who is constantly referring to this *not enough*? Is it really a problem *for God* that your love – supposedly – is often less than a certain amount so that God has to suppress an angry impulse, while the celebrant in his public talk at the altar strokes God's shoulder comfortingly and declares before the gathered congregation how well he can understand him? Would that daughter really just have had to show "more" love for her father? Did she indeed give in too soon in God's eyes when she found a place for her father in the home? If everything that fathers and daughters, men and women, friends both male and female were able to experience of one another's love was too little, what amount would really have been enough to absolve them all from that "not enough?"¹¹

To imply that God (in the role of the two hedgehogs competing with the hare) receives us each Sunday with a *non enim satis est*, and that we can talk about nothing else before this has been stated yet again, is satisfaction theology in its crudest form, bottomless and legalistic. To imply on principle that human beings do not have enough love may well reinforce their *real* crisis.¹² Because this insufficiency is not the result of a divine evaluation of love between human beings but rather the mantra of a narcissistic, religious conception of success which assumes that the most that can be achieved by honest endeavour will merit a mere "pass mark."

2.4 Defamation of Self-love

Alongside the liturgical habit of greeting people as "love cripples" at the beginning of the liturgy, it is usual – as a kind of mirror image – to confront them with their exaggerated inclination to self-love. "We have thought too much about *our* own well-being and been neighbours to *ourselves* first." When and where exactly is that supposed to have happened? Again, I think of the people in the service described: not heroes, not just well-intentioned people, not embodiments of humility and obedience. I think of friends, members of the family – and of you as you read this article with kind attention. When were the moments when you

¹¹ The people briefly described above have all loved as they are accustomed to love, because they cannot exist without love. They have been happy to love – even if this statement may sound tautological. But people who love do not normally have the impression of reaching a target; on the contrary, they are more probably surprised about what love makes possible.

¹² It is the experience of loving concern which "leads the sinner to think again" (cf. Rom 2,4).

found yourselves faced with the alternative to obey God out of love or to prefer to be concerned about yourselves?

Incidentally, self-love is a desirable virtue. It is no coincidence that the double commandment of love presupposes it as appropriate for measuring love of one's neighbour and of God. It becomes a problem – as is the case with all virtues – only if it is not rightly handled and it is confused, for example with the strength of its purchasing power. The descriptions of society over the past 20 years¹³ tend more to reveal a serious loss of the virtue of self-love which is why – as one could say with a wink – sin is making progress. People are prepared to wear themselves out in the world of work to the point of losing their ego. They are harsh and pitiless towards themselves and meet demands made on them from outside until they lose consciousness. They are exhausted by having to produce more and more from within themselves and, if so required, to reinvent themselves from week to week. Some have no conception of what it might mean to concern themselves with themselves *in an appropriate way* and finally to make peace and become friends with themselves.

It is bad enough that people are regularly accused in worship of too much *self-love* which angers God and is a danger to themselves. This self-love is declared the exact *opposite of discipleship*.¹⁴ The individual is faced with the absurd alternative of either following the way of salvation and displaying a rigorous attitude to him/herself – or perishing as a result of his/her egoistic interests.

2.5 Extracting the Core from the Concept of Freedom

The experience of freedom is one of the classical subjects of anthropology. In worship, the main reference to freedom concerns freedom from sin, death and the devil and – in the same breath – from ourselves. But is freedom not also expressed in *living one's own life responsibly in faith*? Why are the usual instruments for

¹³ Cf. among many others: Ulrich Beck, *Risikogesellschaft: Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne*, 18th Ed. (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2006); Gerhard Schulze, *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft. Kultursoziologie der Gegenwart*, 4th Ed. (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus, 1993); Alain Ehrenberg, *Das erschöpfte Selbst. Depression und Gesellschaft in der Gegenwart* (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus, 2004).

¹⁴ Discipleship in the context of self-love can certainly be made plausible. After all, Jesus links “life” with discipleship and provides a “guide to living,” the content of which is “life.” Discipleship relates to the heart of human life. Nobody needs to be estranged from themselves in discipleship. Nor should privations, suffering, and pain, which are consciously expected, be equated with self-contempt or self-hatred.

appropriating and exercising freedom dashed out of people's hands and minds by the liturgy? Among other things, this includes our own will which should confirm our decisions and guide what we do or do not do.

