

The Future of Liturgy – An Evangelical Perspective

I love the church because I love the Gospel. **Indeed, the Gospel creates the church.** Just as God's voice has priority in calling together a people, so the Gospel has priority in establishing and interpreting the nature and activities of the church. While God's purposes for the world have their sharp focus in the justification and regeneration of individual believers through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, this particular work of God is set against God's plans to bring everything under the headship of Christ (Ephesians 1:10) and to renew all things on the Great Day of the Lord (Matthew 19:28). The church is the place where this regeneration and renewal, in other words where God's promises, God's presence and God's purposes, are most clearly encountered in this world. The liturgy is designed to convey something of these realities to the worshipping community. As Simon Chan ably summarises:

[W]e need to see ecclesiology as an intrinsic part of the doctrine of the gospel of Jesus Christ, not an administrative arrangement for the sake of securing practical results.¹

God uses the material order to effect spiritual reality, and the words, actions, shape and leadership of the weekly assembly of God's people are a profound means instituted by God to form and prepare us, and the world, for glory.

It should not be surprising then that questions concerning the *liturgy* are front and centre in contemporary debates about the church's *constitution* and *mission*. On the one hand, there are those advocates of liturgical precision, who see the liturgy ideally as the most powerful means of conveying spiritual truth to shape the people of God, and who argue that it ought to be resistant to cultural change. It becomes the bulwark against the priority of subjectivising and psychologising elements in post-modern culture.² In the taxonomy of James F. White, this approach to liturgy sees it as a beacon which lights our

¹ Simon Chan, *Liturgical Theology: The Church as Worshipping Community* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 36.

² M. Francis Mannion, 'Liturgy and the Present Crisis of Culture', *Worship* 62/2 (1988): 98-123, especially 120.

contemporary cultural darkness.³ On the other hand, some Anglicans, particularly those formed in the evangelical tradition, renounce the value of formal liturgy entirely as a mistaken strategy espousing vain repetition, cerebral pedagogy, or accommodation to an outmoded cultural style, which, in a world fast losing its moral and Christian moorings, is impotent to win men and women, boys and girls to the Lordship of Christ. The assumption then is that conversion-centred worship, expressed chiefly through the sermon, is the only appropriate response to Christian declension. We are free to adopt and adapt any means possible in the service of evangelism, and the closer those means are to those already understood and practised in the world, the better. The old principle *lex orandi lex credendi* (the law of praying is the law of believing) is upheld more in the breach than in practice by such leaders. This approach is more like holding up a *mirror* to culture than a *beacon*, and encourages culture to be reflected in our liturgical practices.⁴ **To discuss the future of liturgy is ultimately to discuss the relationship between the church and the culture in which it is embedded.**

To offer an historical and political parallel: the question of the future of the liturgy is not dissimilar to the tension which exists between the republican and democratic narratives in, for example, the United States. A republic is not necessarily democratic: it is the achievement of an elite which establishes a polity to defend the common good. It does not provide for the rights of a *monarch*, nor does it necessarily guarantee the rights of free expression for its *citizens*: the Greek city states may have been republican, but they also denied to women, children and slaves civic rights, thus disqualifying such cities as democratic or even broadly inclusive in our terms. The American Constitution, for all its extraordinary innovation and philosophical nuance, was created by a group of middle-aged men, who themselves were scions of the wealthier ranks

³ James F. White, 'Worship and Culture: Mirror or Beacon?', *Theological Studies* 35/2 (1974): 288-301.

⁴ White, 'Worship and Culture,' 288. Of course, while many evangelicals accommodate their worship style to prevailing cultural norms, they are much more resistant in terms of theological conviction, at which point they would defend their role as beacons, rather than mirrors.

of society. Though it guaranteed the rights of whites and two-thirds of blacks, it was only in the years following its adoption that the democratic impulses of the new-born nation, the decentralised politics of President Thomas Jefferson (1801-1809), then the popularist politics of President Andrew Jackson (1829-1837) emerging from frontier conditions, together put a strain on the institutions of government, and encouraged revivals of religion as well as a new national identity.⁵ Bottom-up democratic pressure revised political assumptions in the US. **Similarly, the liturgy of the Anglican Church, in Australia as elsewhere, is increasingly contested by popularist pressures in the population for the sake of mission, pushing back against what is essentially the production of a religious elite, albeit noble and edifying.** Local, often revivalist, practices win the day.

