

Worship and Liturgy

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Christ our Sacrifice:

Evelyn Underhill defines Christian worship as “the total adoring response of man to the one eternal God self-revealed in time.” This response is seen perfectly in Christ: “Lo, I have come to do thy will, O God” (Hebrews 10:5-9). The whole life of our Lord Jesus Christ is an act of worship: his obedience, his ministry, his self-offering on Calvary. We can also say that it is a liturgical act of worship which is expressly articulated in the words of Jesus’ High-Priestly prayer in John 17:1-5.

“In Christ” (2 Cor 5:17) we enter the stream of obedience, devotion and love flowing from the Son to his Father. Therefore true worship is union with our Lord in the Holy Spirit, identifying ourselves with the Perfect Sacrifice of Jesus Christ, which is why the Eucharist will always be the most perfect form of worship and liturgy – indeed in Eastern Christendom it is known simply as **the Liturgy**.

Our Response:

1. Our awed, wondering response to the **Holiness**, the otherness of God, as when in the book “Wind in the Willows” the question “Were you afraid? (i.e. in the divine presence) was answered by “No, not afraid...and yet...”. Mystery is at the heart of worship.
2. Our rational, considered response to the **Mind of God**, to his purpose, his plan revealed in Scripture. This will keep us free from superstition.
3. Our moral response to the **Goodness of God**, by the obedience of our lives, confession of sin.
4. Our aesthetic response to the **Beauty of God**. Offering the best of human creativity in art, drama, and music. This will also play an important part in liturgy e.g. in the architecture of our churches, the ceremonial and outward forms we use and of course the music of liturgy.
5. It needs to be added that even the so-called ‘rational’ attributes of God – Truth, Beauty, Goodness – are mysterious, unfathomable, beyond our total grasp, so that even in the midst of liturgical, rational worship, we may be overwhelmed by a sense of God’s presence and our words may quiver into silence (as in Isaiah 6:5).

What is Liturgy?

I wonder what most of us have in mind when the word ‘liturgy’ is mentioned. I am sure that, for most of us, liturgy is some form of worship that is traditionally used in a particular Christian community, a form of words repeated over and over again

when the church comes together. For instance the Anglican Book of Common Prayer is a book of liturgies, some for regular use like that of Holy Communion, Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer, others for special occasions such as Baptism, Confirmation, Marriage, Ordination.

But liturgy is something more fundamental than the words of a fixed order of worship enshrined in a book. Take for instance the wanderings of the patriarch Abraham. When he travelled the length and breadth of the land of Canaan, we read that “he pitched his tent with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord” (Gen. 12:8). Abraham built altars in other places e.g. near the great trees of Mamre at Hebron (Gen. 13:18) and subsequently returned to these places (as in Gen. 13:4). In so far as there was a repeated pattern of altar building and prayer, we can say that these were liturgical acts, although I am pretty sure that Abraham had no book of prayers as such.

We can of course see a strong liturgical tradition in the pattern of sacrifices enjoined on the Israelites in the book of Leviticus and continued in the first Temple at Jerusalem and in its restored successors. In the main these were the Burnt Offering, the Peace Offering and the Sin Offering but there were also the daily offerings in the Temple at daybreak and sunset and on the Sabbath. When the synagogue became a regular feature of every Jewish community the services were timed to synchronise with the Temple offerings.

With the destruction of the Temple in AD 70 the synagogue and the home became the centres of Jewish liturgical prayer. The Passover Meal with its prayers of commemoration and its required items of food enacted in the family home is the best known of all and is of course the basis of the breaking of bread and table fellowship of the Christian community of faith.

The Nature and Purpose of Liturgy:

1. The recapitulation of salvation history.

Christian Liturgy, like its Jewish antecedents is always the recapitulation of salvation history, (cf. The Jewish Passover, and the festivals of Atonement and Tabernacles) so that the unchangeable basis of Christian liturgy must always be the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. It can rightly be said that Jesus inaugurated the worship of the Church when he instituted the Lord’s Supper.

2. All liturgical acts have a double function

- a) They are directed Godwards (latreutic, glorifying God),
- b) They are also directed manwards (for salvation, for teaching). They set before worshippers a standard of worship, teaching them how they ought to think and feel.

3. Liturgy is a manifestation of the nature of the church

- a) A baptismal community, distinct from the world
- b) A nuptial community, awaiting the coming of the Bridegroom
- c) A catholic community, transcending boundaries and centuries
- d) A diaconal community, serving God and the world
- e) An apostolic community, its worship confronts the world. Our worship sends us out again into the world.

Liturgy is Scriptural

It makes provision for the regular reading of Scripture according to a plan, it covers the whole counsel of God in His Word in both Testaments, (not just favourite passages that the pastor likes to preach on!)