But, in the liturgy, our will is mentioned *exclusively as a problem of our freedom*. It would be better if we did not have one. In statements, prayers and hymns, our will is presented as a latent affront to God's will as if, in practical life, we were constantly faced with the clear alternative either to do God's will or our own. On the other hand, it seems improbable that there might be "overlapping" or convergence, or that God might even give his blessing to something which originates in our judgment and will.

Some examples from the hymns in the German Protestant Hymnal: EG 91.7: "How could I still live according to my own will" (Ch. F. Gellert, 1757); EG 164.3: "We willingly abandon all vanities, all earthly pleasures and joys; there lies our will" (G. Teerstegen, 1729); EG 341.3: "The free will hated God's judgment" (M. Luther, 1523); [to be understood self-critically] EG 360.3: "We want to live and stand our ground but we risk your freedom: the world should be organised according to our will" (Ch. Weiss, 1965); EG 497.5: "Give me understanding from your heights so that I do not rest and insist on my own will" (P. Gerhard, 1653).

Examples from the service book: "Let us consider where we live according to our own will and do not listen to God's commandments [...]" (546). The only thing that we are allowed to will is related to God: it is a question of doing God's will, of praising God, of thanking him, etc. Although only a few prayers refer explicitly to the issue of salvation (which has nothing to do with the human will in Luther's view), the human will can at best consent to what God causes to happen. This is underlined by a wealth of images which present the believer above all as a receiver or an instrument so that a will that determines one's action is totally inconceivable. "I want to be a vessel [...] I want to hold out my empty hands [...] I want to be good earth [...] I want to be a river bed" (538).

These observations should not be understood as devaluing the content of historical spirituality or the spiritual dimension of such texts which can still be experienced today; on the contrary, they serve here as examples to complete the overall picture given by worship texts about the relevance of the human will. The obvious neglect of the normal human reactions (emotional, voluntary and cognitive, in particular) when undertaking an action – which one should consider desirable, and be able to justify and then also want – is a significant expression of a specific, implicit, liturgical anthropology of worship.

However, we cannot avoid – also for the sake of our freedom – repeatedly adopting a will of our own, also and precisely in relation to decisive questions of our lives which affect our history and our destiny. How else could we act coherently in the coming week, live in harmony with our convictions and in the

process be recognised as particular individuals? In this connection, it is not a matter of adopting a so-called “unconditional” will, namely the dubious freedom of just wanting something, but of a *conditioned* will which knows, examines and evaluates the reasons and is able consciously to take a decision, thus freely tying itself to reasons.

The liturgical dismantling of the human self-will needed for an experience of freedom is part of the strategy of the dilemma described. On the one hand, we need a will that belongs to us in order to be calculable for ourselves and for others; but on the other hand, if we exercise our will, that supposedly demonstrates precisely the reason for our incalculability. There is no recognition that a free will is a *conditioned* will, related to circumstances that have to be accepted and determined by reasons to which we commit ourselves, although so complex an event as a worship service offers many (and possibly also rare) possibilities precisely of opening our eyes to that.

Those then are five problem areas which exemplify the practical liturgical anthropology in worship practice today.

3 Excursus: Anthropological Positions

In view of the exciting, diverse and definitely “biased” history of a theological anthropology interested in how human beings are human, these observations are not self-evident. This can be summarised most clearly by looking at the views that Master Eckhart, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Wolfhart Pannenberg had of human beings – to mention only three anthropological approaches from different theological periods.

