

Reformed Worship Part 4: Worship Must be Covenantal

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For many evangelicals, *liturgy* is one of those Roman Catholic leftovers in a few liberal churches, while “led by the Spirit” is its pride. When my wife and I were missionaries in the southern Philippines city of Davao, she was invited to go to a Christmas Eve worship service in one of the more popular Baptist churches there. The service started, as usual, with a “praise and worship,” as the “worship” team led the singing of joyful Christmas carols. The singing became more and more “joyous” and “celebratory,” and before my wife knew it, the “worship” team was rocking with “Feliz Navidad.” Perhaps getting carried away, or maybe by design, the team finally broke into a rollicking “La Bamba”!

Although somewhat on the fringe, nevertheless, this is an example of the many excesses when being “led by the Spirit” is applied to a liturgy-starved evangelical worship. However, as seen in Part I of this series, a church does not have to go to the extremes of the Toronto “blessing” to be off the Scriptural standard. Innovations such as “praise and worship,” drama, dancing, and puppet shows are as unacceptable to God as much as “holy laughter,” “holy barking,” and “holy vomiting.”

But one may argue that the Bible nowhere prescribes a liturgy for Christian worship, thus, the freeform worship services in evangelical churches today is not in violation of any Scriptural command. Moreover, freeform worshipers contend that liturgy cramps their worship style and quenches the Holy Spirit.

However, it is easy to see that every church has a liturgy. The Christian Reformed Church says this about liturgy:

Liturgy is what people do when they worship... Every church has a liturgy, whether it worships with set forms inherited from ages or whether it worships in the freedom of the moment. The only question is whether we have the best possible liturgy: it is never whether we have a liturgy.

When our family lived in the southern Philippine city of Davao, we attended such a freeform church worship service for a time. The church had the familiar evangelical service with about an hour of “praise and worship,” announcements, sermon, then a few more songs at the end. As we became familiar with the routine (even though they denied they had one), we started skipping the “praise and worship,” and arrived at the church a few minutes before the sermon started. This was possible since we knew exactly the timing of their “liturgy”!

A Divine-Human Dialogue

“Liturgy” is not Roman Catholic invention. In fact, *liturgy* is a Biblical word from the Greek verb *leitourgeō*, which means “to serve, minister, or perform” religious or public duties (Acts 13:2; Rom 15:27; Heb 10:11). From the Old Testament to the New Testament, the people of God always worshiped with a liturgy.

Scripture requires that in worship everything must be done “*decently and in order*” (1 Cor 14:40). That is, worship must be intelligible and edifying. Following the teaching of Scripture, its summary in the confession and catechism and its application in the Church order, we follow in our worship services an historic Reformed liturgy which we believe reflects these Biblical and confessional priorities.

Because it is God who made and redeemed us, he has the first word so our services begin with a call to worship from God’s Word, an invocation and Greeting from God, followed by a response by God’s people.

But we can only enter into God’s presence if your sins have been removed. To this end, we read God’s Law to convict us of our sins. Then we confess our sins as a congregation, and individually. In response, God declares that he pardons us of our sins out of his grace and mercy.

Out of gratitude we sing a song of thanksgiving, and give tithes and offerings. Since prayer is the chief part of thankfulness, we offer our hearts in thankful prayer in morning and evening worship.

Continuing the dialogic pattern, God speaks to us in the sermon, reminding us of what he has done to save us and calling us to live according to his Word in thankfulness. We again respond in a song of praise called doxology.

God has the last word as the minister pronounces God’s benediction upon his covenant people. Just as the service begins formally with the call to worship so it ends formally at this point.

We see this liturgy in two examples of worship services in the Old Testament:

Exodus 19-24: God calls Israel to worship (19:10-11); Israel assembles before God (19:16-20); God speaks his word to the people (Chs 20-23); Israel responds with vows to obey and offers sacrifices (24:1-8); God ratifies his covenant with a covenant meal (24:9-10).

2 Chronicles 5-7: Solomon assembles Israel for worship (5:2-5); sin is dealt with through burnt offerings (5:6); Israel enters God’s presence through the priests (5:7-10); a psalm of praise (5:11-14); Word of God proclaimed by Solomon (6:1-11); Solomon’s prayer of intercession (6:12-42); fire consumes the sacrifices/glory fills the temple (7:1-2); psalm of praise (7:3); Israel partakes of the peace offerings (7:4-9); benediction– Israel departs in peace (7:10).

In the New Testament, we also see this order of worship in the Book of Revelation, a glimpse of heavenly worship. Notice the parts of heavenly worship: John enters worship only because of what Jesus has done (Ch 1-3); the sacrifice is the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross (Ch 4-5); the sermon is what God accomplishes in redemptive history in between Jesus’ first coming and his second coming (Ch 6-19); the prayers are the prayers of the saints throughout history (Ch 6-19); the covenant meal occurs when Christ returns (Ch 19); the benediction is the blessedness of eternal life in Christ (Ch 21-22). Clearly, the pattern of worship remains the same from the Old to the New Testament.

Covenant Renewal

From the above examples from Scriptures, we see that corporate worship is a **covenant renewal ceremony**, a *liturgical dialogue* between God and man. How is it a liturgical dialogue?

Whenever we assemble together for worship, we are renewing our covenant vows to God. God first called Israel to worship him at Mount Sinai in Exodus 19-24. After hearing God's covenant laws, the people promised, "*All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient*" (Exo 24:7; cf 24:3, 19:8). After 40 years in the wilderness, when they arrived in Moab at the gates of Canaan, God renewed their covenant with them, exhorting them to obey all his commandments (Deu 29-31). After entering and settling in the Promised Land, God again renewed his covenant with his people, and the people again promised, "*The Lord our God we will serve, and his voice we will obey*" (Jos 24:24).

In all these covenant renewal ceremonies, God speaks and the people respond. God speaks his law, the people respond in repentance. God speaks his promise of redemption and restoration, the people respond in praise and thanksgiving. God speaks his word of exhortation, the people respond with vows of obedience. This is why worship is *dialogical* – a dialogue between God and his people.

At the end of these ceremonies, there are signs of confirmation: with Adam, the Tree of Life; with Noah, the rainbow; with Abraham, circumcision; with Moses, the blood of animal sacrifices; and with the disciples, the Lord's Supper, the new covenant in the blood of Christ. The Lord's Supper (Matt 26:26-28; 1 Cor 11:25-26) is the fulfillment of the covenant meals shared by the people in the presence of God (Neh 8:9-18; Exo 24:11; Deu 12:6-7; 14:26). The final covenant meal will be the great marriage feast of the Lamb in heaven (Rev 3:20; 19:9).