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### **published in**

NTT : Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion  
2019

### **DOI (link to publisher)**

[10.5117/NTT2019.3.003.SMIT](https://doi.org/10.5117/NTT2019.3.003.SMIT)

### **document version**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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### **citation for published version (APA)**

Smit, P-B. (2019). It's the Ritual, Stupid! The Ritual Turn in New Testament Studies in Theological Perspective. *NTT : Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion* , 73(3), 169-190.  
<https://doi.org/10.5117/NTT2019.3.003.SMIT>

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# 'It's the Ritual, Stupid!'

*The Ritual Turn in New Testament Studies in Theological Perspective*

Peter-Ben Smit

NTT 73 (3): 169–190

DOI: 10.5117/NTT2019.3.003.SMIT

## Abstract

This paper seeks to interrelate the ritual turns in biblical studies and systematic theology, in order to explore whether the latter can be used to further the former. In order to do so, first, the ritual turn in biblical studies is outlined, second, aspects of the ritual turn in systematic theology are presented, third, an exegetical case study focusing on 1 Corinthians 11:17–34 is presented, and fourth and finally, conclusions on this experiment are offered. In doing so, the paper will interact in particular with recent work by Catherine Pickstock and somewhat older work by Paul of Tarsus.

**Keywords:** 1 Corinthians 11:17–34, Ritual Turn, Catherine Pickstock, Paul, the Lord's Supper

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

This paper seeks to interrelate the ritual turns in biblical studies and systematic theology, in order to explore whether the latter can be used to further the former. In order to do so, first, the ritual turn in biblical studies is outlined (restricting myself to New Testament studies), second, aspects

<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented as a keynote lecture at the annual conference of the Vereniging voor Theologie (Utrecht) on 16 January 2019 and subsequently on a meeting of the New Testament Research Colloquium (Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam) on 1 March 2019 as well as at the Rituals, Emotions and Identity conference at the University of Rostock (11–13 June 2019). I am grateful to all input that I received on these occasions. Interdisciplinary papers are best tested in an interdisciplinary manner.

of the ritual turn in systematic theology are presented, third, a case study is presented, and fourth and finally, conclusions on this experiment are offered. In doing so, I will interact in particular with recent work by Catherine Pickstock and somewhat older work by Paul of Tarsus. Given the explorative character of this contribution, its conclusions will be formulated primarily in relation to the thought experiment conducted here and can be seen as opening up avenues for further research in the field of (New Testament) exegesis and ritual studies.

## The State of Ritual in New Testament Studies

When surveying the ritual turn in New Testament studies,<sup>2</sup> assuming that such a thing exists (the term is not very common, but there is a clear rise in interest in ritual),<sup>3</sup> three distinct kinds of attention to ritual can be discerned. These will be surveyed now sequentially.

A first development that comes to mind is the emergence of social-scientific and cultural anthropological approaches that seek to reconstruct early Christianity as a 'lived religion', rather than as a disembodied set of doctrines, as it has been taking place over the past circa four decades.<sup>4</sup> Foci of such studies usually are the development of early Christian identity in relation to ritual and the manner in which ritual practices played a role in negotiating challenges to early Christian identity. Such approaches have proven to be heuristically fruitful. This is also supported by the fact that an ever increasing range of topics are being addressed from the vantage point of ritual studies: obvious candidates, such as circumcision, baptism and meal practices,<sup>5</sup> but also healings, exorcism, visions and even

2 The study of ritual in the field of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament seem to be a story of its own (but see the programmatic title of: G. Klingbeil, *Bridging the Gap: Ritual and Ritual Texts in the Bible* [Winona Lake 2007]!), which may well have to do with both the prevalence of texts concerned with ritual in many parts of these Scriptures and with a bias in New Testament studies that a non-ritual kind of faith trumps ritual as a part of religious practice.

3 Cf. very recently: R. Uro et alii (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Ritual*, Oxford 2019; see further two monographs that both give an impression of the emerging role of ritual approaches in New Testament studies; S. al-Suadi, *Essen als Christusgläubige. Ritualtheoretische Exegese paulinischer Texte*, Tübingen 2011; and C. Matthes, *Die Taufe auf den Tod Christi: eine ritualwissenschaftliche Untersuchung zur christlichen Taufe dargestellt anhand der paulinischen Tauftexte*, Tübingen 2017, and the reviews of research contained in both.

4 A hallmark was B.J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, Atlanta 2001<sup>3</sup> [1981].

5 Cf. the appertaining chapters in Uro e.a. (eds.), *Handbook*.

the crucifixion have been fruitfully analyzed using ritual approaches.<sup>6</sup> This has had a number of consequences for the field of New Testament studies/early Christian studies; some aspects can be highlighted exemplarily, certainly not exhaustively. For instance, ritual has come to be regarded as phenomenon of its own right, even as constitutive of an identity, not merely illustrations or expressions of doctrine – to some extent, ritual is even being regarded as the ‘primary theology’ of early Christianity, on which subsequent reflection takes place. In doing so, a modern prejudice against ritual is being overcome – in fact, it looks like a word/ritual dichotomy might be overcome at last. With regard to the place of texts in early Christianity, there is a tendency to begin to view texts as *part of* ritual practices, not as something separated from them or just bearers of information about them. In line with this development, texts, as physical objects have become a topic of interest as well. As a consequence of attention to ritual, early Christian identity has also come to be understood in terms of a performance of identity (i.e. of *koinonia* with God and one’s neighbor in Christ), that is dynamic and fluid, in constant negotiation, as well as very bodily and physical. Simultaneously, the mediating and negotiating role of such practices, making present the transcendent, has come to be emphasized. In line with this new perspective, ritual has come to be recognized as a fundamental mode of responding to with the Christ event as a gift that needs to be mediated.

A second set of contributions takes a different angle and emphasizes the hermeneutical function of ritual;<sup>7</sup> in other words: when texts are being read in the context of ritual, a particular kind of hermeneutics begins to function, linking texts with prayers, with sets of doctrine, with the body, etc. This approach can be referred to as a ‘liturgical hermeneutics’ that stresses that the Scriptures have been liturgically transmitted and ought to be read and understood in a liturgical context. This is a relatively well-trodden path already and will not be the focus of my explorations here, although it is worth stressing that such approaches have also served to highlight aspects of New Testament texts and their hermeneutics that may have been

6 Cf. the relevant contributions in Uro e.a. (eds.), *Handbook*. – Crucifixion is only mentioned in passing as a ritual (25); a more extensive consideration can be found in: P.-B. Smit, ‘Crucifixion? Crucifixion as a Failed Ritual in Phil. 2’, *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 46 (2016), 12–24.