1. In his sermon “On the noble person” (ca. 1326), Eckhart describes the presence of an “inner person” as a “friend”, a “noble”, a “good tree”; this entity, according to Eckhart, is an expression of the indestructible quality of the image of God in human beings. The “inner man” may be “buried” like a “living spring,” hidden like a noble face which the carver brings forth out of the wood, but it has always been there and has never lost its link with God. So what people need primarily is not mediation in the sense of mission but, on the contrary, “de-educating” in the sense of broadening and deepening their unity with God in order, in the process, to emerge as human beings or, in the words of Eckhart, to “be essence with God” (“mit Gott zu wesen”).¹⁵

15 Cf. Meister Eckehart, *Schriften*, ed. H. Büttner (Jena: Diederichs, 1934), 240–247.

2. In the practical indivisibility of awareness of God and awareness of self, Friedrich Schleiermacher sees traces of an “original perfection” of human beings.¹⁶ Among other things, this human predisposition is a cause of the impulse to want repeatedly to give expression to their relationship with God and, especially in worship, to give it appropriate form or to present it. In this connection, it is not insignificant that Schleiermacher brings the categories of inclination and disinclination into the picture; he thus sees *faith practically as a form of the sense of living* which human beings can make their own. Schleiermacher’s understanding of sin as “disinclination” (to life), which in his view expresses a distorted awareness of the self and of God, is particularly noteworthy. “Sin” is a “disorder of nature” (of human beings); “real sin” consists of doing something that is not in harmony because it is “in secret contradiction with the awareness of God” (which cannot be separated from the awareness of self). So sin can also consist of entering into a lack of freedom through one’s own action and not doing what was the result of examining one’s own self-consciousness. The way of the individual to freedom is always endangered.¹⁷

3. Wolfhart Pannenberg points out that both the “dominion of human beings over the world” and the inviolability of their “personal self-determination” (based on relationships) are part of the biblical conception that human beings are made in God’s image.¹⁸ That is not something which is completed at the beginning of their lives but is acquired in the course of their pre-determined history in which they participate as free persons living in relationships. (Referring to Master Eckhart, one could say: who we are becomes more and more evident in the course of our lives – like a face emerging from wood through the hands of a carver.) So at the present moment it is not yet clear who we are. That is an expression of the *mystery of our human existence* which shares in the mystery of God’s being God.

It is very revealing to reflect on Wolfhart Pannenberg’s *double focus* on freedom and love as experiential categories by means of which the human existence of humans and God’s being God are brought into relation with one another thanks to the concept of being in God’s image. Freedom – namely freedom as “personal self-determination, freedom to judge and to decide”¹⁹ – is

16 Cf. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Der christliche Glaube nach den Grundsätzen der evangelischen Kirche im Zusammenhange dargestellt*, 3rd Ed. (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1835).

17 Cf. *ibid.*, 326, 345, 361, 409.

18 Wolfhart Pannenberg, “Der Mensch – ein Ebenbild Gottes?” in *Was ist der Mensch? Beiträge zu einer modernen Anthropologie*, 3rd Ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1968, 27–41, here: 30, 34.

19 *Ibid.*, 37. Here Pannenberg is referring – without specifically saying so – to central elements of the formation of human free will.

fundamental to humans being persons. “Precisely in their freedom, human beings are the image of God,” thus they have access to the divine mystery of their lives. Freedom is a form of participation in God’s life. “But the content which nourishes such freedom is love. Only those who love are truly free [...] And the unity of the Christian God dwells only in the mutuality of their love [referring to the divine persons].”²⁰

Although the anthropological profiles cited here are certainly not dominant in the present theological discussion *de homine*, they are also not peripheral and therefore the question arises of the reasons behind the effective anthropology of many worship services.

4 Reasons behind the Implicit Anthropology of Worship Services

4.1 Introductory Remarks

Nobody would start a pastoral conversation by first confronting the person seeking advice with his/her moral weaknesses or with the question of his/her sins. In homiletics, use is also made of a “hermeneutically broken” anthropology which does not just explain human beings but helps *them to understand themselves*.

One might have the idea of justifying the wide-spread lack of a “hermeneutical break” in liturgy (compared with pastoral care) by arguing that it is necessary to speak the truth at some point if the individual is normally otherwise handled with kid gloves. No! We must *always* be truthful but one aspect of *truth* (“Wahrheit”), as the German word shows, is that it protects (“bewahrt”) people. Worship services are a contribution to the protection, indeed, to the reinforcement of people’s freedom. Worship should keep people in their relationships (with God) from which they derive their energy for living. Similarly, worship services contribute to enabling people to continue to lead their lives calmly, beyond the two extremes of critical distance and passionate devotion. Individuals find the way to truth by discovering in freedom and love something of their being in God’s image in which the truth and the mystery of human beings are found.

