

LITURGY IS THE DIALOG



OF CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

LARRY D. ELLIS

In many Christian communities the term liturgy is seen as a musty, distant, recitation of something written down long ago, which has no particular relevance to our contemporary experience of Christian worship. A historic study of the subject will stand in great contrast to these ideas.

Liturgy is an English form of the Greek word *leitourgia*. It might be approximately translated by our phrase *public works*. It originally had no religious meaning; it was a term of civic responsibility. These projects (such as building or maintaining public roads or water systems), while undertaken by an individual or group of individuals, were done on behalf of and for the benefit of the entire community. They could be assigned only to those who were citizens of that community.

Gradually the word liturgy lost its civic meaning and by the time of Christ it had an exclusively religious meaning. Even then, it still retained the emphasis of a service performed by one in the community for the benefit of, and on behalf of, the entire community.

Today, liturgy refers primarily to Christian worship, the work of the people of God.

TODAY, LITURGY REFERS PRIMARILY TO CHRISTIAN WORSHIP. THE WORK OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD. [IT] REQUIRES AN ASSEMBLY OF THE CHURCH. THIS MEANS THAT AT LEAST TWO CHRISTIANS MUST BE PRESENT.

There was a great amount of liturgical freedom experienced by those who were the worship leaders in the Apostolic age of the first century. Worship was not yet affected by the competitive struggles of centers of church traditions or the influence of mass merchandising.

PRAYER

A significant act of worship is our prayers. Liturgy must be distinguished from private prayer. Liturgical prayer requires an assembly of the church. This means that at least two Christians must be present. In corporate worship, liturgical prayer is one of the vehicles for divine revelation and the human response to God. It is our dialogue with God. Written-down liturgy is not new Scripture; rather when prayed together, it provides an opportunity for us to converse with God, together.

Thus we may engage in the composition of corporate dialogue between God

and his church by writing new liturgical prayers, especially from relying upon the Scriptures to focus the content of our new prayers.

While there are many expressions of worship, for the purposes of this article we will examine the design of only two types of liturgy, the corporate invocation prayer and prayers of confession and supplication in corporate worship.

Many churches assume that the dialogue of worship consists only or mainly of the exchange of spoken words. This misunderstanding limits us by its focus on the analogy of human conversation.

The dialogue between God and man is more closely analogous to the relationship between man and wife in marriage. It is a living communication in which word and deed, gift of service, mind and body all have part.

God gives himself to his people in loving kindness and faithfulness. The response which he requires is not merely verbal, but the thanksgiving of the whole personality. Therefore, we must consider all that we do, our gestures, our posture, our physical actions, the tone of our spoken voice, as well as the submission of our hearts to God when we discuss liturgy.



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Fortunately, through the servant hand of many of the early Christian leaders, we have an accurate written record of some of their worship liturgies as well as some commentary that specifically addresses corporate worship.

In the **Didache** (an anonymous treatise concerning the teachings of the apostles from about 120 AD), written prayers of thanksgiving were provided as a guide for worship leaders celebrating the Eucharist (Lord's Supper). In addition there are comments about the importance of freedom in worship. Clear instructions were provided that after the "formal prayers" were prayed, they were to "Allow the prophets, however, to give thanks as much as they like."

This is generally understood to mean that the prophets (as worship leaders) had the right to formulate the extemporaneous prayers and did not limit what was prayed. From this—arguably one of the oldest documents of Christianity, written near the inception of the early Christian church worship—the explicit element of freedom and flexibility is affirmed.

Into the third century we see again the affirmation that prayers, even within the structured liturgy, are clearly flexible. In **The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus** (from about 215 AD) the bishop is exhorted to pray beyond a prescribed liturgy. It states that the bishop shall give thanks. It is not at all necessary for the worship leader to repeat these same words year after year, as if recited by rote giving thanks to God, but the worship leaders are encouraged to pray according to each one's ability. The important thing is that a prayer be honorable; then it is good.

