

CHAPTER FIVE

Liturgy: The Practices of Our Worship

EXERCISE

Think of an important person in your life and what you do to show this person that you love him or her. Write down a favorite memory with that person.

Introduction

In the same way that beautiful relationships are made strong and healthy by various practices of love and service, so also our experiences in worship blossom out of being rooted in healthy practices.

Discussion

Five Types of Practices in Worship

We should build five kinds of practices into our worship that will help tend our relationship with God and hopefully bear the fruit of some beautiful experiences of worship with God. These practices are not mutually exclusive; they will overlap and intermingle.

1. Word Practices

Our worship should cultivate in us a deep knowledge and love of the Scriptures. This means that worship should be focused around the Bible, sermons should be expository, and our songs should put God's words into the mouths of his people.

ILLUSTRATION

One of my first jobs after graduation from college was as a music director in a small parish church in Brooklyn. The pastor had a standard liturgy each week that included an Old Testament reading, a reading from the Psalms, and a Gospel reading. I wasn't used to this much Scripture reading in a church service

and I couldn't believe they were reading a whole chapter of an Old Testament book and a whole psalm as well as something from the Gospels. This went on week after week and each week when the readings began I prepared myself to be bored. But when I went home to worship with my parents in my home church and there were no set scripture readings, I realized how much I had grown to love hearing God's Word read to me. I loved having the opportunity to meditate on it and have the words echo in my ears throughout the week. I began to understand what David meant in Psalm 119 when he says he loves the law of God and meditates on it day and night.

DISCUSSION QUESTION

Do we make time in our worship service for the reading of God's Word? Are the scriptures clearly present in our prayers and song lyrics?

2. Praise Practices

Our worship should cultivate in us the practice of praising God for who he is and what he has done. This means that our services should include prayers of praise to God, corporate praise music, and testimonies of God's work in our lives.

ILLUSTRATION

Consider the story of Job. He was faithful to God and God blessed him. But then God took the blessings from him and gave him trials of many kinds. Job's wife told him that it made sense for him to praise God in good times, but now he should curse God. Job responded, "*Though he slay me, I will hope in him.*" (Job 13:15) We learn from Job that praising God doesn't always flow from an expressive emotional experience for good that God has done in our lives, but that it is also a discipline we need to cultivate. Or as the hymn puts it, "Take my voice and let me sing, always only, for my king."

DISCUSSION QUESTION

Does our worship service proclaim praises for God's character? Does it also bear witness to the work he has done in our lives?

3. Prayer Practices

Our worship should include prayers of all kinds. This includes verbal prayers as well as meditative and contemplative prayers. And the prayers should reflect the whole range of emotions that are offered in the Psalms.

ILLUSTRATION

A common view of prayer is that it is a laundry list of needs that we bring to God. But if we look at the Psalms we see prayers of lament, doubt, joy, anger, praise, and confession as well as petition. Ambrose of Milan, a church leader in the time of the gladiators, called the Psalms "God's gymnasium of prayer." When we go the gym there are a variety of machines and exercises available to us. We tend to gravitate toward those machines or exercises that come naturally to us, not the exercises that are difficult but equally necessary. But, if we are wise, we make use of all these exercises and machines in order to become physically fit so that we can play with our family, live a healthy life, and prepare ourselves for all that life will throw at us. In the same way, the Psalms offer us many different prayers that express a variety of emotions and experiences. But we tend to pray the Psalms that come more naturally to us. Worship should teach us the languages of lament, anger, joy, and doubt so that when life throws experiences our way that bring these emotions and experiences, we know how to express them before God.

DISCUSSION QUESTION

Is prayer a filler in our worship service for transitioning us between events or is it a way for us to bring the whole range of our emotions and experiences before the Lord?