7 Cf. contributions such as: F. West, *Scripture and Memory. The Ecumenical Hermeneutic of the Three-Year Lectionaries*, Collegeville 1997; A. Zerfass, *Auf dem Weg nach Emmaus: Die Hermeneutik der Schriftlesung im Wortgottesdienst der Messe*, Tübingen 2016.

given less attention previously. This approach has also had its impact. For instance, it has increased an awareness that ritual, or more narrowly: liturgical, practices are hermeneutical in nature as well. Furthermore, it has stressed the 'natural' place of (canonical) texts in celebrating communities. Finally, these approaches helped and help to draw attention to other modes of textual interpretation than 'cognitive' or 'noetic' modes only. Having said this, it is now possible to move to the perspective that I am most interested in, as it incorporates insights from the first two kinds of relating ritual to texts, while intending to go beyond it.

Third, when something else is meant with a 'ritual turn' than 'simply' the application of a new set of exegetical methods to texts, or the hermeneutical function of rituals in which texts are being read, as just described, and rather the question is in view what kind of epistemology, even ontology is implied by ritual, as it has been a topic in the field of liturgical theology and is now a focus of what may be termed a 'ritual turn' in systematic theology, the harvest is rather meagre. This can be demonstrated with reference to two relatively recent contributions to the debate, one by Gerald Klingbeil, the other by Dru Johnson, who both propose to do something along these lines and to do so as an innovation in the exegetical field. In his essay 'When Action Collides with Meaning: Ritual, Biblical Theology, and the New Testament Lord's Supper',<sup>8</sup> Klingbeil, who has done substantial work in the field of biblical studies and ritual,<sup>9</sup> intends to do the following:

In this study I will suggest that understanding ritual in biblical texts is not only a matter of recognising activities, patterns, and the interaction of the varied elements that make up any ritual (such as time, space, participants, objects, sounds and language, sequence, structure, etcetera), but that ritual also helps us to better grasp how the biblical texts talk about God.<sup>10</sup>

His approach and conclusions are somewhat genealogical in nature, interested in intertextual and historical links between the New Testament's 'Lord's Supper' and the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. Yet in his outlook he notes also

8 G.A. Klingbeil, 'When Action Collides with Meaning: Ritual, Biblical Theology, and the New Testament Lord's Supper', *Neotestamentica* 50 (2016), 423-439.

9 Cf. esp. Klingbeil, *Bridging*.

10 Klingbeil, 'Action' 424.

Considering the future of ritual in NT research, the to-do list is long. First, we need to recognise the importance for/of ritual – not just in the practice of religious activity, but even more so on the conceptual level, thus requiring more nuanced and focused consideration of ritual activity.<sup>11</sup>

Dru Johnson, in his monograph *Knowledge by Ritual: A Biblical Prolegomenon to Sacramental Theology*, puts it like this:

Any attempt at a sacramental theology that regards the authority of Scripture must reckon with this principle: we practice rites to know.<sup>12</sup>

His main argument is that through participation in a ritual, one gains access to a different kind of knowledge and is enabled to know in a manner different from non-ritual, e.g., 'cognitive' manners of knowing.<sup>13</sup> This argument is paraphrased well by Leithart in a review of Johnson:

Epistemology and ritual are rarely considered together. They are often opposed ('mindless ritual'), and ritual is more often associated with belief than with knowledge. At best, ritual is understood as an expression of knowledge that has been arrived at by other means. Dru Johnson doesn't think these positions do justice to either ritual or epistemology. In *Knowledge by Ritual*, he argues that human knowledge is 'ritualed.' Ritualed knowledge isn't some bizarre mystical form of knowledge but a central feature of scientific learning, modernity's paradigm of knowledge acquisition.<sup>14</sup>

As the contributions of Klingbeil and Johnson show, as seasoned scholars of ritual and biblical studies who are self-consciously trying to point into a new direction,<sup>15</sup> there is a world to gain and it looks like a promising

11 Klingbeil, 'Action,' 434.

12 D. Johnson, *Knowledge by Ritual: A Biblical Prolegomenon to Sacramental Theology*, Winona Lake 2016, 5.

13 An argument akin to what I have argued concerning baptism in the work of Irenaeus of Lyons, see: P.-B. Smit, 'The Reception of the Truth at Baptism and the Church as Epistemological Principle in the Work of Irenaeus of Lyons', *Ecclesiology* 7 (2011), 354-373.

14 P.J. Leithart, 'Ritualed Knowing', 3 July 2016, hyperlink: <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2016/06/ritualed-knowing>, accessed 4 January 2019.

15 Other voices may be added to the list, of course; in a Dutch context, the synergy (albeit one not without its tensions) between biblical exegesis in the tradition of the 'Amsterdam School' of exegesis and biblical theology and the liturgical movement in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (and its predecessor, the Dutch Reformed Church) would be

world as well. This is also the case because it seems to be a world in which biblical exegesis and systematic theology may make their close and intimate relationship public again, given that it remains in the closet too often (biblical exegesis always proceeds from systematic theological assumptions and systematic theology is always informed by views of scripture).

## A Conversation Between Systematic Theological Approaches to Ritual and Biblical Exegesis

In order to assist in this process of coming out and to encourage the ritual turn in biblical studies a little further, I will construct an experimental and exploratory conversation, a first date, if one likes, between systematic theological approaches to ritual and the exegetical *desideratum* that has just been identified with reference to Klingbeil and Johnson. Furthermore, I have chosen not to discuss ritual in systematic theology exhaustively, but rather to identify one particular voice that represents both a poignant point of view and builds on a longer research agenda in the field of ritual and systematic theology. Similarly, one biblical text has been chosen to interact with, in an exploratory exegesis from the vantage point provided by this systematic theological voice.