The themes of its prayers are Scriptural themes and even the phraseology is scriptural. I am talking about Reformed liturgy of course e.g. the Prayer of Humble Access: “We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table” (reminding us of the Canaanite woman who replied to the Lord Jesus, “Even the little dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their Master’s table.”)

We can also add that the Old Testament is a liturgical book: many parts of it can be traced to the worship of the temple and the synagogue. The whole book of Psalms is the most obvious example of this. Liturgy recalls the significant events of Old Testament and New Testament history.

Liturgy is Educational

We hear the full Trinitarian doctrine in its prayers/hymns. We learn how to relate to Father, Son and Holy Spirit in our worship i.e. the prayers always have a theological basis.

In Liturgy we repeat the Creeds of the universal church. We use the time-honoured prayers e.g. Gloria...Sanctus...Agnus, words for which every great composer (from Beethoven onwards) has composed special music.

The words of liturgy are words that recapitulate the unchangeable basis of our faith – the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

They are words that bring us into a living encounter with those events and cause us to be renewed by that encounter.

Liturgy retains what is essential:

Through the centuries, different emphases have dominated Christian thought: the Second Coming, the Holy Spirit, Jesus as personal Saviour, even judgement and hellfire. But liturgy retains a balance of the essential elements of our faith and does not allow itself to be hijacked by the passing whims and fancies of the ages. It saves

us from trend-driven forms of worship. This doctrinal balance of Trinitarian worship makes the early Christian liturgies the greatest embodiments of Christian worship.

Liturgy is inevitable

Even if a church has no Prayer Book, it will have an order of service (a **shape** of its worship) which is typical from week to week. This inevitably becomes traditional, even liturgical. At worst this becomes a “hymn sandwich”.

So good liturgy gives the right **shape** to worship.

Liturgy need not be boring or dead. Not only the preacher needs to have ‘fire in his belly’, the fire of the Holy Spirit, but the worship leader or officiant also in the way he conducts the service.

Liturgy is reformable

Liturgy is not a sacred, inviolable text but has to be adapted from generation to generation and indeed from one national culture to another. The Preface of the 1980 Alternative Service Book puts this very well: “Words, even agreed words are only the beginning of worship. Those who use them do well to recognise their transience and imperfection; and to treat them as a ladder, not a goal”. If liturgy was not capable of renewal we would still be repeating everything in Latin or using only the pronouns *thou* and *thee* to address the Almighty. It was the General Secretary of the Bible Society in Singapore who reminded us in TTC Chapel that God does not speak to us in a ‘dead’ language. He speaks to us in a language we understand. Therefore liturgical revision must be an ongoing process.

Inculturation of liturgy

Not only the language needs to be adapted to the people group but also the form. There are parts of the Church in Africa where the stewards dance up the aisle with the offerings. A few years ago we had an Archbishop as a student at TTC. He came from a very orthodox church in Central Africa but he told us (and showed us on video) how he danced along the road to his church in full episcopal regalia, gathering people on the way to dance in procession with him. In that context this was a very effective form of evangelism and of Christian liturgy.

In the Church in Sabah we had perhaps one of the best examples of Inculturation. A former Archdeacon (Bernard Mercer) had used the tones of the Hakka dialect to create a musical setting for the Eucharist. It was sung with great gusto by our congregation and, as far as I know, is still used in the diocese of Sabah.

The Lutheran World Federation Series on *Worship and Culture in Dialogue* sums up this issue as follows:

“Word, Baptism and Eucharist in Jesus’ name are not dispensable in new situations, but they do need to be done in new ways. In the case of the eucharistic meal, however, fidelity in practice will include the general use of the pattern already found in Luke-Acts:

Sunday, openness and the accent on grace, the critique of purity and insiderhood, the use of staple food and festive drink and the connection to concern for the poor. New cultural material brought to this communal action will also undergo welcome and critique for the sake of the Gospel.

The City of God has a centre and permeable boundaries, namely the Lamb and the open gates.” (LWF Studies: Worship & Culture in Dialogue p.82)

There still remains today a challenge to the churches in Singapore to produce a local liturgy which is Singaporean and not purely Western or American.

Finally, liturgy will always be a link between the past and the present – a link we cannot afford to lose since Christianity is a historical faith. The link often happens through traditional symbols of liturgy as in Baptism and Holy Communion. In these symbols we can see that liturgy is prescribed by the Lord (he even gave us his own words to accompany in the breaking of bread) so that his saving power can be made available to the worshipper here and now. This is the genius of liturgy: that it transcends time and can therefore effect a living encounter with Christ in every age and in every corner of the earth.