This lecture will investigate the future of liturgy in order to defend its value while exposing the dangers of cultural captivity, a danger to which both evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics fall prey. Firstly, I will contend that our *missiology* in the post-Christian West creates significant tensions with received liturgical models and yet those models are not thereby invalidated. Perhaps American revivalism's assumption of a nominally Christian society is itself no longer tenable, providing a new social space in which to appreciate liturgical forms.⁶ Secondly, I will argue that our approach to *anthropology* will ultimately shape our assumptions and conclusions concerning the value of liturgy. How our worldviews are constructed and how our hearts and minds are to be redirected will have a bearing on how liturgy should operate. Thirdly, I will outline some *concrete suggestions* as to how all kinds of Anglicans might rethink their liturgical practice, and generate new liturgical materials for our post-modern context. While I critique here one common set of reactions in

⁵ Witvliet argues that Protestant religion in American today is buffeted by popularism, pluralism, pragmatism, and pietism. See John D. Witvliet, 'The Americanization of Reformed Worship', in *Worship Seeking Understanding: Windows into Christian Practice* (ed. J. D. Witvliet; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 175.

⁶ Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996), 163.

Australian liturgical culture, examples no doubt could be produced which are less easily categorised. In the end, we must find a model of liturgy which honours the formulations of a particular age, *and* encourages contemporary contributions, insights and experience, from a variety of local contexts.⁷ **One size does not fit all.**

We need to join a Team: The Liturgy Trains Us as God's People

One of the chief concerns expressed by evangelicals regarding formal liturgies is their power to alienate. Vocabulary used in such services may be foreign, and the lack of spontaneity is felt to represent inauthentic spirituality. Repetition or recitation is thought to conform to an infantile pedagogy. A set-piece order does not take into account local needs or opportunities. The very laudable desire to engage our community and to be relevant to our culture to build bridges for the sake of the Gospel rather than to burn them down are persuasive arguments in debates concerning the future of liturgy. Missiological reasons are giving for leaving behind ossified forms. It is said that the church's mission in the world is dynamically responsive to the context in which it finds itself, so why shouldn't our liturgical aspirations be as well? Youth in particular define themselves culturally in contrast to their parents, so disallowing liturgical differences between the generations is to accept defeat in reaching the next generation for Christ. **Liturgy may nurture corporate and individual maturity, but should it be assumed that churches require no extra efforts to draw unbelievers into the fellowship?** The patently clear evidence of growth in many evangelical, or Pentecostal, churches worldwide with little to no formal liturgy seems to end the argument for many, though having nothing written down does not necessarily mean that creativity blossoms.

It is my contention however that while liturgical precision, or commitment to liturgical aesthetics as a subculture, may in certain instances

⁷ Witvliet, 'Theological Models,' 105-106.

impair broad-based reengagement with Australian society, our missiological context in twenty-first century secular Australia nevertheless necessitates some ongoing liturgical commitment, even if recalibrated. Because *our society* no longer reinforces the Christian story or Christian ethics as it once did through other social or imaginative means, the responsibility for *corporate identity* formation falls ever more heavily on *the local congregation*. God's people respond to God's voice, not just individually, but primarily as a body. It may be true that one size doesn't fit all, but there exists nonetheless a need for every congregation, no matter where it finds itself, to learn to clothe itself with corporate categories and experiences. **The liturgy trains us as God's team.** As Smith reminds us, liturgies defend 'identity-forming practices,' tell stories, and provide a vision for the 'good life' and human flourishing.⁸ We certainly need training for maturity as individuals, but liturgies do more by creating common vision, esprit de corps and a new theological culture. Clapp, who is suspicious of Constantinian ecclesiological assumptions anyway, summarizes the importance of the church as a radically new corporate identity:

The New Testament understands life in the church as a kind of resocialization, an enculturation according to the standards of the Kingdom of God rather than this world ... In its baptism the church boldly insisted that there was a kind of kinship, a particular allegiance, more significant and constitutive than that of the biological family or the state.⁹

When appealing to theological categories, liturgical forms may appeal to the doctrine of the *incarnation* to demonstrate the validity of embodying culture for the sake of mission, whether that culture is generated by English cathedrals or by the American frontier. Because Christ took flesh, it is argued, we can affirm cultural identification. It is true that material culture must be owned before it can be transformed but we must be warned against theological reductionism. Developing physical and identifiable forms for our worship, by appealing to the theological themes of creation and incarnation, is necessary, but not sufficient to reconcile missiology with liturgy. *Identification with*

⁸ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview and Cultural Formation* (Cultural Liturgies; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009)35, 109, 113.