In particular, I will seek to construct a dialogue between biblical studies and four aspects of ritual that speak to systematic theology. These four aspects of ritual have recently been highlighted by Catherine Pickstock in an introductory article to a special issue of the *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology*. The other partner in the dialogue is an early Christian text that is much concerned with ritual – and stems itself from a ritual context –, Paul of Tarsus' First Letter to the Corinthians, 11.17-34, the well-known pericope about the 'Lord's Supper'.<sup>16</sup> I'll first outline Pickstock's four observations, as they seem to be a good starting point for an exploration of exegesis and ritual from a systematic vantage point, then add a fifth observation and subsequently proceed to Paul.

worth investigating further in this respect, see, e.g., D. de Zeeuw, R. Kouwijzer (ed.), *Liturgie: stelt het wat voor?*, Delft 2000 – reference kindly supplied by dr. M. Klomp, Protestant Theological University (Amsterdam).

<sup>16</sup> On the terminology, see A. McGowan, 'The Myth of the "Lord's Supper": Paul's Eucharistic Meal Terminology and Its Ancient Reception', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 77 (2015), 503-521.

## Catherine Pickstock and Ritual in Theology

Catherine Pickstock, whose line of research has featured substantial attention to ritual and theology for more than two decades by now,<sup>17</sup> recently published an introductory essay to a thematic issue of the *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* (2018:3), which was dedicated to the question of ritual from a theological perspective.<sup>18</sup> In her introduction, Pickstock provides a synthesis of the relationship between ritual and theology on a conceptual level, which makes her contribution attractive as a systematic theological voice to interact with, especially as she identifies the thematic issue as an instance of the 'ritual turn' within theology:

Looked at as a whole, the present volume suggests that it is possible to speak of an emerging 'ritual' or 'liturgical' turn within theology. This turn seems able to

17 Beginning with her doctoral dissertation, published as: C. Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*, Oxford 1997.

18 C. Pickstock, 'Ritual. An Introduction', *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 79 (2018), 217-221. The essays, to wit: T. Manzon, 'Ritual without Belief? Kierkegaard against Rappaport on Personal Belief and Ritual Action, With Particular Reference to Jonathan Lear's "A Case for Irony"', *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 79 (2018) 222-234; E. Wolff, 'Cyprian Krause's "Justification of Rituality in the Face of the Absurd" – Its Potential for Negative Hermeneutics of Liturgy and Their Methodological Consequences', *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 79 (2018), 235-250; R.M. Bergem, 'The Logic of Representation in Political Rituals', *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 79 (2018), 251-260; A.P. Darley, 'Ritual as Erotic Anagogy in Pseudo-Dionysius: A Reformed Critique', *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 79 (2018), 261-278; D.G.W. Smith, 'Rituals of Knowing: Rejection and Relation in Disability Theology and Meister Eckhart', *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 79 (2018), 279-294; N.I. Richman, 'What Does It Feel Like to Be Post-Secular? Ritual Expressions of Religious Affects in Contemporary Renewal Movements', *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 79 (2018), 295-310; S. Aspray, 'An Augustinian Response to Jean-Louis Chrétien's Phenomenology of Prayer', *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 79 (2018), 311-322; J. Williams, 'Playing Church: Understanding Ritual and Religious Experience Resourced by Gadamer's Concept of Play', *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 79 (2018), 323-336; S. Kotva, 'One Question on Ritual and Religion', *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 79 (2018), 337-340, underlie Pickstock's introduction and synthesis, but will not be discussed separately here. – The 'Postscript' of the volume, J. Sherman, 'Postscript: a new ritual turn?', *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 79 (2018), 341-347, compares the current ritual turn with an earlier turn to ritual, as it took place at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, noting that 'Where early twentieth-century scholars tended to treat ritual as repetitive symbolic behavior, and thus as something that needed to be decoded in order to be understood, the author suggests that a contemporary ritual turn involves not only thinking about ritual as symbolic, but also thinking about it as a kind of creative, formative, and performative practice. To think ritual in this manner means not only to think about ritual but also, as it were, to think with ritual' (341).



mediate between four different, but perhaps unhelpful dualities, and to open out new perspectives that are at once traditional and innovative.<sup>19</sup>

All of these dualities and their ritual mediation have to do with an overall concern that 'ritual is primordial,'<sup>20</sup> which is as much an anthropological observation (*homo ludens*) as a philosophical and finally theological issue. Within the context of this agenda, these four different and potentially problematic dualities are what interest me; I will present them and then use them as four lenses for looking at 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, adding a fifth to them in the course of the argument.

The first duality concerns the 'the contrast between the objective and the committed study of religion.'<sup>21</sup> When considering duality from the vantage point of the primordial character of ritual in religion and theology, this has something to say to both religious studies and theology:

This [contrast] retains a certain validity, yet still appears somewhat different in the light of a proposed primacy of ritual. For this primacy seems to imply a positing of an irreducible mystery at the outset, from the point of view of religious studies, while suggesting to the engaged discipline of Theology a certain reflective distance from its own more interior perspective, insofar as a ritual starting point is somewhat resistant to dogmatic comprehension.<sup>22</sup>

In addition, ritual, in its givenness, its playfulness and the attitude of participation, repetition, and reception that it presupposes, also leads to an emphasis on the 'given', the gratuitous, as primary:

So perhaps gratuity is foundational, and the unnecessary precedes the necessary. Maybe ritual is first, basic and last, because it is more than basic, and yet less than reflectively transparent. Are we naturally religious creatures because we have a certain kind of body, just as much as because we have a certain type of mind?

From this, Pickstock derives a number of questions, one of which I highlight, as I will return to it in my discussion of the fragment from 1 Corinthians:

19 Pickstock, 'Ritual,' 218; see for a ritual turn also, e.g., M. Moyaert, 'Towards a Ritual Turn in Comparative Theology: Opportunities, Challenges, and Problems,' *Harvard Theological Review* 111 (2018), 1-23.

20 Pickstock, 'Ritual,' 217.

21 Pickstock, 'Ritual,' 218.

22 Pickstock, 'Ritual,' 218.

'And how then might one understand the leading role of the gratuitous sign over the merely utile?'<sup>23</sup> In particular, the related and implied question that in ritual the playful, useless and 'given', precedes the productive, controlled and useful is of interest in this regard.<sup>24</sup> – In this sense, the title of my paper is more than just flippant, varying as it does on the Clintonian 'It's the economy, stupid', which makes the productive primary, rather than the gratuitous, as a ritual perspective would suggest.