What does it mean to speak of a “hermeneutically broken” anthropology? First, (1) it is certainly theologically correct to be able to address people as sinners. But this can be done in a way which is directly linked with the experiences of

²⁰ Ibid., 38f.

being human which prove to be experiences “under the law” and can also include people’s unredeemed autonomy. A hermeneutically broken anthropology is not one according to which theologians understand people but one which serves to enable people to understand themselves.

That means (2) that anthropological competence in preaching is not demonstrated by explaining directly that humans are sinners using all the technical theological terms which are only of limited value as liturgical language. To be able to argue theologically on the basis of a coherent anthropology, and to know what can be stated dogmatically about human beings, is *one* elementary prerequisite for drawing up a liturgy but does not produce one automatically. One’s own considerations and conceptual decisions are required to address people in their human existence in such a way that they learn to live by faith and so that they experience that their faith contributes something to gaining freedom and can become a resource for living in relationships.

(3) Both skills, the theology and the shaping of religious practice, must be brought into balance with one another. If the anthropology of the service is not appropriate, the liturgy cannot be coherent.

In liturgy we “fall into the house with the door” (blurt out everything) more often than in pastoral work. And we do so with a door which should not be taken off its hinges – of people’s being human – and into a house that is the house of our lives in which everyone – as we say – should be able to be their own master. Why is that so?

4.2 Observations and Hypotheses

With 2000 years of worship history, naturally a large number of reasons can be considered. I should like to discuss five of them in the form of hypotheses.

1. Could it be that the liturgical practice described reveals traces of far too *superficial a reception of Reformation anthropology*, the contours of which resulted one to one like a silhouette from Luther’s pioneering soteriology? What has to be said about human beings should be suited above all to their redemption by Christ alone, to the externality of their salvation.²¹ But if one does not pay attention to

²¹ This is demonstrated e.g. in the *categories of the will* defined soteriologically by Martin Luther, which not only relate the will explicitly to the question of redemption but also derive the voluntary basic structure of humans directly from soteriology. Everything that one could potentially will is divided into elements of the will which are relevant or irrelevant for salvation, in order then to go on to state that the will is not appropriate to the first category. Against this (1) it must be objected that the matter of the externality of our salvation is theologically a fixed reality, i.e. presented to

the different functions of the corresponding patterns of argumentation, the whole spectrum of human willing and acting can easily be suspected of being a repertoire of notorious attempts to redeem oneself.²² It is understandable that liturgy sees that as a problem.

In this connection, the identification of being a sinner – again motivated by soteriology – with an imputed human inability to have relationships must be mentioned. Is it necessarily a contradiction of the externality of our salvation that we are certainly able to love – and that of our own accord? Can a person's sin, their being crippled in themselves, not also consist of being unable to devote themselves to their own lives, the indifference of people to experiencing a lack of freedom, an inability to see their lives as a gift and therefore not wanting to live it?²³

Reformation anthropology gave the people of the late Middle Ages a lot but also deprived them of a lot. It enabled them to find comfort by transforming faith's reasons for fear into reasons for confidence. Less attention has been paid to the question of how a person, who has been blessed by faith, can experience what they do or refrain from doing (unrelated to justification by works) in a positive sense as belonging to them and also forming their identity. To that end, one needs a non-discredited free will of one's own which is also conditioned, as explained above.

2. Most of the prayers during services nowadays tend only rarely to refer explicitly to sin and wrong doing, salvation and redemption. But we are addressed all the more frequently about our moral failings in a way which really suggests that good works would be a way out! Is this perhaps also a reflection of the *inheritance of the enlightened, well-intentioned persons of the late 1960s* who

us, which belongs to the *facts and prerequisites* of our existence and cannot be a separate object of our will. Nor can we e.g. *will* the sun to exist – in so far as we understand our will as guidance for our action which should be able to produce something that affects our behaviour. (2) A consistent *distinction between questions relevant or irrelevant for salvation* can scarcely be maintained when leading one's daily life. (3) The *creation of an alternative between a conditioned and a free will* is equally inconclusive. Regarding the problems mainly in the history of the reception of the arguments given for an un-free will, cf. Wilfried Engemann, "Die Lebenskunst und das Evangelium. Über eine zentrale Aufgabe kirchlichen Handelns und deren Herausforderung für die Praktische Theologie," in *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 129.9 (2004): 875–896, esp. 883–885.