CHANGING LITURGY


Over a thousand years later, the process of modifying liturgies in Christian worship was still continuing. Archbishop Thomas Cranmer completed **The Book of Common Prayer** (BCP) in 1549. In it, Cranmer sought to ensure that the Scripture should be read and preached at the celebration of Holy Communion. At Morning and Evening Prayer, in psalm and canticle, in Old and New Testament lessons, the Bible is both read to the con-

gregation and provides much of the language for the congregational response.

The liturgy itself is highly valued, chiefly as a means of corporate praise and prayer. It enables the people to offer adoration and thanksgiving, penitence and intercession, together with all those using the liturgy in every place. The emphasis was not on the extemporaneous prayer, but that BCP was to bring the Scriptures and the liturgy into the hands of the lay worshipers as well as provide a unified voice to the local worshipping Christian community.

This was a major departure from the historic Roman Church requiring that the mass be said in Latin by the priest. A fundamental change in Christian worship came about when the people were provided with a Scripture-rich prayer book in their native tongue. One can easily imagine that meaningful participation by worshipers was immediately enhanced by this simple, but bold, move.

The creative genius of Archbishop Cranmer combined what was of value in old rites with the new insights and




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positive gains of the Reformation. Not far away, in Germany, in 1555, John Knox and a group of English refugees gathered to resolve uncomfortable differences in liturgy between the Prayer Book and the Genevan rites of John Calvin. This led to the original version of **The Form of Prayers**, which when published in 1556, was the first Reformed liturgy in English.

Research from historical Christian documents leads to the conclusion that from the earliest days of the church, worship was not limited to a single structured liturgy. Instead, from the earliest recorded history of the church, it has been the practice to compose and revise worship liturgies.

CHANGELESS TRUTH

The common elements of uniformity were limited to the changeless truth of the gospel revelation—the life, death, resurrection, and exclusive role of Jesus Christ as our Redeemer—not the specific words said. Forms, languages, prayers, and worship traditions were indigenous to local cultures and epoch of time.

The ancient Jews had, among their number, those who demanded compliance not only to the law, but also their interpretation of that law. Today, creeds, BCP, and even long-established worship forms in free churches can become objects of liturgical orthodoxy for form-driven purists.

Vestiges of Enlightenment thinking tempt us to primarily address the Scriptures in our worship. Instead, Scripture, like Liturgy, is to address us. Liturgy is a medium for conversation from God to us and back.

Those new-found Levites, who courageously venture into the art of authoring new liturgy, might expect some criticism, but according to history they will be in very good company. The gospel story is eternal; our communication is culturally based.

Freedom from liturgical legalism is well rooted in early church worship history. In reviewing the form and structure of liturgy as it changed over the past two thousand years, we see that there are significant influences that shape the content of the liturgies. One's theology of God, historic practice, view of the Scriptures, view of independence or connectedness, and view of redemption of humanity all have a strong influence over what becomes the intended design of our worship

activities. There are a few definite boundaries within which we must remain when we write and evaluate liturgy. While early worship liturgies were not at all standardized word for word, they did express a common unified thread of foundational theology.

The gospel message must be inculturated and even recontextualized (translated from one context into a different context) in all places and cultures. However, as we recontextualize old liturgies and compose new ones, we must heed the early Christian's exhortation to remain orthodox and not redefine the gospel. We must be vigilant against syncretism—the combining of two opposing world views—especially with some of the widely-accepted postulates within Postmodernity, that reject anything that claims to be the one meta-narrative of God's redemption of humankind.

Classical Christianity makes a universal claim for the Christian narrative. In all these early liturgies as well as those after

the Reformation there was no ambiguity whatsoever about God's plan for human redemption coming about solely through the life, death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ. Even though there were many variations on precisely how this process would be brought about, there was no deviation from this truth.

Newly composed liturgy must be guarded against widespread pressures to submit to popular revisionist theologies. At the same time, absolute commitment to contemporary relevance must be maintained.