Second, Pickstock identifies a contrast between theologies grounded in the (revealed) word and tradition on the one hand, and in experience and reason on the other hand:

The second contrast is between theology as grounded in the revealed word of God and tradition, on the one hand, and theology as grounded in experience and reason, on the other; a theology from the heavenly above or from the human below. One can see that much of the Scriptures presuppose liturgy, or themselves present liturgical traces. The divine first arrives to us through the medium of our response that is always already present. This means that God has communicated Himself to us neither in bare external events, nor in the secret recesses of our souls. Rather, God arrives through descent into our ritual performances, into acts of human artistry which are given to coincide with his arrival, as it were theurgically.

Pickstock continues:

This reaches an apex with the New Testament that is seamlessly the record of the acts of God Incarnate, and of the perfect worship on earth of God by God. The action of the Church is as much to be the political extension of Christ's primary liturgical performance, as it is the ritual commemoration of his deeds. Liturgy thereby redeems because it is a kind of real if momentary utopia; as Romano Guardini noted, beyond the ideality yet unreality of art, and the reality yet imperfection of the quotidian or everyday realm, liturgical action is at once both real and ideal: all are harmoniously united through the theurgic conjuration of the presence of God.<sup>25</sup>

23 Pickstock, 'Ritual,' 219.

24 In this respect, Pickstock's outline comes close to the position of, for instance, L.-M. Chauvet, as developed in *Symbole et sacrement: une relecture sacramentelle de l'existence chrétienne*, Paris 1987.

25 Pickstock, 'Ritual,' 219. The genealogy of this aspect of the 'ritual turn' as presented by Pickstock cannot be explored here, but in this section in particular, references to some of the leading minds of the 'liturgical movement' are striking, i.e. Romano Guardini and Odo

Little needs to be added to these quotations, the main question will be, in the third main part of this essay, to see whether these theses can serve as a lens to make more of 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, both exegetically and theologically, ideally in a manner in which these two coincide.

A third contrast that Pickstock identifies and that she thinks is relevant to the question of ritual in theological studies is that between the material and the ideal; she is relatively brief on this point:

If we are ritual animals, then history is governed neither by pure material forces and needs, nor by fully comprehensible speculation. Rather, it is obscurely governed by symbolic acts and their interpretation and endless dilation. The would-be objective historian must interpret these actions just as much as does the committed historical actor. She enjoys no privileged, extra-ritual perspective, because she is also simply a human being.<sup>26</sup>

The fourth and final contrast that Pickstock lists (and which follows, also according to her, from the third) is the one between an academic and a spiritual theology, which 'are divided as two modes of interiority: the one more rational, the other more affective.'<sup>27</sup> When considering this contrast from the vantage point of ritual, 'the rational and affective may be seen as inseparable if one allows for the essential mediation of the body in our primary ritual responses.'<sup>28</sup> Pickstock illustrates this with reference to early Christian views of reading Scripture, for instance using the example of Origen:

In reading the scriptures, according to Origen, the mind senses: touches, tastes, sees, hears and smells. This is not a metaphor, because one requires mind in order to sense, even in the ordinary physical manner. Origen implies that, if the human senses think, then likewise human thought also senses. The words of the Bible are ritual, religious words, because they are intensely charged, and involve both halves of this picture: the corporeal and the rational.<sup>29</sup>

Casel. – In this context, it can be remarked that Pickstock's approach here comes close to the 'material approach' to religion of Meyer, in which mediation, ritual and material are also key, cf., e.g., B. Meyer, 'An Author Meets Her Critics – Around Birgit Meyer's "Mediation and the Genesis of Presence: Toward a Material Approach to Religion"', *Religion and Society: Advances in Research* 5 (2014), 205-254.

<sup>26</sup> Pickstock, 'Ritual,' 220.

<sup>27</sup> Pickstock, 'Ritual,' 220.

<sup>28</sup> Pickstock, 'Ritual,' 220.

<sup>29</sup> Pickstock, 'Ritual,' 220.

Accordingly, it is possible to claim that

One's primary theological response to nature, scripture and tradition is 'ritual' in the sense of being that of one's whole person: body, soul and spirit. Just for that reason, it must be a physically engaged, gestural and worshipping one, yet also one that necessarily involves interpretative reflection – begun in the liturgy, and deepened by study and reflection.<sup>30</sup>

Having presented Pickstock's four points in this manner, now the question can be addressed whether these four proposals (or, rather: theses formulated in a sympathetically reticent manner) can help to further a 'ritual' exegesis of the New Testament that goes beyond the 'mere' application of social-scientific or cultural anthropological methods as well as beyond a 'liturgical hermeneutics' that stresses that the Scriptures have been liturgically transmitted and ought to be read and understood in a liturgical context. Prior to doing so, however, I will venture to add a fifth point to these four.

### A Fifth Tension Transcended: Identity and Change

A further tension that is resolved or transcended when employing a ritual approach is the tension between identity and change, two notions that can easily end up in opposition to each other. In short, a ritual understanding of identity encompasses both continuity and change. This is the case because ritual consists, as a performative activity (with Bell and Butler),<sup>31</sup> of an ongoing process of copying, which leads to a series of non-identical performances, in which copies are recognizable as new performances, yet not 'the same,' because they are also new and different. This even needs to be the case for a ritual to remain identical, as in new situations it has to be (somewhat) new as well in order to become anachronistic – ritual identity therefore encompasses both identity and change, or rather: it offers an understanding of identity that needs change in order to achieve identity. – More theologically put: liturgical identity is true to itself only when it also incorporates change and is, accordingly, open vis-à-vis the eschaton

<sup>30</sup> Pickstock, 'Ritual,' 220.

<sup>31</sup> The line of thought developed here, draws on J. Butler, *Gender trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York 2006 (1990), and C. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, Oxford 2009 (1992), with regard to the role of ritual and performativity in the construction and development of identities.

(and exposes the fictionality of the kinds of identity involved in all kinds of identity fundamentalism, whether religious or otherwise).

## 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 as a Test Case<sup>32</sup>

### Givenness

When recalling 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 in relation to Pickstock's first duality, the one between 'the contrast between the objective and the committed study of religion' that she connects strongly with the issue of gratuity and the primordial character of the gift and of givenness when it comes to religious matters (and even human existence as a whole), it seems that this can be of relevance for the interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 on at least two levels. The first level is that of the interaction between the researchers and her/his 'object' of study; this will be addressed when it comes to the question of embodiment and interpretation. Here, the issue of givenness in the pericope itself will be discussed. This will also show how a theologically informed approach to ritual can be of interest for a historically minded exegesis of a text.