⁹ Clapp, *A Peculiar People*, 99, 100.

culture can lead to *capitulation to culture* for evangelicals or liberal Catholics alike. More productively, however, we might embody in the liturgy doctrines assuming *discontinuities*, like atonement, Spirit, and parousia, because they create expectations of liturgy which both hold it apart from the culture, *and* push it beyond static imitation of an historical model. Chan is keen to point out that the liturgy is not merely an instantiation of the creation being used by God for spiritual ends, but is actually a dynamic event in which the life of the Holy Trinity is experienced and glorified.¹⁰ Webber argues that the future of Christian worship should build on ‘specific events in history, not some transaction that takes place outside of time, space and history’ but should ‘never be static and merely intellectual because what happens in worship is an actual and real communication of the power and saving benefit of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ ... a celebration of the work of Christ characterized by a spiritual immediacy that touches people where they are.’¹¹ **The incarnation of Christ was the *means* to the greater *ends* of atoning, reconciling, and transforming, and should not be the primary or solitary category for understanding liturgy.**

Liturgy, when addressed by theological reflection on *several doctrinal topics*, learns to sit loose to culture, begins to shape a more fully-orbed identity in the people of God, and encourages us with multiple theological imperatives to reach out for Christ’s sake. Liturgy ought to contain within itself a systematic conversation, the expectation of new conditions producing new emphases, and an overall shape that is Christological, drawing on eschatological and pneumatological themes. The church’s mission is to present everyone mature in Christ (Colossians 1:28), indeed for the body to become the ‘fulness of him who fills all in all’ (Ephesians 1:23). **These are inevitably corporate categories, dynamic and missiologically motivated.** The liturgy is ‘a rehearsal of the

¹⁰ Chan, *Liturgical Theology*, 59-61.

¹¹ Robert E. Webber, ‘The Future Direction of Christian Worship’, *Ex Auditu* 8/?? (1992): 113-128, especially 123, 116.

Christian story that takes us through the steps again and again.”¹² Ritual, expressed liturgically, is ‘above all, the assertion of difference.’¹³ Surely this won’t impede our outreach: we are holy that we might better make an impact for Christ.

We need to join a Gym: The Liturgy Trains Us as Individuals

More than forming us as a team, however, weekly liturgy also tones our individual spiritual muscles. Human beings are a bundle of thoughts, feelings, attitudes, aspirations and resolutions, sometimes one of these attributes having prominence, and sometimes another. While it may have been assumed in the modern world that our rationality guides us, defines us as image-bearers, and connects us into that which is universal, in the post-modern world, first emerging in the nineteenth century cultural movement known as Romanticism, the hegemony of reason has been overthrown. Human beings are constituted by means of the particular combination of attributes that they choose to prize or cultivate. In this new context of Christian theology, our capacity as image-bearers can be understood not merely to reflect our minds but our deputised responsibility to exercise particular rule in God’s place, wherever that may be, and to enjoy relationships with the Creator as well as with the creation. Bearing the divine image is expressed through relationships, and is more often owned as a *local* rather than a *universal* mandate. However, long before the post-Christian West owned postmodern assumptions, in the heart of the Christian West, the Puritan project in colonial America owned a reaction to Enlightenment assumptions: Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) asserted that ‘True religion in great part consists in holy affections.’¹⁴ Drawing on the anthropology of Augustine and the physics of Newton, Edwards maintained that all of me is

¹² Clapp, *A Peculiar People*, 118.

¹³ Debra Dean Murphy, ‘Worship as Catechesis: Knowledge, Desire, and Christian Formation’, *Theology Today* 58/3 (2001): 321-332/328.

¹⁴ Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections* (The Works of Jonathan Edwards 2. Edited by John E. Smith; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1969), 95.

drawn towards God, or all of me is drawn away. **Recidivist sinners need to be not just *educated* but *moved*.**

According to James Smith, the liturgy is well placed to move us as complex human beings. Rejecting the reductionist language and conceptualities of *worldview*, which privilege the cerebral, Smith expounds a ‘pedagogy of desire,’ which asserts that human beings have to be retrained to yearn for God’s Kingdom, and the retraining must address each part of my being.¹⁵ **Counter-culturally, his model assumes a creation with purpose, against which my own desires must be measured and towards which they must be conformed.** Subsequently, in *Desiring the Kingdom*, he works through a sample church service, and shows how each of its constituent elements contributes to the reorientation of a Christian’s desires. The liturgy contains challenges to my will when the Ten Commandments are read, and it contains stimulus to my imaginative solidarity when an ancient hymn is recited, and it contains a reminder of my own covenant commitments when an infant is baptised. As Debra Dean Murphy says, liturgy challenges our epistemology:

If, on the most basic level, the knowledge that Christians aspire to is, as it was for Augustine, knowledge of God and knowledge of self, then such knowledge will not leave us unchanged ... As long as our understanding or what it means to know and learn remains wedded to the modern fiction of the cool, clinically detached observer and to a view of the end of knowledge as the technical mastery of information, we fail to recognize that to learn, to know, is to be *transformed* – it is to implicate our selves, our very bodies in the actions and practices of learning and coming to know.¹⁶

Additionally, we are re-formed in church through the practice of the Scriptures being read or recited. In a world where we increasingly find that church members have not grown up going to church, and thereby have never learnt how to pray or how to interpret experience in the light of Scriptural authority, the liturgy, especially that of the Anglican tradition, immerses us in Scriptural truth. Whether it be in the crisp call to worship at the beginning of a service through a Bible verse, in a Collect designed to anchor our

¹⁵ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 112.

¹⁶ Murphy, ‘Worship as Catechesis,’ , especially 323.

praying in a season of the year, in a Cantic to encourage our praise, or in the resonances embedded within a Eucharistic prayer, Biblical metanarrative, allusions, and quotations train the individual Christian to hear and speak the Scriptures in all circumstances of life. From where else did Abraham Lincoln get the phrase “A Kingdom divided against itself..”? The very structure of services in the Prayer Book assumes readings and sermon, which are frequently overlooked in more pragmatically conceived liturgical orders. Furthermore, the public reading of the Scriptures provides one more opportunity for lay people to be actively involved in the service. Formal liturgies remind us to make connections between parts of the service using the Scriptures, not merely personality or humour.

A well-conceived liturgy provides for individual Christians an opportunity to exercise several spiritual muscles, using various apparatuses to achieve a holistic workout. It is conducted, of course, principally using the medium of words, and these frequently in printed format, though it should be remembered that words are themselves more than merely cognitive devices. Words perform many different functions in life generally, and in liturgical contexts specifically. Minds, hearts, wills and imaginations can all be engaged through the power of words. Cumulatively, words are performative apparatuses (not merely information manuals) when embedded within a ritual structure. As Leithart suggests in relation to the Lord’s Supper but appropriate more broadly: ‘[T]he effect is more a matter of “training” than “teaching.”’¹⁷ Recitation may appear puerile as a pedagogical technique to some, but even today there are parts of society where repetition is highly valued, for example amongst elite athletes, dancers, singers, musicians, as well as in daily parenting. Conversely, liturgical repetition ought not to exist merely to maintain a tradition, or become an opportunity for aesthetic indulgence. **In the end, healthy liturgical commitments must be measured by the development and increase of individual Christian maturity.** Church must not just provide

¹⁷ Peter J. Leithart, ‘The Way Things Really Ought to be: Eucharist, Eschatology, and Culture’, *Westminster Theological Journal* 59/2 (1997): 159-176, especially 175.

structures for our common life. Church must also provide challenge and redirection for my lazy and lethargic affections.

Fresh Styles of Coaching for New Spiritual Challenges

Liturgy evolves and takes root in new cultures in often surprising ways. **The Anglican Church in Australia has self-consciously tried to plant new liturgical seeds in our native soil.** We have created two new national prayer books since adopting an indigenous Anglican constitution in 1962, not to mention other liturgical resources used locally, with or without Episcopal approval. The book *An Australian Prayer Book* (1978) was published with Australian floral emblems throughout, though its successor in 1995 used a more traditional cross on its cover. The Liturgy Commission continues to draft prayers, and orders of service, which reflect local needs, for example collects for sustainable environments or for parish anniversaries. In some parishes, no book is to be found, allowing creativity, liberties and occasionally error; in other parishes, a book is used to provide shape for weekly worship, though not one approved by diocesan synods or the General Synod, and so not conforming to Anglican formularies. Many bishops have been disinclined to discipline liturgical variance, opening the floodgates to experimentation, renewal, and sometimes theological declension. To defend the value of liturgy is not yet to determine what kind of liturgy is used. I would like to see myself as a liturgical coach, nurturing liturgy in evangelical parishes in the following ways.