4. Action Practices

The Bible connects our worship to actions of love and justice. So our worship should cultivate opportunities to show compassion to the poor and needy among us. This includes giving our money away to be used by God for these purposes as well as praying for the needs of the

poor, the orphans, the widows, the vulnerable, the sick, and the lonely. (See sidebar for more support of this point.)

ILLUSTRATION

In Isaiah 1:15-17, God refused to receive his people's worship because their *hands are full of blood*. He said he would bring judgment on them unless they *cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause*. James 1:27 reads, *Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world*. There is a consistent message in the Bible that our worship is tied to our actions, especially toward the needy, and that we neglect this at our peril.

DISCUSSION QUESTION

Does our worship service include opportunities to pray for peace, for our community, and for God to renew our zeal to care for the "least of these"?

5. Sacrament Practices

The sacraments are visible signs of inward grace. And they provide opportunities to participate with our bodies in worship. The practices of baptism and communion in particular are instructive and participatory, and provide predictable, beautiful, and familiar structure to our worship and to our year. Whether our church takes communion and baptizes weekly, monthly, or yearly, the sacraments should be part of our worship.

ILLUSTRATION

In Matthew 28:19 and 20, Jesus tells his disciples to make disciples and baptize them *in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you*. He also gave his disciples at the Last Supper his body and blood and instructed them to *do this in remembrance of me*. (Luke 22:19) Jesus gave us sacramental worship. He did not only see our minds and emotions as needing to come under his lordship, but also our bodies.

DISCUSSION QUESTION

Are there ways that our church can incorporate the beauty of communion and baptism by talking about them or participating in them?

Lesson

Christian worship is made healthy and strong by faithful cultivation of biblical practices.
(1 Corinthians 12:1, 4-7, 13-20)

First Corinthians 12 gives us a picture of the body of Christ where every member has gifts to contribute to the good of all. Through much of history, many people had no choice of where to worship; they worshiped in the one church in their town or village. This tended to create congregations that included people who gravitated to a variety of practices, each bringing their varied gifts to bless

and sharpen one another. Now, however, because we are not limited by geography, we tend to choose churches and gravitate to worship services that are comfortable to us and where like-minded people worship. The people with strong word practices gather together, and the people with strong praise practices worship with each other. But when this happens, we miss out on the varied gifts God gives to his body. Instead of sharpening each other, we affirm each other's idolatries and ignore our collective failures. We need our brothers and sisters to use their varied gifts in worship for our benefit. For instance, we might come to church wanting to experience the joyful release of praising God while he wants us to experience giving our money away. We might want to be intellectually stimulated while God wants us to be still and meditate. God can use others to do this work in our lives. God wants to build us together into something stronger and more beautiful than what we could be alone.

Handout: Liturgy: The Practices of Our Worship

Exercise

Think of an important person in your life and what you do to show this person that you love him or her. Write down a favorite memory with that person.

Discussion Question

1. Do we make time in our worship service for the reading of God's Word? Are the scriptures clearly present in our prayers and song lyrics?
2. Does our worship service proclaim praises for God's character? Does it also bear witness to the work he has done in our lives?
3. Is prayer a filler in our worship service for transitioning us between events or is it a way for us to bring the whole range of our emotions and experiences before the Lord?
4. Does our worship service include opportunities to pray for peace, for our community, and for God to renew our zeal to care for the "least of these"?
5. Are there ways that our church can incorporate the beauty of communion and baptism by talking about them or participating in them?

Lesson

Christian worship is made healthy and strong by faithful cultivation of biblical practices.
(1 Corinthians 12:1, 4-7, 13-20)

What are obstacles in our path to applying this lesson?

Merciful God,

May our religion be always firmly rooted in Your word. May our understanding be divinely informed, our affections holy and heavenly, our motives pure, and our hearts never wrong before You. Deliver us from the natural darkness of our own minds – from the corruptions of our hearts – from the temptations to which we are exposed – from the daily snares that attend us. Until we finish our course with joy, may we pursue it with diligence and humility. Amen.