A common approach to 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 is one in which it is argued that Paul redresses the social order of the Corinthian community by means of an appeal to the *paradosis* according to which Christ died for each member of the congregation. Hence, disrespecting a member of the body of Christ, is to disrespect Christ.<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, the social hierarchies that have established themselves in the Corinthian community performatively, through a particular manner of celebration of the Lord's Supper, ought to be changed. Pickstock's considerations about the gift open up space for a slightly divergent reading, which, I would claim, is consonant with other parts of Pauline theology.<sup>34</sup>

32 In order to focus on the interaction with Pickstock's insights in relation to the Pauline text, interaction with secondary literature has remained somewhat minimal – see in particular, for a ritually informed approach to 1 Cor: Al-Suadi, *Essen*.

33 Cf., e.g., J.S. Kloppenborg, 'Precedence at the Communal Meal in Corinth', *Novum Testamentum* 58 (2016), 167-203, for a representative and recent contribution to the discussion; see for a contribution that argues that Paul is innovative rather than 'conservative' in his attitude here: P.-B. Smit, 'Ritual Failure, Ritual Negotiation, and Paul's Argument in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34', *Journal for the Study of Paul and His Letters* 3:2 (2013), 165-195.

34 Cf., e.g., the exploration of the 'gift' in J.M.G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, Grand Rapids 2015; the pericope discussed here does not appear much in Barclay's work, somewhat surprisingly so (although the meal is referred to in relation to the gift on page 423).

Whatever Paul seeks to redress in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, he attempts to do so by quoting the *paradosis* of the Lord's Supper:

23 Ἐγὼ γὰρ παρέλαβον ἀπὸ τοῦ κυρίου, ὃ καὶ παρέδωκα ὑμῖν, ὅτι ὁ κύριος Ἰησοῦς ἐν τῇ νυκτὶ ἣ παρεδίδετο ἔλαβεν ἄρτον 24 καὶ εὐχαριστήσας ἔκλασεν καὶ εἶπεν· τοῦτό μου ἐστὶν τὸ σῶμα τὸ ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν· τοῦτο ποιεῖτε εἰς τὴν ἐμὴν ἀνάμνησιν. 25 ὡσαύτως καὶ τὸ ποτήριον μετὰ τὸ δειπνήσαι λέγων· τοῦτο τὸ ποτήριον ἡ καινὴ διαθήκη ἐστὶν ἐν τῷ ἐμῷ αἵματι· τοῦτο ποιεῖτε, ὡσάκις ἐὰν πίνητε, εἰς τὴν ἐμὴν ἀνάμνησιν. 26 ὡσάκις γὰρ ἐὰν ἐσθίητε τὸν ἄρτον τοῦτον καὶ τὸ ποτήριον πίνητε, τὸν θάνατον τοῦ κυρίου καταγγέλλετε ἄχρι οὗ ἔλθῃ. (1 Corinthians 11:23-26 [NA28])

23 For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' 25 In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' 26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (1 Corinthians 11:23-26 [NRSV])

It is a quotation that is replete with language of giving and receiving, especially in the first part (see: v. 23: *παρέλαβον*; *παρέδωκα*; *παρεδίδετο* [cf. *ἔλαβεν*]; v. 24: [cf. *εὐχαριστήσας*], *τὸ ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν*). More important than this linguistic observation is what Paul draws the attention to by means of this quotation: the salvific givenness of the broken body and the (poured out and shared?) cup (a reference to a libation with subsequent drinking is very likely).<sup>35</sup> This is the foundation of the Corinthian Christ devotees' life in Christ, which comes to them mediated ritually, and hence also in that manner as a gift, as a part of 'play'. This surely receives its interpretation *ex post facto* (cf. also the sequence in v. 23: first the ritual, playful actions – even if they were scripted! –, then the interpretative words). Based on this, Paul could also be seen to draw the Corinthian community back to what is at the core of its own tradition:<sup>36</sup> givenness.

35 Cf., e.g., M. Klinghardt, *Gemeinschaftsmahl und Mahlgemeinschaft: Soziologie und Liturgie frühchristlicher Mahlfeiern*, Stuttgart 1996, 101-111.

36 Paul makes a point of stressing that the Corinthians new the *paradosis* already, on the role of memory in Paul with special reference to this pericope, see also: P.-B. Smit, 'Paul and Memory,' in P. Sampley (ed.), *Paul in the Greco-Roman World. A Handbook. Vol. 2*, London 2016<sup>2</sup>, 147-170.

This interpretation can be based on the manner in which the body of Christ is introduced in v. 24: τοῦτό μου ἐστὶν τὸ σῶμα τὸ ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν – it is a given body, and by recognizing this dimension also in v. 29: μὴ διακρίνων τὸ σῶμα – it is striking that while eating *and drinking* involves both ‘body and blood’, as they have been introduced in the *paradosis*, only the body needs to be discerned here. This is likely the ecclesial body, but that body is inherently linked to Christ’s given body in this pericope as well – could it be the case that recognizing Christ’s body also meant recognizing the gift that it involved? This might even elucidate the meaning of the proclamation of Christ’s death (v. 26: ὁσάκις γὰρ ἐὰν ἐσθίητε τὸν ἄρτον τοῦτον καὶ τὸ ποτήριον πίνητε, τὸν θάνατον τοῦ κυρίου καταγέλλετε ἄχρι οὗ ἔλθῃ), which is further unpacked with reference of disrespecting Christ’s body and blood again in v. 27, both references to Christ’s body given up to death.

