

**Dabney Center
Spring 2003
Course: Liturgy
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Session #3

Objections to Liturgy/Ritual

“Liturgical” worship is highly “ritualized.” But since the Reformation, many Protestants have viewed ritual and ceremony with suspicion. Several arguments against ritualized, liturgical worship are offered:

1. “Old Covenant worship was full of rituals and ceremonies, but Christ’s coming abolished the ceremonial law. We are free from such strictures in our worship. Our worship in the New Covenant is ‘spiritual’ – spontaneous, inward, and simple.”

Christ did not actually abolish the ceremonial system; he fulfilled it (Mt. 5:17ff), and in doing so transformed it. Thus, the categories of temple and sacrifice are still used to describe New Covenant worship in the NT. Jesus and the apostles established new rituals and ceremonies (baptism, the Lord’s Supper, new prayer forms, new songs, etc.) for the new epoch. The NT is not opposed to ritual per se, but to doing the wrong rituals, either because (a) they belong to the old age (e.g., circumcision), or (b) they are human inventions inconsistent with biblical principles (e.g., some Jewish oral law washings).

2. “Ritual leads to dead orthodoxy and dead formalism. It kills the freshness of New Covenant worship and quenches the Spirit. If we do the same things routinely, we’ll just go through the motions.”

This is a false dichotomy. Often, churches which favor “spontaneity” and “freedom” become stale and dead themselves, as many ex-charismatics attest.

While dead formalism is a problem we must guard against, ritual per se is not the real danger. If ritual is so dangerous, why did God give an entire ritualized system to Israel that allowed virtually no variation? Surely God would not tempt his people this way!

Rather, the real issue here is the heart of the worshippers. If we really love God, the “liturgical routine” should never be dull.

God’s own life is one of tireless repetition. God is a ritualized being. He moves through his divine life in an orderly, habitual way. The creation account, with its repeated patterns, is very telling: Even when God is at his

most original, he acts habitually. We are made in his image, and so we are “creatures of habit.”

3. “Liturgical worship is ‘high church.’ It is elitist and snobbish. It leaves out the common man.”

Snobbery is a problem, but not unique to those who worship liturgically. Extreme RPW minimalists and free wheeling charismatics can also take undue pride in their worship.

Actually liturgical worship is the most “common” style of all, in the sense of being accessible to anyone. (It was called the *Book of Common Prayer* after all!)

The vast majority of Christian worshippers the last 2000 years (just like the Israelites before them) have been mostly common folk and yet they’ve learned to recite creeds and prayers, chant psalms, kneel and stand at appropriate times, and so forth. The irony in the above mentioned objection is that until rather recently in history (with the invention of printing and the rise in literacy rates), worship had to be highly ritualized (and therefore memorized) for the people to participate at all!

Ritualized liturgy is actually far friendlier to children, the elderly, immigrants, etc. than other forms. For example, many traditional Presbyterian and Puritan forms of worship are really only accessible to college educated, middle class “thinkers.” As a result these kinds of churches end up with a very unbalanced membership and become distorted, disfigured manifestations of the body of Christ.

Jordan is entirely correct that worship should be “childish.”

4. “Liturgical rituals, ancient prayer and hymn forms, etc. simply aren’t intelligible in our modern culture. We need more contemporary styles and forms to reach people today.”

This objection smuggles in several false assumptions. For example, Frame argues for “intelligibility” from 1 Cor. 14, but he badly misreads the text.

The way this objection is sometimes stated, it presupposes confusion between liturgy and evangelism. In evangelism, intelligibility is critical. In worship, other concerns come to the fore. Worship is only indirectly evangelistic; the primary audience is God himself.

This objection also assumes that worship should come easy. We have to teach kids how to tie their shoes and ride a bike, but supposedly worship should come “naturally.” Surely the King of the universe is worth more effort!

Worshipping well is a skill that has to be acquired (cf. references to musical skill in the psalter). This skill is learned over the course of a lifetime through practice and repetition.

This objection assumes the symbolic character of ritualized worship forms is unintelligible to moderns. But surely this is false, even if moderns are symbolically impoverished compared to their ancestors. Consider recent examples: flag burning in the U.S.; tearing up billboard pictures of Saddam in Iraq. Symbolic actions are still intelligible!

The real reason many American Christians object to liturgical worship is laziness! We don't want to have to learn the "grammar" or "language" of historic, biblical worship forms. We put our personal convenience and pleasure above honoring God. This is idolatry.

Given the broad scale idolatry of American culture, the church simply must stake out her ground as a counter-culture. This means liturgical worship! So what if it's weird?

5. "Liturgy and ritual lead to Rome."

Two can play at this game. Rejection of ritual leads to Pennsylvania . . . and Amish country!

The fact that Rome does something is not, in itself, an adequate argument against it. After all, Rome believes the Trinity, incarnation, etc.

This objection forgets that the Reformers themselves wrote liturgies that were to be viewed as "fixed forms." In fact, prayer books were a Protestant invention, basically! Among the Puritans, liturgy was generally accepted early on in the movement, but when worship forms got entangled in church-state issues with the British crown and persecution began, there was a backlash against anything that smacked of Anglicanism or Romanism. There is no reason to follow the Puritans in this area today since our cultural situation is substantially different. The strict RPW which came out of the Puritan interaction with the crown was an innovation, as Packer has pointed out.

