

CHAPTER FOUR

Liturgy: The Shape of Our Worship

EXERCISE

1. Write down an activity in your life that you do at least once a week or once a day.
2. What would happen if you stopped doing this activity?
3. If you continue in this activity faithfully, what do you hope will happen?
4. Can you recall specifically the last ten times you did this activity?

Introduction

In some circles, the word “liturgy” has a bad connotation. It can conjure up images of cold formality and rote worship. But “liturgy” comes from the Greek word *leitourgia*, which simply means the work (*ergon*) of the people (*leos*). It is sometimes translated just as “service.” For our purposes in this study, we are using the word “liturgy” to refer to the repeated corporate practices of a group of people.

Those from more informal churches might argue that their church does not have set worship practices because it is more spontaneous. But let’s examine this claim. When an individual walks into a more youthful and energetic worship service in a less traditional building, with microphones on stage and drum sets rather than choir lofts, what will their experience be? In all likelihood, there will be some background music playing, either from a recording or from the band itself. Following that will be a greeting and some sort of invitation from someone on stage to worship. Then the band will begin to play a more modern worship song, by the end playing with heightened intensity. Following this will often be a question posed to the congregation in the form of a video or dramatic presentation, such as, “What is my purpose?” or, “Does God care about suffering?” Climactically, the pastor will come on stage (to a “podium” rather than a “pulpit”) and address the congregation in an approachable,

relational way to teach the Scriptures. The sermon will end with a challenge for everyday life and the band will quietly re-emerge to lead the congregation in a final time of worship.

With some allowance for variation, this form will surely seem familiar to members or visitors of the growing number of informal evangelical churches. This description is in no way meant to be critical, but rather to illustrate the inescapable fact that every church has an order of worship that remains more or less constant from week to week and so, therefore, has a liturgy.

Discussion

The Power of Liturgy

The concern about liturgy in worship for many Christians is that they fear just “going through the motions.” So worship that has been scripted ahead of time can feel artificial and ineffectual. But all the liturgies and routines in our lives are powerful and effectual, even when we are not paying attention, because of what they form in us over time.

ILLUSTRATION

Remember that liturgy is a word to describe the corporate practices of a group of people. So consider the liturgy of attending a professional sporting event or concert. The liturgy begins as we pull up to the arena or concert hall and look for parking. It may be that we actually pay for time in a parking lot, effectively buying tickets for our vehicles as well as for ourselves. As we enter the space, we look for vendors selling food or drinks and head there immediately (we know that we will not want to get up from the performance and risk missing anything). We proceed to our seats and either celebrate or bemoan our proximity to the performance. As the game or concert begins, we enter into the spirit of the event, raising our hands or

applauding at the appropriate times, standing in silence or removing our hats at the appropriate times, and becoming outraged or moved with emotion at the proper times dictated to us as a group by the liturgy of the evening. Finally, we will collectively stand up and gather our things, feeling either satisfaction that the order of events brought us toward the beatific vision for our community or discontent that it left us only wanting. (For further study on the liturgies in our lives, see *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, by James K. A. Smith)

This is only one of the many examples of liturgy in our lives. In all these liturgies—going to a concert, shopping for clothing, shopping for cars, or even dating—we can repeatedly participate in them to the point that we are not fully engaged with our actions. This can result in these liturgies forming us in ways that we don't realize. Liturgies are powerful forces of formation in our lives.

DISCUSSION QUESTION

When we choose to enter into the liturgy of the mall, the liturgy of the sporting event, or the liturgy of social technologies, what kinds of strengths are being formed in us? What kinds of weaknesses are being formed in us? Is it possible for those strengths or weaknesses to be formed in us subconsciously?

The Hope of Liturgy

The power of liturgy also points us to the hope of liturgy. If we are humble enough to accept that our lives do have liturgies, realistic enough to embrace that our worship is liturgical by nature, and courageous enough to believe that God is at work in our lives, then we can begin to see the hope we have in the power of our liturgical practices: that if we are obedient in our practices of prayer and scripture in worship, the Holy Spirit promises to be at work in those routines and practices. He is not just at work in spontaneous moments, but also in liturgical ones.

ILLUSTRATION

The Bible repeatedly uses botanical and agricultural analogies to describe the Christian life. These metaphors (e.g., seeds, vines, branches, land, or cedars) imply that Christian

growth takes time and faithful practices. In fact, the botanical life is one in which we don't see the mechanism of growth with our eyes. We wait for it faithfully as we tend to the plant, but we only see the effects of the growth using photographs or our mind's eye as we remember the humble beginnings of our seedling.

In this way, the hope of the farmer is like the hope of the believer. While the growth may be so slow that we can't see it with our own eyes, we continue in our liturgical practices—sometimes with great care and sometimes as a matter of repetition—because we believe that, over time, God will bring the work to its full fruition.

DISCUSSION QUESTION

Do we trust that God is at work in our worship service even if we don't feel the immediate results of stirring or inspiration?

Lesson

Christian worship is powerful and effective when we seek to make our worship liturgies obedient to the Scriptures. (Psalm 103:15-22)

God promises us that he is at work in the world and that his Word will not come back void. But it can be difficult for those who work for the church vocationally, as well as for lay worship leaders, to believe this because there can be a tremendous pressure to see immediate "results" in ministry. We want to see results that can be measured at an annual meeting. We want to see results that prove people have been emotionally moved by our 75-minute worship service. This can sometimes lead us to adopt an ethic of pragmatism. We look for what is working in other churches and what is drawing the most people and try to package these strategies for use in our own worship service.

However, having established that all of our churches have a liturgy, that these liturgies direct our emotional experiences, and that ultimately these liturgies are shaping us in certain ways, we can look at our worship services with new eyes. Looking for both expression and formation in our worship service, what do we see?

How do our worship liturgies form us? Take a few moments to think about the following questions.

Does the liturgy direct us to feel comfortable the same way the movie theatre makes us comfortable? Does the liturgy direct us to feel

moved the same way a concert gives us goose bumps? Does the liturgy direct us to examine our lives using the same criteria that advertisers or psychologists give us to examine our lives? Does the liturgy direct us to affirm our cultural idolatries?

Or

Does the liturgy of the worship service direct us to be joyful about the things that make God joyful? Does our worship direct us to grieve the things that make God grieve? Does our worship direct us to examine ourselves with the criteria

that God gives us to examine ourselves? Does our worship direct us to tear down our false hopes, and replace them with eschatological hope?

Exercise

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2. What would happen if you stopped doing this activity?
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4. Can you recall specifically the last ten times you did this activity?

Discussion Question

1. When we choose to enter into the liturgy of the mall, the liturgy of the sporting event, or the liturgy of social technologies, what kinds of strengths are being formed in us? What kinds of weaknesses are being formed in us? Is it possible for those strengths or weaknesses to be formed in us without our thinking about it?
2. Do we trust that God is at work in our worship service even if we don't feel the immediate results of stirring or inspiration?

Lesson

Christian worship is powerful and effective when we seek to make our worship liturgies obedient to the Scriptures. (Psalm 103:15-22)

What are obstacles in our path to applying this lesson?

Our Dear Lord,

Our souls long for communion with You – to have a precious sense of the mystery of Your Holiness. What blessedness to be like You, as much as it is possible for a creature to be like its Creator. Lord, give us more of Your likeness. Enlarge our souls to contain fullness of holiness. Let us climb up near to You, and love and plead and wrestle with You; for our hearts are wandering and aimless. Wrap our hearts in divine love, and keep us ever desiring You with our eyes fixed on Your holiness. Amen.