Of course, interpreting a ritual in terms of givenness, as Paul can be seen as doing in this pericope, is also an interpretation, yet it can lead to a way of dealing with ritual that is non-productive, that is not fundamentally aimed at achieving certain goals, even if it also has consequences. This is to say the following: when a ritual, in this case a symposium,<sup>37</sup> that is pressed into the service of performatively producing a social hierarchy goes beyond the gift – it is turned into an instrument, quite contrary to its own character of a gift (and in this case: of being a gift of salvation for all). The Pauline intervention can be read as one that returns the Corinthians to the gift character of what they celebrate. It is so not only (or even primarily) in the anthropological sense of the givenness and playfulness of every ritual, but also in terms of the ‘givenness’ of the Christ event that is mediated to them ritually through the Lord’s Supper. Then his criticism of the divisive manner of celebrating it, with some going hungry, having not yet been served food, while others are inebriated, well underway with enjoying the drinking part of the symposium, is a consequence of this reminder: if a gift is primary, it ought to be enjoyed by all equally (as all are gifted equally), with obvious consequences for the shape of the performance of the ritual mediation of the gift. In fact, by returning to the gift, Paul can be seen as returning to the non-productive character of the ritual, which, as it is a logical consequence of a gratuity foundational to life, leads to equality, yet it is not geared towards producing it instrumentally. Rather than a ritual that ‘produces’

37 The pericope is interpreted in the tradition of the ‘Smith-Klinghardt’-paradigm for the study of ancient meals, cf. e.g., M. Klinghardt, ‘A Typology of the Communal Meal,’ in D.E. Smith, H.E. Taussig (eds.), *Meals in the Early Christian World. Social Formation, Experimentation, and Conflict at the Table*, New York 2012, 9-22.

hierarchy and social differences, Paul enables the Corinthians to return to the primacy of the gift.

### Excursus: The 'Perennial Liturgy' in The Hague and Givenness

One may compare Paul's manner of engaging the Lord's Supper in Corinth with an issue that played an important role in contemporary Dutch theological debate in the last months of 2018 and the beginning of 2019. In two churches in The Hague area ('De Fontein', Katwijk; Bethelkerk, The Hague), a 'perennial' liturgy was celebrated from September 2018-January 2019. Thereby asylum was provided for an Armenian refugee family – under Dutch law, the authorities may not interrupt an ongoing religious ceremony.<sup>38</sup> It would be relatively easy to critique this liturgy for turning something that is essentially unproductive and playful, something given, into something that is productive, aiming at achieving a particular political end, i.e. the non-deportation of the Tamrazyan family, by making use of a loophole in Dutch law. I am not denying that such criticism is possible (or even valid to some extent).<sup>39</sup> Yet, it is also possible to interpret this liturgy, which, in many ways, came to be spontaneously and unplanned (although it involved much organization and coordination to keep it going!), and as such has the character of a gift that may be interpreted, but only *ex post facto*, in a different manner. This liturgy can also be understood as a particularly intense and ongoing performance of the givenness of existence – Christian spirituality may well strive to do so in general! –, which has radical hospitality as a consequence, or rather: the impossibility to deny anyone this gift, given that one's own life depends on it (both on the gift and on performing its reception in a credible manner). One may associate this with what Pickstock calls, with Casel, 'the initiation of all of humanity into the most extreme of all mystery cults,'<sup>40</sup> or with what she notes in relation to Peterson:

[T]he perfect offering is also a perfect distribution of human goods and of human ordering. It is an 'economisation' that looks forward to the end of

38 Cf. *Algemene wet op het binnentreden*, art. 12b.

39 Cf. e.g., the comments of Marcel Barnard on his blog of 11 November 2018 (<http://www.marcelbarnard.nl/weblog.php>, accessed on 1 July 2019) and of Mirella Klomp and Elsbeth Gruteke in the television program 'Tussen wet en geweten' (EO, 26 December, 2018, <https://portal.eo.nl/over-de-eo/pers/artikel/2018/12/tussen-wet-en-geweten-over-kerkasiel-familie-hayarpi/>, accessed on 1 July 2019) – I contributed to the debate in two separate pieces: P.-B. Smit, 'Met het kerkasiel redt de kerk de rechtsstaat juist,' *Trouw*, 16 November 2018, and idem, 'De Asterix en Obelix-theologie van het kerkasiel,' *Nederlands Dagblad*, 20 November 2018.

40 Pickstock, 'Ritual,' 219 (no precise reference to Casel's work is offered).



the very need for an economising justice in the perfect realised justice of apocalyptic praise.<sup>41</sup>

Participants in this ongoing liturgy are in thanksgiving returning to the givenness of their own existence, founded ultimately on God's self-giving in Christ. One's own dependence on the gift has as a consequence an openness for the need of others to receive as well.<sup>42</sup> This dynamic is not about 'producing' justice, it is simply about being truthful to givenness. In this manner, liturgy and life coincide and this not only due to the length of the worship involved in this perennial service of worship, rather, it is because it returns existence to the gift by celebrating the liturgy in a way that is expressive of the foundation of life: givenness; hospitality as receptiveness is a consequence of this. Accordingly, such a liturgy is not about producing justice. It is about reducing oneself to a condition in which justice can reign, the condition of having received and giving thanks. More could be said about this, of course, but with this excursus, I conclude my consideration of the first part of the issues highlighted by Pickstock and turn to the second one.

### Revealed Word and Tradition – Experience and Reason

When moving to the second tension that Pickstock identifies, i.e., the one between theologies grounded in the (revealed) word and tradition on the one hand, and in experience and reason on the other hand – she understands this as theologies 'from above' and 'from below' –, it appears that reading 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 from this vantage point and wondering how ritual plays a role in this text in this respect is also rewarding. Pickstock argues that the tradition-word/reason-experience opposition is a false one in the light of ritual, given that 'God arrives through descent into our ritual performances, into acts of human artistry which are given to coincide with his arrival, as it were theurgically.'<sup>43</sup>

For understanding what takes place in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, this matters. One of the things that one cannot argue any longer is that Paul

41 Pickstock, 'Ritual,' 220 (no precise reference to Peterson's work is offered).

42 Cf. also the lines of thought explored, in a Dutch context, by Ruard Ganzevoort and Stephan van Erp in, respectively: P.-B. Smit, E. Coster-van Urk (eds.), *Menselijke waardigheid in de klem? Quasimodolezing 2015* (Ruard Ganzevoort, with responses by: André Rouvoet, Marieke Ridder and Jan Kimpfen), Sliedrecht/Amersfoort 2016; P.-B. Smit, M. Derks (eds.), *Allemaal vreemdelingen in een 'christelijk' Europa. Twee theologische pleidooien voor humaniteit. Quasimodolezing 2017. Stephan van Erp en Erica Meijers* (Publicatieserie Stichting Oud-Katholiek Seminarie 59), Amersfoort/Sliedrecht 2018.

