

Why I believe in Liturgical Worship

Written by Calvin Fox

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I could simply say I enjoy its order, which is quiet and dignified. The Service has a definite beginning, middle and end. There is a reverence and aesthetic beauty to it, usually enhanced and conveyed by the architecture, windows and furnishings of the Sanctuary (properly called a Nave). The colorful robes and studied actions and rituals of the official participants (and of worshipers, too) also contribute to a sense of the Sacred. All of this seems appropriate to being in the presence of a Holy God and offering to Him sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving. The instrumental and choral music is also appropriate for this and conducive to deep worship, prayer and communing with this Holy God. Yes, I enjoy all of that. I did not grow up with liturgical worship- far from it! Most of my meaningful experience in Worship has been in the free, simple Protestant style, in a casual and informal setting where the emphasis is on preaching and extemporaneous praying. As a small child I attended a Methodist Church but later worshipped in Congregational and Baptist type churches. I was almost 40 when I was introduced to Liturgical Worship. During the last 30 years, even though I have worshiped (and have been a Pastor) in non-liturgical churches during part of this time, I have experienced a growing appreciation for Liturgical Worship. This has been accompanied (and strengthened) by a growing unhappiness with worship trends in many evangelical churches. But, is my appreciation of Liturgical Worship only a matter of personal preference and needs? Are there good Scriptural and Theological reasons for Liturgical Worship. Can it be defended and supported on ground more solid than personal temperament or “what works for me”? It should be and can be!

Reviewing the first paragraph above, I realize some of what I have written about Liturgical Worship could also be said of non-liturgical Worship. Those who appreciate the latter could defended what they do as “appropriate to being in the presence of a Holy God and offering sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving. The instrumental and choral music is also appropriate for this and conducive to deep worship, prayer and communing with this Holy God.”

And those who worship in traditional Congregational and Baptist churches could say their order of Service is quiet and dignified. It has a definite beginning, middle and end. There is a reverence and aesthetic beauty to it, usually enhanced and conveyed by the architecture, windows and furnishings of the Sanctuary. The simple robes, actions and rituals of the official participants also contribute to a sense of the Sacred. Their traditional instrumental and choral music is also appropriate and conducive to worship, prayer and communing with God.

So what is left? What is unique about what is known as Liturgical Worship? What does it have that all these other churches do not have? Is it simply style? We need to sharpen the definition of “Liturgical”. I hope to do that here and to make the distinctives clear.

Biblical Essentials for corporate Worship

Everyone, whether Liturgical or non-Liturgical, agrees that the essential elements of Biblical Worship are prayers of praise, thanksgiving, intercession, petition and confession (of sin). Also included are Scripture readings and Preaching. Offerings of time, talent and treasure are to be given. Spiritual Songs and the Psalms are to be sung. Opportunity to confess the Church’s Faith [“Jesus is Lord” being the earliest Confession or Creed, first used at Baptisms- cf Rom

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10:9. By the 4th Century, something close to our version of the Apostles Creed served that purpose] is also essential.

There is one more essential: the Lord's Supper (called the Eucharist, which is Greek for Thanksgiving cf 1 Cor 10:16). The earliest Worship was centered in this observance (called "celebration". This word means to observe or perform a religious ritual). Every Sunday, the Church gathered to "celebrate the Eucharist", which was always done in conjunction with preaching and all the other acts of Worship listed here, e.g. Acts 20:16 and 2:42.

Because Liturgical churches put so much emphasis upon the Eucharist, the Communion Table is the central focal point in the church, with a Lectern and a Pulpit to each side of it. This is not Protestant. Liturgical churches that are Reformed, as well as Catholic, emphasize preaching even more than Holy Communion. In them, the Pulpit and the Lord's Table will both together be the visible focus in the front and center of the church (definitely not a Choir or "Praise Team" with instruments. This focus is also true in traditional Baptist and Congregational churches. Many today, discount the importance of symbols and furnishings in their worship centers; however, that is naïve. The medium still invariably conveys a message. As one enters a church building of any kind, immediately a message is received as to what type of church it is and what to expect in the Worship Service. That message comes from the symbols and furnishings.

The Services in one New Testament church were charismatic and chaotic. They had gotten out of hand and the Apostle Paul came down hard on them and insisted that all they did together in Worship must be done in a "fitting and orderly way" 1 Cor 11-14 That latter advice has been a major principle in the Church ever since. It is an important characteristic of Liturgical Worship. It applies to the music as well. Music in church must be fitting and orderly, not chaotic or inappropriate. Of course this begs the question: what is fitting and orderly?