²² Correspondingly, everything conceivable in the way of human activity is given a tinge of justification by works. Whatever is compiled on the long list of human endeavours is sealed away with the stamp "unsuitable for redemption of one's self."

²³ In this connection, the interpretation of sin as an experience of alienation should also be recalled. Cf. among others Paul Tillich, *Religiöse Reden* (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1987), 144–146.

committed themselves to the ethos and pathos of peace, justice and the integrity of creation – and usually called on people in worship mainly *to accept responsibility*?

Example. “Lord, our earth is full of oppression, injustice, exploitation and war. We hear about that every day. But we do not want to recognise that we are involved and share the blame for it. We have often missed the chance of preventing injustice. [Silent prayer] We have often kept silent when we should have spoken out. [Silent prayer] Often we have only talked when we should have done something. [Silent prayer] We confess our sin and call upon you: Lord, have mercy. [Congregation: Lord, have mercy.] God, do not look upon our injustice, our silence and our sluggishness. Look upon your Son, Jesus Christ, who died for us and acquired the justice which is acceptable to you.”²⁴

3. Nevertheless, considering the history of liturgy, one should not underestimate that attempt to link up with the human ability to accept responsibility. Indeed, how must the “justified sinners,” who came to worship when dialectical theology was in its prime, have reacted to the liturgical tradition which, on the one hand, proclaimed that the Gospel has no point of contact, but, on the other hand, which referred notoriously and explicitly to the sin of those present? Should not those who know about their justification be able to expect something from worship other than being confronted with the necessity and circumstances of their redemption?

Two examples. “Let us reflect on our unworthiness and confess before God that we have sinned in thoughts, words and deeds. We cannot set ourselves free from our sinful being by our own efforts; therefore, we seek refuge in the unfathomable mercy of God, our heavenly Father, yearn for grace for Christ’s sake and say: God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”²⁵

In the *Evangelisches Kirchenbuch*²⁶ there is a specific “Bußwort” (word of penitence) for each Sunday of the church year. The “word of penitence” for the Sunday with the theme of “God’s majesty” is as follows. “Almighty, eternal, merciful God and Father, we confess to you all our sin and guilt. Behold, we were conceived and born in sin. We have not believed your word, we have departed from your ways, our misdeeds before you are too numerous. But, Lord, remember your mercy and your goodness which have existed from the beginning of the world. Do not remember the sins of our youth, nor all of our misdoings, but remember us in your mercy for the sake of your goodness. O Lord, be gracious to

²⁴ *Evangelisches Gottesdienstbuch* (n. 3), 496.

²⁵ Confession of sin from *Evangelisches Gottesdienstbuch*, Vol. 1 (Witten, 1967), 154.

²⁶ Karl Arper and Alfred Zillesen (ed.), *Evangelisches Kirchenbuch*, Vol. 1, 5th Ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1929).

our guilt which is so great and have mercy on us. Amen.”²⁷ In both of these books there is a lot of talk about “sin”, “misdeeds” and “guilt” but to a large extent without any concrete moral insinuations.

4. Might it not be that the liturgical practice outlined here reflects something of the heritage of the *culture of disciplining people* by religion which has existed for thousands of years? Although it is not found in the Eucharist as one of the sources of worship, it was already clearly recognisable in the Early Church (“battle against sin”). Luther’s reform of worship succeeded in putting liturgy back on its feet in this respect but, even so, the idea of exercising discipline was apparent again, *inter alia*, by the time of the Enlightenment.

The *battle against sin in the Early Church* was aimed totally at being able to hand over the soul unharmed on the day of the parousia (Origen) or, after a first penance, to take advantage of the second, final opportunity. Part of the fight against sin was “to pull one’s socks up” by suppressing certain facets of being human, e.g. sadness, doubt, aggression (Shepherd of Hermas). Note also the Apophtegmata Patrum which are strongly geared to self-discipline and convey, among other things, how one can live despite being subject to temptation right up to one’s last breath.