First of all, it has to be acknowledged that the invention of the internet and the proliferation of screen culture in the West has led to liturgy used in piecemeal fashion. We can cut and paste our favourite prayers from services which were designed as distinct integrities into our own eclectic service order. It may lead to language used in different registers in the same service, or vocabulary repeated or avoided, but it is often appreciated because the format is thereby fresh. We have an increasing intolerance of boring predictability. The same, of course, is also true for our song selection. Once we had a single book from which to choose our hymns. Now many churches have given up on buying

expensive hymnals for the congregation, but instead print out songs for the pew sheet, or project a variety of songs onto a screen. We can no longer assume that a single text will itself be the determining theological structure for the service, even if that would be our preference. Liturgical variety and innovation are likely to be valued more highly than a unitary source. Being Anglican will look more and more dissimilar in detail, though this is of course already the case within the Anglican Communion encompassing much of the globe. A high control culture is already competing with a high trust culture, at least in the West. ***The future will be appreciating local forms.***

Second, the place and value of preaching will undoubtedly need to increase in this new world. Even where formal liturgical appreciation is high, our engagement with unbelievers or new converts will require of pastors and priests an awareness and ability to speak into their lives in the sermon more directly, for the liturgy is more subtle and makes its mark within a longer timeframe: its *raison d'être* is patient nurture rather than critical challenge. Biblical illiteracy has grown massively in the last thirty years with the demise of Sunday schools, youth groups, diocesan fellowships, and Scripture taught in schools; this trend will only continue. Less formal liturgical assumptions have adversely affected the amount of Scripture reading in weekly services, often reduced to just one reading, which the preacher will expound in his sermon. Some churches, not usually Anglican, have no readings at all. In this environment, Scriptural *vocabulary* or *categories* will in the short-term still be used, and appeal will be made to the *authority* of the (inspired and inscripturated) Word of God, but what will be harder, if less Scripture is read or no Bibles are available in the pews, will be to make connections in the sermon between the *text* of the Scriptures and the *lives* of the hearers, and to teach Biblical hermeneutics. Longer term, evangelicals may fall prey to more practical or therapeutic preaching, providing life lessons rather than encounter with God through his own words. Furthermore, to fail to read the Psalms in public worship, and thereby to miss the opportunity to engage with an extraordinarily large range of emotions in a world which prizes them so highly, is to give

permission to the atrophying of spiritual experience. ***The future will be defending Scriptural content and exposition.***

Third, it will be the *shape of the service* which becomes more important than the *individual elements* within it, to form the people of God. To take us on a spiritual, emotional and theological journey, the service leader, often a lay person, will need to be well schooled in *preparing* the shape of the service, and in *guiding* us through it on a given Sunday with their own skills in communication and understanding. To create tension, suspense and resolution, to teach justification by grace through faith through the penitential phase of the service, to deal with distractions and to choose songs intelligently, to provide not just crowd control but to motivate and to move, to own distinctive theological vocabulary while being friendly to newcomers and outsiders: all these must be part of the kitbag of those in liturgical leadership. It will not be the format of an approved and printed text which will provide the necessary structure. The group identity of the people of God will depend increasingly on the pedagogical formation and spiritual insights of individual leaders, whether lay or ordained. The Colleges will therefore have a greater role to empower broader liturgical competencies than merely to teach priestly actions or Eucharistic subtleties. ***The future will be more intensive education for preparation of services.***

Fourthly, the Liturgy Commission of the General Synod will need to grasp the nettle, and authorise an increasing variety of texts (which nevertheless conform to Anglican theological standards), and not just for occasional uses. For example, I have a particular passion to produce texts for the Great Thanksgiving which deliberately draw on the vocabulary and themes of individual books of the Bible, to draw the liturgy into dialogue with a sermon series, and to relate sacramental theology to each part of the Bible. Proper prefaces make connections between the Lord's Supper and the church calendar, but there may be other ways in which we can create synergies to reinforce theological and corporate identity. The Commission may need to play an increasingly educative role, to train lay leaders, to empower theological

reflection on what makes liturgy distinctively Anglican, and to write not just with new pastoral situations in mind, but with conceptually diverse prayers for a variety of local contexts. *The future will be a less recognisable Anglicanism.*

Fifthly, the future of liturgy will need to recognise the powerful impact that the evangelical, occasionally revivalist tradition, has had within the Anglican church. Democratic populism has to learn to sit comfortably within the elitist republican lounge room, both from the perspective of those agitating for change and from the perspective of the more traditional liturgical elders. The charismatic impulse can't merely be put back in the bag. Technological innovation in church services is here to stay. Therapeutic and consumerist culture in the West is likely to remain our conversation partner, perhaps our adversary, in all things liturgical for the foreseeable future. The evangelistic imperative will only become more pressing in a post-Christian world. How useful therefore is the Apostle Paul's reminder, using *liturgical* language, that our *priestly* duty is most sharply expressed in *bringing the Gospel of God to Gentiles*, that their offering might be acceptable and sanctified by the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:16). Cultural adaptation, with an eye to evangelistic service, is not necessarily at odds with liturgical forms, though in this area, as in many others in the church, we look for leaders who are ready for the challenge. *The future is already here.*

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