43 Pickstock, 'Ritual,' 219.

contrasts received tradition with lived praxis. This would be to suggest that the received tradition is not also part of a mediating ritual praxis – certainly the *paradosis* of the last/the Lord's Supper in all likelihood is just that –, and as if the lived praxis of the Corinthian community is not also a response, albeit one that Paul deems to be unsatisfactory, to the divine in which the divine is to be mediated. In other words, any opposition between 'ritual' and 'tradition' ceases to be a helpful framework for describing what takes place in 1 Corinthians 11:23: 'Εγὼ γὰρ παρέλαβον ἀπὸ τοῦ κυρίου, ὃ καὶ παρέδωκα ὑμῖν, ὅτι ὁ κύριος Ἰησοῦς ἐν τῇ νυκτὶ ἧ παρεδίδοτο ἔλαβεν ἄρτον. Although it would look like Paul is positioning himself outside of the ritual and comments on it from a distance (also literally, given that he writes a letter and is not present in person), thereby creating a contrast between the Corinthians' ritual and the tradition that he had received,<sup>44</sup> this is not the case. The reason for this is that Paul does, in the end, communicate a normative praxis to the Corinthians: he reminds them of the authoritative ritual. The fact that he does so verbally, does not diminish its importance: the communication of authoritative tradition amounts for Paul to the communication of a ritual praxis, using the medium of the letter and a verbal representation of the ritual in order to achieve his aim. It is, in other words, impossible to distinguish between the two in any absolute sense anymore, given that they coincide. It connects well with Pickstock's observation quoted above that 'God arrives through descent into our ritual performances, into acts of human artistry which are given to coincide with his arrival, as it were theurgically.'<sup>45</sup>

Religion as a 'medium of absence,' as Meyer has it,<sup>46</sup> makes the 'transcendent' present by responding to that which is absent – re-presented only by the response to it. In rituals, this is particularly clear, but it also applies to the words that Paul uses, which are not Christ, but they, introduced in

44 In whichever manner; the phrase can be interpreted as referring to a kind of direct revelation to Paul (in a dream, vision, or auditory revelation). This is unlikely and unnecessary. It is unlikely, as it would have been difficult for Paul to claim a much more broadly circulated 'Jesus tradition' (esp. in its Markan form) as having been revealed to him directly. It is unnecessary because ἀπὸ τοῦ κυρίου can also amount to an emphasis on the authority of what Paul has received: it is from the Lord, even if it was communicated to him by human intermediaries (which is the more likely scenario).

45 Pickstock, 'Ritual,' 219.

46 Cf. B. Meyer, 'Mediating Absence –: Effecting Spiritual Presence Pictures and the Christian Imagination,' *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 78 (2011), 1029-1056, 1036, following P. Weibel, 'Religion as a Medium – the Media of Religion,' in B. Groy, P. Weibel (eds.), *Medium Religion. Faith. Geopolitics*, Köln 2011, 30-43, 33.

a scripted manner, represent Christ, both verbally and ritually, given that they make a(n authoritative) ritual praxis present to the Corinthians. In fact, what Paul is doing here, is anything but stepping outside of the ritual and commenting on it. He is rather engaged in what can be called 'ritual negotiation', which sets in when the performance of a ritual has become a matter of debate, and which is part of the ritual praxis as such.<sup>47</sup> Paul is himself embedded in the ritual practice that he comments upon, while drawing on resources that this ritual praxis, which is the shape of the transmission of the early Christian tradition, offers itself. It becomes very hard to operate with word/ritual or above/below dichotomies in this setting, given that both dimensions are so closely intertwined.<sup>48</sup>

Does this advance an understanding of 1 Corinthians 11:17-34? I would say so, it shows in particular that the commemoration of words and the enactment of rituals (of which such commemoration may well be one), also in this early Christian text, are two intertwined ways of performatively continuing the initial praxis of responding to the 'beyond', as it, in this case, originated in Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

### Scholarship and Ritual Embeddedness

Pickstock's third contrast is concerned with the material and the ideal, a dichotomy that is untenable in a world saturated with ritually enacted responses to the 'beyond', their interpretation and further transmission. Everyone is caught up in such processes, simply because everyone is human. In this respect there is no fundamental difference to the one engaged in performing a particular ritual, say, the contemporary functional equivalent of Paul's Lord's Supper, i.e., the Mass, or a scholar studying them.

More broadly speaking, as everyone is a ritual animal and inhabiting a world 'obscurely governed by symbolic acts and their interpretation and endless dilation',<sup>49</sup> one is to be aware of the fact that any act of interpretation is also an act of meaning making in one's own context. Rituallity means,

47 Cf. for an earlier exploration of 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 from the perspective of ritual failure and ritual negotiation: Smit, 'Failure.'

48 In a Dutch context, whenever mentioning 'above', one also has to mention Harry Kuitert and his dictum that 'all talk about above is from below' ('alle spreken van Boven [komt] van beneden...., ook de uitspraak dat iets van Boven komt'; coined in: *Zonder geloof vaart niemand wel* [Kampen 1974]), to which one can add: yes, and such human talk is also a manner of responding and thereby making present that one receives something as 'above,' leaving, as a matter of principle room for the possibility that the 'above' isn't there, while also leaving the option open that it is there.

49 Pickstock, 'Ritual,' 220.

therefore, contextuality with all the advantages – certain things become possible thanks to a context (e.g., a critical scholar lecturing at a public university does not have to worry about doctrinal orthodoxy) – and disadvantages: certain things are not permitted (the same scholar can't start such classes with a prayer). Such an awareness is helpful for an exegete (or systematic theologian): it makes clear what can and cannot be done due to scripted and hence ritual behavior and therefore how ritual process of interpretation are shaped. It points to the radical contextuality of each interpreter and hence levels the playing field between, say, explicitly religiously committed scholars and as explicitly non-committed scholars, as it indicates that both are caught in symbolic acts and their ongoing interpretation. It also entails the challenge that each contextually aware scholar faces: how to make the most of the interpretative advantages that a particular context of symbolic and ritual signification offers and to avoid pitfalls? Intersubjective and intercultural exchange seems to be the best remedy in this respect.

There is also an historical aspect to this: when considering 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 in its historical and communicative setting, the fact that all involved in the reception of the Lord's Supper are interacting with particular symbolic acts and thereby do the same thing, yet in different and conflicting directions, helps to appreciate better what is happening in Corinth (there are competing points of view, none of which are necessarily in the right from the start) *and* it helps to appreciate more the discursive manner in which early Christianity emerged, conflictuous and all – and is likely to continue to emerge.