Deciding what is fitting and orderly Worship

I. Example of the Church in the Patristic Age (2nd-8th C)

There is opportunity for much variation in how each and all of the Biblical elements of Worship are put together and expressed. And that process has evolved and changed over time. This fact leads to an important divide among Christians. Many are committed in theory to emulating the practices of the earliest first century church as much as possible. My studies of Scripture and Church History have led me to believe this commitment is unrealistic (idealistic, simplistic and even romantic) as well as impossible and unnecessary.

Most Christians understand that Tradition evolves over time and that this is good and not to be devalued. We accept the concept that in building His Church, the Spirit of Christ has led it to develop in many ways. They include the shape and forms of Worship, the way the Biblical essentials are put together and practiced. This has often been done in response to the culture and changing needs of the Church in a particular time and place, especially the need for unity in organization, beliefs, fellowship and witness. In particular, those of us who accept this concept and the reality of such development, value and respect how the post New Testament Church, especially of the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th Centuries, worshipped. That worship was not exactly the

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same in all times and places. From various sources we can get a composite picture and that gives us a Model.

Liturgical worshipers respect and value the Liturgy of those Christians and much of what Liturgical Churches do today derives from those times, as well as from the 1st Century. We also value and respect the theological development that was happening concurrently. Much of what all Christians today believe to be orthodox Christian Doctrine was canonized (accepted as official) by the ecumenical Councils of that same period. Their Faith is our Faith. If we can accept their doctrine we should give serious consideration to how they worshiped (and to how they organized the Church, too) Those of us who do consider ourselves to be Catholic Christians [which is not to say Roman Catholic]. I am both Catholic and Reformed (Protestant). However, because to most people the name "Catholic" does mean

Roman

Catholic, I could use a substitute for it. I chose "Patristic". That word refers to certain Writers, Pastors and Theologians of the Church during the first 8 centuries. They are known as the Church "Fathers". "Pater" is "father" in Latin, so this period of time we are talking about as our Model is part of the Patristic Age. Hence, instead of "Catholic" Christian, I could use "Patristic" Christian: one who respects and values the faith and practices of the Church during the Patristic Age (especially the first 5 centuries). However, I realize this might confuse many as "patristic" is not familiar to most evangelicals.

To begin to answer our question as to what is "fitting and orderly" in a Worship Service, I would say that the search for the answer begins with the way the Church worshipped (the Liturgy) in its first 5 Centuries. There are more developments to add, but to me this is the historical background for Christian Worship today and "Patristic" Christians want to be rooted in it.

II. Scriptural Sources for Liturgy

There remains the Scriptural and Theological under girding of Liturgical Worship. This takes precedence over the argument from history. Much that has been proposed and practiced in the Liturgy (and accompanying Prayer Books) to this very day, does not pass muster in the light of good Theology. The same is true of practices in contemporary evangelical churches. The bottom line, again, is that the choice of how to worship in our church Services is not simply a matter of personal preference

. Let's go to the Book.

Here we meet two more differences in approach. Those who seek to model their non-liturgical Worship after the New Testament Church, usually ignore the example of worship in the Book of Revelation, as well as neglect or reject entirely the Old Testament on this subject. Those who endorse Catholic (Patristic) or Liturgical Worship are usually very open to the influence of both the Book of Revelation and the Old Testament. That influence is very noticeable in Liturgical churches worship.

III. Theological Foundations of Liturgy

Another major divide is theological. Those who practice non-liturgical worship today tend to worship a God who [in their mind] is like Jesus of Nazareth or a non-judgmental God who is

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primarily Love as well as immanent (“with us”). (Inconsistently, some of those who practice Liturgical worship today do the same.) Most of us who are into Liturgical Worship are more likely to worship a God who [in our mind] is Holy, omnipotent and transcendent. This explains the value put on church buildings with vaulted ceilings and which create physically a sense of the Sacred. (This is one of those developments over time- the earliest churches met in private homes or cemeteries) This sense of the Holy and Sacred also influences the type and style of music and even the behavior of the worshipper upon entering the Nave, as well as during the Service. The actual environment has an emotional and physical effect different from that in a contemporary evangelical church building. Everything connected with Liturgical Worship has this unique effect and personally, I like it.