The increasingly *institutionalised form of confession in the Middle Ages* can also be seen in the light of disciplining people by means of religion. Starting in the 8th century, there were tendencies to elevate private confession to a duty incumbent on every Christian. This was connected with elaborate casuistry on paying the price of sin in the form of penitential punishments defined in great detail. Note, also, the “Regula pastoralis” of Gregory the Great (died 604), which is basically a Christian moral doctrine with a recurring educational theme.

The *liturgical movement of the Enlightenment* (e.g. Jakob G. Ch. Adler, Kirchen-agenda 1797) tried to compensate for Christianity’s loss of plausibility by using worship services to establish good middle-class behaviour with socio-ethical emphases. Worship was to improve society. Neo-Lutheran liturgics placed the emphasis still more strongly on a form of worship for which authority and office were constitutive in a new way and which was to counteract a liturgy that was too strongly individualistic. It is significant that the Prussian order of service was introduced by the Prussian king, Frederick William III (died 1840), in order to make Prussia into a proper “Christian state.” Here, in addition to (self-)discipline, there was also the aspect of power,²⁸ which Schleiermacher rightly saw as a problem.

²⁷ Ibid., 205.

²⁸ Cf. Karl-Heinrich Bieritz, *Liturgik* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004), 541–543.

5. Again, it is precisely to the Enlightenment that we owe a new liturgical sensitivity to human capabilities, namely to human limitations both upwards and downwards. Pedagogy and philosophy were then taken for granted as partners in the debate in the common struggle for human freedom. Against this background, we must go on to ask: has the 20th century *debate on human beings*, that was frequently conducted in a *bipolar form* – encapsulated e.g. in the questionable contrast between a “humanist” and a “biblical” world view, not contributed to perpetuating clichés about human beings? Would not a more intensive resumption of the dialogue with the human sciences benefit liturgy also on the tricky ground of anthropology?

The reception and further developments in practical theology of the types of argument used by the human sciences are often preceded by a relativisation of “the humanist world view” in sometimes rather grotesque forms. The ideological *alternative created between a biblical and a humanist view of human beings* – probably a bi-product of the emancipation of theology both from the philosophical and human sciences and from the natural sciences²⁹ – overlooks the fact that “the humanists” (1) draw a clearly diversified, broken picture of human beings, that in the process they (2) definitely link up with biblical traditions, that (3) the “biblical view of human beings” is also aware that humans have good sides, not to mention the traces of their being in God’s image: the strength of their hope, the mystery of their love, their ability to devote themselves, the strength of their faith, and the like. But, above all, one should (4) be careful not to forget that the biblical writers were great “humanists” to whom we owe perhaps the most important documents on the human struggle for freedom and love.

For me, it is one of the ironies of the history of theology that reference should have been made to Charles Darwin in the attempt to reinforce the argument that people’s unscrupulousness which hinders relationships was the core of their sinful being. Many of his colleagues, who still confirm today that Darwin was right in almost everything, go on to add that he was wrong on precisely *this* point. What Darwin taught about human beings seemed to confirm the features of the *incurvatus in se ipsum* (turning in on one’s self): the struggle against others for the

29 Concerning safeguarding the traces of historical concepts, cf. Wilfried Engemann, “Kommunikation des Evangeliums als interdisziplinäres Projekt. Praktische Theologie im Dialog mit außertheologischen Wissenschaften,” in eds. Christian Grethlein and Helmut Schwier, *Praktische Theologie. Eine Theorie- und Problemgeschichte* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2007), 212–216.

sake of one's own survival as the basic human incentive and essential characteristic. The strongest and least scrupulous are the winners. This meant that, for a while, Darwin paradoxically became the scientific chief witness for an anthropology which sees humans' refusal to cooperate as the basic motive for their being sinners, counts their self-love against them and does not believe in their ability to love.

Whether or not one shares these hypotheses, they raise the question: Which emphases are appropriate for formulating a liturgical anthropology?

