

LITURGY AND THE GOSPEL BY RICH LUSK

Worship is a controversial topic among Christians in our day. Strong, passionately held convictions often clash over even the minutiae of how we should worship God. Considering the centrality of gathered worship in the Scriptures, and the current fragmentation of the church, this is probably inevitable in our day. At TPC, we strive to be a worship-centered church because we strive to be a God-centered church. But why do we worship God the way we do?

Understanding the liturgy (our order of worship) is critical. The liturgy tells a story – the story of the gospel. Every time God gathers His family for worship He reenacts the glorious drama of His work of redeeming a community of sinners to be his treasured possession. Consider the pattern we follow each Lord's Day:

We are sinners, and so our first act of obedience in worship is to confess our sin. Our sin excludes us from God's sanctuary. Under the Old Covenant, worshippers who brought animal sacrifices to the temple would lay their hands on the head of the animal and confess their sins before drawing near to God (Leviticus 1:4, 4:4). Similarly, Old Covenant priests had to wash themselves every time they approached God in the temple (Exodus 30:20-21). In the New Covenant, all believers form God's royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:5). But before we can offer Him acceptable sacrifices of praise, we must be cleansed. Worship begins with the sacrifice of a broken and contrite heart (Psalm 51:17, Isaiah 66:2), rejecting all confidence in the flesh (Philippians 3:4). Before we enter God's house, we have to wipe our feet on the welcome mat.

Having confessed our sin, God grants us forgiveness and accepts us into his presence. He declares this forgiveness to believers through His representative, the pastor. We are assured through this authoritative declaration that fellowship with our Father has been restored and as His children we may enter His sanctuary. It is important to understand that New Covenant worship takes place in the heavenly sanctuary, the Holy of Holies. When we speak of worship as "heaven on earth" we are not simply using a metaphor. In a real, though mysterious sense, the worshipping congregation has been drawn up into the heavenly realms. In worship, we come "to the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel" (Hebrews 12:22-24). There's more to worship than meets the eye! In the Old Covenant, only the

High Priest could draw near to God in the Most Holy Place, and he could only do so one time a year (Leviticus 16). In the New Covenant, all worshippers are invited “inside the veil” to meet with their God every Lord’s Day (Hebrews 10:19-25). Because of Christ’s death for us, we have access to the heavenly throne room of God (Rev. 4). We ascend in a special to meet Him in His heavenly, joining our worship to that of the other saints and angels.

What does God do for us once we have entered His presence? He renews His covenant with us. He hears our prayers and accepts our gifts of worship. He speaks words of comfort and instruction to us as the Scriptures are read and preached. He invites us to the feast of the kingdom, the Lord’s Supper, in which we commune with our Savior and celebrate what He has done for us. Finally, He blesses us and sends us back into the world to act as salt and light. In short, God calls us out of the world to worship Him in the heavenly sanctuary, then commissions us to go back into the world to disciple the nations, to do unto others as He has done unto us.

Notice two things about the way worship has been described here. First, the emphasis is on God’s action, not ours. Through the liturgy, God molds us into the image of Christ, individually and corporately. “Liturgy” means “service” or “ministry.” The focus is not so much on our service to God (though this is by no means excluded – see Romans 12:1-2 and Acts 13:2) but on His service to us. God graciously takes the initiative and we respond in faithful obedience and praise. Just as the gospel is about what God has done for us, rather than what we can do for ourselves, or even what we can do with His help, so the liturgy is about God doing for us what we cannot do on our own. Understanding this enables us to see that the liturgy itself is a means of grace. The Bible’s liturgical pattern of confession, cleansing, consecration, communion, and commissioning impresses the gospel story upon us each Lord’s Day, crafting us into a humble, obedient, service-oriented community. The church fathers had a slogan to encapsulate the transforming power of such worship: “*Lex orandi, lex credendi*,” meaning, “As a man worships, so he believes.” While we usually think it is our theology that will shape our worship, the reverse is also true. A gospel-shaped liturgy shapes us into a gospel-shaped people. Because God has forgiven us, we forgive others. Because God has served us, we serve others. Because God has fed us His Son and clothed us in His righteousness, we are compelled to feed and clothe others. Because God has preached the gospel to us, we are led to preach it to others. A whole way of life – a “spirituality,” or a “culture” – flows out of the liturgical gathering.

Secondly, notice the corporate emphasis. We are gathered together as a family to worship God. We are not passive spectators, but active participants, offering ourselves to God in unison. Worship is an act of the whole church. We are not

simply a collection of individuals, but a body united under Christ our head. We are not gathered to watch the “religious professionals” entertain us as they “do their thing.” This has numerous implications. If our worship is to be acceptable to God, we must be in harmony with one another (Matthew 5:23-24), and our worship forms (songs, prayers, readings, responses, etc.) must encourage participation. In worship, we are to seek the edification of others (1 Corinthians 14:26). Through song, we teach and admonish one another (Ephesians 5: 18-21). We pray with and for one another. Every act of worship is done together – we confess together, call upon God together, sing together, listen together, eat together. As we learn to worship together, the prayer of the Apostle Paul is answered: “Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 15:5-6).