INVOCATION

Let's look at two specific components that should be a regular part of our corporate Christian worship. The first will be the prayer of invocation. The second will be the prayer of confession.

The word, invocation, means "calling in." If we have to call God in, obviously we imply God is not already in our midst. Rather than asking him to be present, we



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might more properly ask God to be present to accomplish his will in our lives and in a specific time of worship.

While we desire the benefits of a structure for the composition of an invocation to our worship, its use must never overpower the significant truth that is it not we who call one another to worship, rather it is God who is the convener of worship. We are the guests at his party. He is the Host.

The invocation acknowledges one another, and more importantly is a solemn reminder that God is meeting with his people. This initial greeting calls attention to the presence of God, who is both the subject and the object of our worship.

From the early recorded lives of the Israelites, God came and dwelt among them in the wilderness tabernacle and the first temple. The reality of the Incarnation is that God has come to dwell and live with us. In the words of Jesus: *“Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the father in spirit, and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks”* (John 4:23 NIV).

Our invocation must embody the truth that it is God who is calling us to him, not we who approach God on our own terms. James Torrance states, “The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews describes our

Lord as the Leitourgia (Heb 8:2), ‘the leader of our worship,’ the minister of the real sanctuary which the Lord pitched and not man.” Our Heavenly Father is the one who seeks us to be with Him.

Here is a five part model structure for a prayer of invocation or collect:

• **Name God**

This is not a place for creativity on our part. Jesus repeatedly taught the disciples to invoke the name of Father when they prayed. He also told them to pray in his own name. In the Gospel according to John, four times in the Upper Room, Jesus repeats the promise that God will hear them if they pray together in his name.

• **Name an attribute of God**

A simple clue to some of these attributes or deeds can be seen throughout Scripture when we read the word “who.” Examples include “who art in heaven,” “who forgives all your iniquity,” and “who heals all your diseases.”

• **Claim God for ourselves**

Although it sounds strange to our ears today, the Puritans often claimed God as their “own” God. It is a vow of allegiance we make to God. An example of this would be found in Exodus 15:1-2 (NIV), “The Lord is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation. He is my God, and I will praise him, my father’s God, and I will exalt him.”

• **Petition God about our worship**

Another commonly found element of the invocation is that our worship be inspired by the actions of the Holy Spirit and that it be received through the intercession of Christ. Christian worship is Trinitarian.

• **Use Jesus’ name and close in a Trinitarian way**

Finally we should conclude with a full Trinitarian doxology, where we name the persons of the Trinity.

CONFESSION

We must have a clear theology of forgiveness and especially of confession in order to write meaningful prayers of confession. A central truth within our Christian faith is that God does the work to draw us to himself. He came to Moses to give him what became known as the Ten Commandments. He came to be with his people at the wilderness tabernacle and the first temple. God the Father sent his Son, Jesus, to become human as we are.

God is always the initiator and has provided the one means by which we

are reconciled to Him, through his Son, Jesus. We, too, are to be initiators with one another. God extends forgiveness unconditionally to all. We are asked to do the same.

Reconciliation is the ultimate goal, not simply the extension of forgiveness to one another. Our confession and repentance are intermediary steps in that process. Confession never means to admit our sins only after they are discovered. It fundamentally means to agree with God’s point of view. Repentance is the turning around from our behavior toward God and it can only follow our submission to the verdict of guilty as we agree with God. A corporate prayer of confession must be consistent with the understanding that we hold for confession. Properly composed and sincerely prayed together, we will then rejoice together in the declaration of pardon that is to follow.

A suggested structure for a prayer of confession is presented by Laurence Stookey. He proposes that we first address God as One from whom every mercy can be expected. We next confess wrongful acts and/or good acts not done. We request pardon and our intention of amendment of life. Finally we close the prayer.