5 Being Human in Worship: Contours of a Practical Theological Anthropology

In principle, people will always respond positively to freedom and love, the great themes of life, myths, literature and naturally of the Jewish-Christian tradition. Freedom and love get us moving. The questions associated with them get under our skin. (Perhaps this is also evidence that we are God's image?) Anyone who taps the strong emotional and religious current of these issues, and operates liturgically on people's "open hearts," needs to be aware of what they are doing. (Sometimes I think that certain services would never be passed by an ethics commission.) And yet most pastors would certainly agree that worship is a form of God's service to human beings, conducted for the sake of their freedom, for the sake of a life in relationships in which love is received and offered. If we agree with that, what then is the consequence for the practical anthropology of worship? What would it mean to apply to worship an anthropology which meets the requirements of the times, is able to link up with insights from an interdisciplinary discourse and is nevertheless theologically well thought out? Five points below address these questions.

5.1 Unavoidably Interdisciplinary

A modern liturgical approach to human beings needs a mutual, critical, interdisciplinary dialogue with all the sciences which are concerned with the mystery of freedom and the love of human beings. Two examples of this:

A *dialogue with Practical Philosophy* could spell out clear conceptions of what it means to live with *wishes*, to respect one's own *limitations*, to prepare *decisions*, to *want something for specific reasons*, to *tie* one's self to those reasons and to experience this as *freedom*. That kind of practice is connected with the experi-

ence of inner coherence, with living in inner harmony, and contains elements of “happiness.” For this, liturgy offers a suitable repertoire.³⁰

As a second example, the dialogue partners on questions of anthropology also include such sciences as neurobiology. Although its approaches to human beings do not make it clear whether humans are good or bad, this discipline can teach us certain things about love as the most important resource and strongest motivation of human beings.³¹ For example, that most of what people undertake during their lives is directed to social relationships in which concern, attention and appreciation are received and given.

According to this view, we are not *fundamentally geared to egoism and competition* but to cooperation, resonance and love. It is as if the human being who gives love and receives love is addicted – and as if the best drug for human beings is a human being. People panic and become aggressive when relationships which signify concern, love and recognition are threatened, destroyed or fail.³² Successful relationships mean everything to human beings. Cooperation, solidarity and love make them happy. Of course, people do not acquire “salvation” in that way. It does not help them to keep sin at arm’s length. But they are also not prepared to listen to cock and bull stories about a life that is worthwhile based on selfless motivation. Worship services can be a way of leading us back to the double track of giving and receiving love, a renewal of the groundwater of our lives.

There are plenty of liturgical possibilities for this. They include remembering those to whose love we owe our lives. In the process, we become aware of love as the groundwater of our lives. Is it not possible to reinforce the urgency of calling upon God – not by referring to our sin but by the *kyrie* being an expression of our love which makes us relentless in calling on God? The form of the *communion* celebration can express a realisation of the resources available to us by virtue of

30 Psalms or adaptations of psalms, in particular, make it possible to refer to the whole spectrum of the human experience of reality. The liturgical function of these texts consists mainly of a precise examination of one’s self before God, becoming aware of one’s own wishes, including limitations and aggression.

31 The theological or philosophical debate with neurobiology is based on an open-ended dialogue and is not aimed at some kind of scientific alien prophecy. Thus, for example, the neurobiological hypothesis, that the predisposition of our brain is basically responsible for what we do or do not do and “freedom” is an illusion, is based on extremely inadequate reasoning, cf. Wilfried Engemann, “Aneignung der Freiheit. Lebenskunst und Willensarbeit in der Seelsorge,” in *Wege zum Menschen* 58 (2006), 28–48. By comparison, research on the system of human motivation is further advanced and less speculative.

32 Cf. the relevant standard work by Joachim Bauer, *Prinzip Menschlichkeit. Warum wir von Natur aus kooperieren* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 2006).

successful relationships. In the *blessing*, we should also be able to experience ourselves as people who bless face to face with other persons. And in the *prayer of thanksgiving* after communion we are amazed – with the people whom we saw in the service at the beginning – to observe all that love has been able to do.

5.2 Liturgical Respect for People's Being in the Image of God

To the extent to which the truth about human beings includes their being in God's image, the individual should be able to appear *as a human being* in worship.³³ This includes not only proclaiming the message of freedom and love to people but supporting them in their attempts to make progress also in appropriating freedom and leading a life with successful relationships. That will not be achieved if people are merely used as a sounding board on which to project a splendid soteriology.