### **Academic and Spiritual Theology**

A final concern of Pickstock is the contrast between spiritual and academic theology, which is to be understood as 'two modes of interiority: the one more rational, the other more affective.'<sup>50</sup> Key to her approach is the conviction that the mind also senses and that a person usually responds holistically to something, i.e. with body, soul and spirit. Again this can go in two directions, on the one hand, it simply helps to further contextualize the scholar, who is usually trained to disregard the soul and the body to such an extent that they can unwittingly determine most of what the mind does – quite contrary to one's intention, of course, but still. (Put differently: body

50 Pickstock, 'Ritual,' 220.

and soul are to be methodologically silenced, yet this typically backfires in a veiled, yet influential manner). This applies to biblical scholars as well.

When taking this insight to 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 something becomes visible that has been hiding in plain sight somewhat. Most attention is usually given to the question what was going wrong at the meal and the provenance and meaning of Paul's answer. This overlooks that the starting point of the entire pericope is not noetic, but bodily: the hunger of some Corinthians and their appertaining (physical) exclusion from the meal fellowship given the contrast that this hunger stands in compared to the drunkenness of others is what sets things going (v. 21: ἕκαστος γὰρ τὸ ἴδιον δείπνον προλαμβάνει ἐν τῷ φαγεῖν, καὶ ὃς μὲν πεινᾷ ὃς δὲ μεθύει.). In other words: Paul's epistolary response and theological argument is but one dimension of a reaction to a particular performance of a ritual that sparked off initially by a physical, not a mental sensation (to the extent that these two can be separated from each other).<sup>51</sup> A ritual perspective that is aware of the usually holistic nature of a response to any symbolic act, is more likely to pick up on such aspects of text than – as the history of exegesis shows – approaches that are not aware of this; Paul, by consequence, appears as a theologian who grounds his theology in physical, bodily sensations.

### Identity and Change

Observations on the fifth kind of tension in relation to 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, i.e. the tension between identity and change, can remain relatively brief. The point of Paul's intervention in the Corinthian community is to assure that it remains in its celebrations faithful to what it intends to celebrate. He does so by drawing the Corinthians back to the etiology, both ritually and 'theologically' (a false distinction, to be sure), of what they are doing in terms of the Lord's Supper. This sounds like a move that goes against all notions of change: the Corinthians have gone astray – and changed things – and Paul draws them back into the ritually correct fold. An aberration from identity is resolved in this manner. Yet, this would mean to overlook that another scenario is also possible and even more likely. That things have developed in Corinth is clear, that Paul does not like what has happened is just as clear, as is the fact that he wants to regulate the situation in Corinth by

51 Cf. for an earlier exploration of this aspect, although not connecting it to the ritual/scripted world or to contextuality: P.-B. Smit, 'Het lichaam van Christus aan tafel. Paulus van Tarsus en Judith Butler in Korinthe', in M. Klomp, P.-B. Smit, I. Speckmann (eds.), *Rond de tafel. Maaltijd vieren in liturgische contexten*, Berne 2018, 47-59.

means of an appeal to authoritative tradition, the *paradosis* that he quotes: the ritual of the Lord's supper needs to remain true to its sources.

Yet, as only the new term *κυριακὸν δεῖπνον* (v. 20) indicates,<sup>52</sup> Paul also makes changes in order to ensure that the Corinthian meal remains authentic. If the reason that the Corinthian meal has developed into a problematic direction has to do with the growth of the community,<sup>53</sup> because of which questions of status and hierarchy at the banqueting couch and table became more important, then Paul's interpretation of the 'canonical' tradition probably draws new conclusions from it, having to do with social equality in the congregation. It is, of course, a feature of canonical texts that they give rise to new meanings time and again, rather than to have a stable meaning – this is probably no exception.<sup>54</sup> If this is the case, then the Corinthian meal is also best understood as something that Paul considers to be in need of change in order to remain authentic, rather than to be brought back, ritually, to the exact manner in which it was celebrated when he left Corinth. It would, therefore, be an instance of a ritual that needs to change in order to remain 'identical' with earlier performances. Identity and change imply each other here – this provides a heuristically helpful frame for understanding what is happening in 1 Corinthians 11.

## Concluding Observations

When concluding on the above explorations, a number of observations can be offered.

First, it has become apparent that there is something like a ritual turn in biblical studies, specifically New Testament studies. Furthermore, it is a 'turn' that is in search of a new conceptual framework to do justice to ritual. Of the three kinds of 'ritual turn' that were identified at the outset of this paper, the third is the one that would seem to be both the most challenging and the most underdeveloped, yet, as was explored in the body of this paper, its use in New Testament exegesis can lead to asking new questions and enabling new perspectives, specifically on the texts themselves, on their relation to ritual and on the practice of exegesis and the scholars involved in it.

52 Cf. McGowan, 'Myth', for the novelty of the term.

53 Cf. Smit, 'Failure'; it would be compatible with Kloppenborg, 'Precedence'.

54 Cf. on this dynamic in relation to this text: Smit, 'Paul'.

Second, when constructing, experimentally, a conversation between a systematic-theological approach to ritual, in this case the one presented by Pickstock, and a New Testament text, it appeared that the four conceptual dichotomies identified by Pickstock (and the additional one formulated here) can play a constructive role in thinking about exegetical approaches as well.

Third, in particular, it has become clear how the question of the 'gift' can be explored further in relation to New Testament rituals, in this case: meals, how an opposition between 'above' and 'below' can be avoided (and should be avoided in order to do justice to the texts), how an awareness of contextuality can be increased when focusing on ritual, and how the discursive character of the development of early Christianity and its embrace of both identity and change (change necessary to remain 'the same'), can be highlighted more when thinking about texts concerning ritual from a vantage point informed by the kind of theory that scholars like Pickstock have to offer.

Fourth, as a separate conclusion it can be stated that this exercise has also shown that much work can and needs to be done to explore ritual in the New Testament world as something in and of itself, rather than as an 'expression' of something it itself is not, or only an illustration of.

With these results in mind, it would seem that there is a world to gain when it comes to this exegetical/systematic-theological interface and ditto interdisciplinarity, exploring ritual in early Christianity and exploring early Christianity *as* a ritual praxis.

## About the author



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