A slightly different process can be summarized from the writing of Hughes Oliphant Old. His offering is that we express our humility before God then lament our fallen nature. We then confess our sin (sinful nature) and our sins (acts of commission and omission). We are then to ask for deliverance from evil in all forms and finally to name the good that we desire to have.

I propose the following more generalized structure for prayers of confession:

- **Address God from whom we are promised mercy**
- **Lament our fallen nature**
- **Confess that our nature apart from God’s leading is sinful**
- **Admit our wrongful acts and good actions that we have neglected**
- **Request a pardon (gift of mercy)**
- **Request ongoing leading in our lives**
- **Affirm the faithfulness that we desire to live**
- **Declare our intention to live a life faithful to God and one another**
- **Close in a Trinitarian way**

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For Further Reading

- “The Duality of Worship” (Ray Robinson) • Mar/Apr 79
- “All of the People, All of the Time” (Michael E Bryce) • May/June 85
- “Worship’s Blessing Collectors” (Phillip Mitchell) • Mar/Apr 86
- “The Necessity of Corporate Worship” (Glenn Harrell) • Mar/Apr 89
- “The Questions of Worship” (Gordon Borrer) • Sep/Oct 90
- “Congregational Participation – Drawing God’s People into Worship” (Ron Man) • May/June 96
- “A Theology of Worship” (Robert Webber) • Nov/Dec 96
- “Don’t Plan a Service – Create a Moment” (Doug Lawrence) • Mar/Apr 07

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This article explores liturgy in the church. Here are some questions to ponder:

- Does your church have an intentional liturgy?
- Do you repeat the structure of worship from week to week in a de facto liturgical way?
- Does your worship “liturgy” proclaim unchanging truth and serve your congregation with cultural relevance?
- Is musical style an “unchanging truth”? Should it be?

We must be cautious of words that merely admit our sinful nature and our specific sins, but which are not accompanied by our submission to the verdict of guilty. These are not affirmations that we agree with God.

In addition, a prayer of confession should not be confused with a prayer of petition or intercession for others. The affirmation of our desire to live faithful lives is in some sense a petition, but a list of other expressed needs is outside the bounds of a prayer of confession. This generalized formula will be helpful in the development of newly composed prayers of confession. This structure would also be helpful for individual confessional prayers to God, when one is not worshipping with the church body.

ORGANIC LITURGY

Christian theologian James F. White boldly proclaims “Each community has its own distinctive lifestyles and these ought to be reflected in how they pray together.”

On the subject of uniformity of the celebration of the Eucharist Don Gregory Dix states, “there is not one single way of ‘doing this,’ absolutely identical throughout Christendom; and that none of the many ways of ‘doing’ it has anywhere remained the same from the day of the apostles until now. On the contrary, this simple bond of Christian unity has a peculiarly complicated and ramifying history of variation.”

This is a profound statement. It is not our uniformity in worship liturgies that shapes and builds up the Christian

Renewing Your Thinking About a Prayer of Confession

Doug Lawrence

There is a delicate balance in doing the more obvious work of leading people to God and coupling it with the “stepping away” work required to let people find God for themselves.

Here is an example of how this might be incorporated into a worship service as part of a liturgy we already know how to implement:

Sing your biggest praise offering with full out instrumental accompaniment, letting the sound reverberate around the room or through your sound guy’s earphones. Then stop everything. Turn the lights down. Don’t talk, don’t segue, and don’t explain. Just stop! Have the pastor walk up the aisle of the church without speaking or looking at people. Don’t worry about people staring at him as though he’s having a heart attack. Hopefully they won’t call the paramedics on their cell phones.

After about a minute (this will seem like ten), have the pastor give the following invitation or something like it.