Being in the image of God is a functional concept, further defined by the experience of freedom and love. That we are able to have such experiences is an expression of our being in God's image. In this respect, to put it rather casually, "God's experience is merely the same as that of human beings" or, in more correct theological terms, human beings merely experience the same as God. The mutuality of receiving and giving love is the common feature of their nature, in addition to freedom, and it is an unfinished process. "To be truly themselves in openness to the divine mystery of their lives freely consenting to the world and their fellow human beings – that is the vocation of human beings, their future which is still not a reality."³⁴

³³ Instead of repeatedly copying the outline of an anthropology which results directly from soteriology, it is important to pay attention to the *inner realm of the human* which is liturgically neglected, using the image of a silhouette – to the "black" as a *liturgical terra incognita*. To allow people at worship services the opportunity to appear as human beings presupposes, among other things, being aware of the particular *threats to human existence today*, also and precisely as far as the individual's experiences of freedom and love are concerned. For an outline of the corresponding challenges, cf. Wilfried Engemann, "Erschöpft von der Freiheit – Zur Freiheit berufen. Predigt als Lebens-Kunde unter den Bedingungen der Postmoderne," in *Predigt in einer polyphonen Kultur*, ed. Hanns Kerner (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2006), 65–91.

³⁴ Pannenberg, "Ebenbild" (n. 17), 41.

5.3 Penitence as Cultivating People's Disagreement with Themselves

The Christian tradition of penitence in the sense of *metanoia*, namely in the sense of *meta-nous*, a meta-understanding for examining one's own life before God, is one of the greatest benefits of cultivating people's disagreement with themselves. Among other things, penitence is the art of allowing oneself to be conditioned by a reality which one had not previously perceived or had not considered valid. To cultivate this through worship necessarily presupposes enabling people to understand themselves in a new way, creating space for remorse and anticipating possibilities of being different. This includes, for example, not merely quoting from virtual catalogues of sins in prayers of confession but rather making possible a spiritual hygiene of one's own wishes and being able to envisage what can be wished or is desirable.

5.4 Making More Distinctions When Discussing Sin

An up-to-date anthropology to guide the preparation and celebration of worship services requires taking stock of the predominantly moralising, liturgical mirrors of sin which distort human existence. They show endless varieties of the individual as messing up relationships and having an exaggerated urge to be free. But people's "curving in" on themselves can also be an expression of an inherited view that they owe love to others but can do without it themselves. Sin is also the bad habit of not being concerned about one's own life, the fearful attitude of the third servant in the parable of the talents (Mt 25.14–30) who preferred to bury his life straight away. He did not expect anything good of the relationship he had. Sin is also a dulled awareness of experiencing one's own lack of freedom. Against the background of all such experiences, sinners are unmistakably addressed in the gospel as "beloved beloved." Sin as resignation in respect of the chances of love, dulling of feelings and indifference to the gift of life – all that has little to do with morality and a lot to do with a loss of life, with the fear of leading life in the present, with the fear of "thrusting oneself into life" passionately and, above all, with devotion.

5.5 Re-cultivating Self-love in Worship

Self-love as the criterion for love of God and one's neighbour, paying attention to one's own soul, friendship with oneself – these things need to be learned. With

their well-tryed repertoire of dialogues, sanctifying rituals and acts of blessing and with the insights into life which permeate them, worship services have the privilege of being a school of self-love. Where else would it be possible to practise loving the person that one is and not the person one believes oneself to be?

5.6 Appropriating a Faith for a Life in Freedom and Love

People should be able to experience in worship how good their faith is for them because it helps them to live in freedom and to continue to love. In this sense, the liturgy can reveal what Jesus meant by one of his favourite sayings, “Your faith has helped you.”³⁵ Is not the struggle of faith also a struggle for a life in freedom and protective relationships supported by God’s relation with us? This way of believing does not only save people from sin, death and the devil; this faith is an expression of a passionate, fulfilled life. I should not want to miss a service which cultivates such a faith. Because it awakens my curiosity about my life, sets my feet in a broad space, keeps the future open for me, allows me to appear as a human being – just to mention some of the reasons for celebrating a service of worship.

35 Cf. for example Mt 9.22; Lk 7.50; 8.48.