The irony is that the Roman Catholic counter-reformation has implemented more of the liturgical reforms that Calvin desired than Presbyterians have! The early Reformers wanted weekly communion in both kinds for the congregation, a lot of corporate participation rather than "spectator worship," etc. The Reformers were actually more medieval than modern.

Arguments in Favor of Ritualized, Liturgical Worship Forms

The traditional Christian liturgy balances form and freedom. It features both ordinaries and propers – elements that remain fixed and elements that vary. Life as whole is this way. In fact, biblically sound rituals will encapsulate life.

A good *prima facie* case can be made for liturgy from several places in Scripture. We could argue covenantally that if Old Covenant worship was ritualized, New Covenant worship will be as well, albeit with new forms. We could point to the worship of the synagogue, with its regular structures and patterns. Jesus participated in this worship, even reading the scheduled lectionary passage from the scroll rather than “following the lead of the Spirit” (Lk. 4). Paul clearly desired orderly, regimented worship (cf. Acts 20:7ff; 1 Cor. 14; Col. 2:5).

Perhaps the best argument for liturgical worship comes from the book of Revelation. The entire book is an unveiling of the heavenly liturgy and follows the same basic pattern as temple worship in the Old Covenant. John, as a representative of the church is in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day and enters into heaven to witness and participate in this worship service. If there is “Spirit-led” worship anywhere, surely it’s in heaven! What do we see?

We can’t survey the entire book, but consider a few details from Rev. 4-5.

- The worship is *corporate*, as the actions of the worshippers are clearly coordinated together. There is no individualistic spontaneity.
- The worship is *scripted*, and apparently memorized. It is orderly and routine. The angels do not tire of singing the *Sanctus*; it never becomes “vain repetition.”
- It is *bodily*. There is physical movement, to show reverence and humility.
- It is *symbolic*, e.g., the worshippers wear special clothing. It is not minimalistic.

Towards a Biblical-Theology of Ritual

1. We should not think of rituals as specialized ceremonies tacked on to ordinary life. Ritual – and therefore symbolic action -- is pervasive. Intensified forms of ritual – “ceremonies” – give shape to life as a whole. Ritual is inescapable in God’s world, though rituals are never neutral.

Our entire lives have a ritualized flow to them, as image bearers of the Ritual God. Sometimes, we highlight the ritualized dimensions of behavior more than at other times, e.g., weddings. But without an overall ritual character, our lives would be chaotic and meaningless. Sin wrecked human life, taking it out of its God ordained rhythm; God uses ritual to re-establish his pattern for human life. These rituals are microchronic encapsulations of what human life should be.

Ritual in everyday life is simply a matter of habit. We have various ritual systems, or “mini-liturgies,” we employ all the time, e.g., greeting protocols, manners, etc. These become “second nature” and virtually invisible to us (analogous to “dead metaphors”). Society cannot run smoothly without these ritualized patterns of action.

We move through day-to-day life ritually; we also surround important events, such as birth, marriage, and death with more specialized rituals. Interestingly, most people know better than to trust their spontaneity and intuitions on such momentous occasions.

2. Ritual both expresses and stimulates emotion.

Contrary to the claims of some, ritual does not kill feeling or emotional freedom. Rather, it shapes and guides our emotions in proper ways.

Of course, sometimes, we go through the rituals of daily life without much feeling. This is precisely why ritual (or habit) is so important. If we only showed signs of love, friendliness, manners, etc., when we felt warm and fuzzy, we’d be very unloving! Faithfulness to “the routine” is actually a demonstration of love. Proper everyday rituals structure life in such a way that I show love towards my neighbor whether I feel like it or not. It’s the same with weekly worship. You cannot experience a “revival” 52 Sundays a year. Nor can you, Quaker-style, wait on God to move you inwardly before you obey.

Do the rituals; feeling will follow in due time. Bodily actions can shape the heart outside-in. Performing rituals inscribes character and inculcates virtue. Proper rituals generate appropriate theological concepts (Kerr, Edwards, church fathers, Calvin).

3. Ritualized worship provides the best possible cradle-to-grave pastoral care for the covenant community.

Liturgy forms personal and corporate identity. It gives us a sense of who we are. It gives us a sense of belonging. It creates and sustains bonds of covenant life and communion. Rituals gel us into a body.

Liturgical rituals engrave certain habits into our hearts and minds, forming our character in a virtuous fashion. Ritual begets character.

The liturgy gives us a world-view and world-praxis, a certain way of viewing the world and being in the world. It gives us our symbolic matrix or grid, through which we interpret reality and in terms of which we take action.

Liturgy and ritual disciple us as a distinct people, or counter-culture, in the world. These patterns form us into “God’s army.”

Liturgy gives us a way of celebrating and coping – it enables us to express joy in constructive ways, it enables to channel grief appropriately, and it allows us to die well.

4. Rituals transform human consciousness. They are performative.
5. Rituals can serve as microchronic enactments of all of history and life.
6. Proper rituals are necessary to generate and sustain Christian culture.
7. A proper ritual theology holds together the equal ultimacy of mind and body, doctrine and praxis, the individual and community.