A Typical Liturgical Service explained

Now let’s go through elements of a typical Liturgical Service. I write this with the Liturgy that is used in an Episcopal Church on Sunday morning in mind. There are local variations in details

If we worship a God who is holy, omnipotent and transcendent, we approach Him very much mindful of our human frailties and of our mortality, as well as our sinfulness. Liturgical Worship begins with, and includes, public and corporate confession of our sins and guilt. Later, when we approach the Lord’s Table we confess our private, personal sins. The Priest (from the Greek name Presbyter which means Elder) pronounces forgiveness in the Name of Christ and on the basis of the Gospel and our faith in it. (Of course, He himself does not have authority to forgive. I write as a Reformed or Protestant Christian.)

If we worship a God who is Holy, omnipotent and transcendent and we approach Him very much mindful of our sins and sinfulness, it follows that kneeling in His presence is appropriate. The most common Bible word for worship is the word for prostration. In the presence of a Superior, a subject bows down. Kneeling and bowing are common practices in Liturgical Worship. (I remember when it was normal to kneel to pray in fundamental Baptist churches and many of us kneel when we really are earnest in our prayers during crisis.) When we hear God’s Word read, standing to show respect is appropriate. Liturgical Worship involves participation, including physical movement, of all the worshippers in many ways throughout the Service. (This reflects the original meaning of the word “liturgy” which is, literally, the work of the people)

More Scripture is read in a Liturgical Church than in a typical evangelical church because the former use a Lectionary which organizes the entire Bible to be read in 3 year cycles during the Services- normally portions of the Old Testament, New Testament, the Psalms and the Gospel. After the Readings, comes the Sermon which normally is based on one or more of those passages. Response to the Word heard and preached is made corporately by the recitation of the Nicene Creed, which rehearses the essentials of the Church’s Faith (“We believe...”)

This is followed by the “Prayers of the People” which includes petitions from the congregation. Liturgical Worship makes much use of written prayers. They are known for their beautiful words and phrases, many of them are very ancient. Most people are glad to use these prayers as their own, expressing their thoughts far better than they can on their own. But obviously, the great advantage is that they allow everyone to pray together in unison. This also applies to

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many short written responses the worshippers make to statements made by the person leading the Service.

Christians who are blessed by their use of the Psalms should not denigrate written prayers as “canned” or unspiritual. They would not say that of the 23rd Psalm or the prayer given to us by the Lord. Of course, such prayers are not a substitute for personal, spontaneous prayers. I use both.

The Prayers of the People are followed by another confession of sin. Having confessed our sins and receiving absolution, we are at peace with God and others. We “pass the Peace” to signify this, saying “May the Peace of the Lord be with you/and also with you or simply “Peace of the Lord“. This concept has been replaced in many churches by the practice of walking around and “Greeting” others. This misses the theological point, but fits in well with a non-liturgical worship service which emphasizes fellowship.

There is an Offering and then the Service, which was originally in 2 parts, moves into the second part which is traditionally known as The Great Thanksgiving, i.e.,- the Eucharist. Originally, the non-baptized were asked to leave at this point. For many centuries, only baptized Believers who have publicly confirmed the Church’s Faith as their own in the presence of a Bishop have been welcomed to receive Communion. Many churches today have dropped that requirement and have become very liberal about who may participate. That is not the ancient Tradition.

Note: the Liturgical Church from at least the 2nd Century has had a 3-fold ordained Ministry: Deacon, Elder (Priest) and Overseer (Bishop) Laypeople have many functions during the Service, but only ordained Clergy may celebrate the Eucharist.

In Liturgical Worship, the Eucharist is at the center. Scripturally and Theologically, as well as Historically, it is the apex of corporate Worship and the wellspring of the personal Christian life (when used in conjunction with the preaching of the Gospel). It is by sharing in the Eucharist together that we demonstrate, confirm and strengthen our faith and unity as a People of God. It is also where we individually feed in our hearts by faith on Him who is the Bread of our Life and where we spiritually enter into the Heavens to renew our covenant promises to serve our Lord. This is the heart of Liturgical Worship as I understand it as a Reformed Catholic.

When it is over, the faithful are dismissed with the command by the Priest to go forth on the mission of serving the Lord gladly and with singleness of heart.

The Latin word for send is “missa” from “missus” from “mittere” meaning “to send”. It has been anglicized as “Mass“. Instead of saying “The Mass has ended” or the Liturgy is now over, we should say, “The Mass [our mission] is now beginning.

These then are the personal, historical, theological and Scriptural reasons why I prefer Liturgical Worship and recommend it to others. Because Christians are sinners, the actual practice differs here and there and often falls short of the ideal. But, the ideal is worth both defending and working to achieve.