“There are things I know and there are things I wonder about—just like you. I know God wants us to be here. I know He loves us. I know our being here is pleasing to Him. One of the many things I don’t know is why He’s so patient with us. Let’s take some time to silently tell Him we’re sorry for thinking we could ever hide from Him any of the doubting and acting out we engage in every day. If you are not a Christian and think this is weird, just try to remember a couple of things you might have done this week that you would just as soon nobody know about. I guess that would apply to all of us. Let’s pray that as we unmask ourselves—again, silently—that God might reveal more about who He is to us.”

After a couple of minutes, have someone sing Steve Merkel’s *Lord, Have Mercy*, without accompaniment. It should be fairly slow and without affectation. The profound nature of this ancient text (in a contemporary skin) will have a deep affect on this holy moment. If the singer can be placed in the congregation, that would be even better.

I know this is just a regular old confessional moment, and as Reformed Christians we should all be doing that regularly, right? The thing that makes this different from ordinary confession, though, is that it comes out of a high praise moment and is shocking in its actualization. Whether people love it or hate the exercise is quite beside the point. Everyone will have an opinion about it and that, is a good thing.

This is an excerpt from a longer article entitled *Renew Your Thinking About Transcendent Worship* which originally appeared as part of Monday Morning Email. The article can be found on Creator’s website at <<http://is.gd/sRrFYt>>

church; it is our simple bond of Christian unity. We are not united by what we do, but by what God has done in reconciling us to himself through the life, death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus. He then entrusts the ministry of reconciliation to us to carry out assisted by the Holy Spirit. Our liturgies must blatantly reaffirm this truth.

The Scriptures provide a rich resource for the formulation of new liturgical prayers. When we pray what God has revealed to us through the Scriptures, we address many universal truths that we affirm together. We can examine specific

passages of Scripture, looking for events, righteous behavior, confession of sin, and declaration of the mighty deeds of God, through Jesus Christ. We can then use the suggested structures to develop original prayers of invocation and prayers of confession that reflect the truth that is revealed in the Scriptures.

A common conviction about the nature of God's relationship with us is critical for us to worship effectively. Liturgy is always to be both orthodox in theology and expressed in community.

Liturgy is not only limited only to spoken prayers. Liturgy involves the

totality of what happens verbally and nonverbally when we gather together to worship. While striving to be culturally relevant, worship might include both ancient and contemporary portions of worship liturgy.

A new term, "organic liturgy," has come into use. It means that all parts of the liturgy – the prayers, the praise, the sermon – grow out of an engagement with specific biblical texts. They interact with each other to enable the work of the worshiping congregation to take place.

Idiomatic, organic liturgy is not a designated worship theme, musical style,

Liturgy – All Churches Have One

Bob Burroughs

Did the title grab your attention? I thought it might. I know some of you are already discounting this title as "not true in my church." Please read on before passing judgment on my sanity.

Having been a Baptist for lo these many years, and having had the pleasure of planning and leading a great variety of worship experiences, I came to the conclusion some years back that every church, whether they realize it or not, has a "personalized liturgy," perhaps better explained as "an order of worship that is meaningful to those in the congregation." With me so far?

Of course, there are those congregations and denominations that have a set liturgy, as prescribed by the denominational leaders, the local presbytery, dioces, or a book of rules for worship. You know the denominations that use this predetermined style of worship. Then there are those churches who plan and carry out their own liturgies, doing the same thing week after week, singing the same 25 songs every year, and rarely departing from singing the Doxology in a predetermined spot in the worship experience. You also know the denominations that use the contemporary worship experience.

So what is your point, Bob?

My point is simple: every church has a certain style of worship that is normal, consistent with few changes from week to week, and almost never upsetting the status quo.

Now to go a bit farther, I have always thought this style of worship could be limiting to the worshiper, those in worship leadership, and maybe even limiting the power of the Holy Spirit to move and work among the people.

My wife, Esther, says "One reason why the Holy Spirit doesn't show up much these days in worship is because He isn't listed on the program. We should perhaps remember: He IS the program!"

At one time in the early 20th century, there was a signpost on a long and rough highway in Eastern Alaska that read:

"Choose your ruts carefully. You will be in them for the next 200 miles!"

Perhaps our churches should begin to think about the worship ruts they have established to see and perhaps reconsider the "program," or the order of worship, to seek anew the power of the Holy Spirit in the worship experience.

Consider this:

- the church is not the primary focus in worship
- the pastor is not the primary focus in worship
- the music is not the primary focus in worship
- the announcements are not the focus emphasis in worship
- the visitors are not the primary focus in worship
- the offering is not the primary focus in worship

vocabulary, or even specific applications drawn from the sermon's Scripture focus. It is when the parts of our corporate worship are all connected and lead to the experience of a dialogue with God the Father, his son, Jesus, through the power of the Holy Spirit—it is the totality of our corporate worship service. The various parts of our organic worship might look quite different from each other, yet their intended interconnectedness is experienced by the worshippers.

When we prepare prayers of invocation, prayers of confession, sermons, and join in with music that is connected through a common set of Scripture based truth, we unfold organic liturgy.

I believe that we should be committed to embrace ostensibly polarized

positions such as order/freedom, verbal/symbolic, rational/mystical, giving/receiving, comforting/disturbing, as well as individual/corporate present opportunities to practice convergent worship. Intentionally planting these tensions in our worship will help our churches recapture some of the pre-Enlightenment mindset of the early Christian community, while also establishing relevance for many in the Postmodern world.

Expressions of the unchanging gospel message created by the worshipping community in newly contextualized idioms, vocabulary, and imagery present exciting opportunities for writers of new liturgies. The writing of prayers for worship calls for the creativity of a poet, the sensitivity of a pastor, the insight of a theologian,

and the foundation of a living relationship with God.

Last, but by no means least, we again recall that it is always God who is seeking us. We are the ones who are to respond. Our efforts to grow in learning to pray are ultimately ineffectual, should we work apart from the efforts of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, we must be in prayer as we compose prayers. As we write new liturgies, let us always pray, "Almighty, God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen."

fine

- the deacons/elders are not the primary focus in worship
- the comfortable surroundings, lights, padded pews, sound system, instruments and tapestries are not the primary focus in worship
- the worshiper is not the primary focus in worship

GOD (Yahweh), the Holy Spirit, and Jesus are the main priorities in worship.

All the above-mentioned things are contributors to the worship experience, but the LORD and true worship can show up in the underground church in China; in the small crowded room in an African village in Malawi; under shade trees in the jungles of Peru; in a homeless shelter; in an abused women/children shelter; in a soup kitchen for the homeless; in a crowded, non-heated, historic church building in Prague; in the small country church in middle America; in the grand and marble facilities in modern cities across the USA and other countries and in the least expected places across the world.

Worship begins in our hearts. Liturgy – whether liturgical or contemporary – can enhance worship and lead us to a better understanding of God and His call to worship Him.

But liturgy is not a required item for a complete worship experience. Sometimes, we get too tied up in the thought: "But we've always done it that way," when we should be thinking: "How can we improve our liturgy to meet God in their experience?"

Certainly, good music helps – but it is not the primary thing. Good preaching helps – but it is not the primary thing.

Facility helps – but it is not the primary thing. Variety helps – but it is not the primary thing.

Good sound systems, cool lighting, screens, drama, and other creative aspects of the worship experience helps – but these are not the primary things.

What is the Primary Thing? True and meaningful seeking of God in the manner best suited for your church. It is as simple as that. And, that is not as simple as it sounds, is it?

Liturgy – Contemporary – no liturgy – three points and a poem – all these can become a template upon which true and meaningful worship can happen.

Remember the Alaskan Road sign?

Don't get caught in a worship rut – certainly not in the great opportunities that are around us these days.

- Follow the Word of God and the Holy Spirit personally and cooperatively
- Change things around ever so often
- Listen to God's people
- Avoid worship ruts
- Work hard to prepare meaningful worship.

Liturgy—all churches have one!