

Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

Vol. XVIII, No. 1

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January/February 1994

CRITICAL MASS

Part XVII: Liturgy and Church Growth

by Gary North

And when they had sung an hymn, they went out into the mount of Olives (Matt. 26:30).

There is almost nothing in the New Testament regarding liturgy. There are fewer guidelines for liturgy than for any other aspect of the church. Yet there are vast libraries of books on liturgy.

They do not agree who search for a detailed model for liturgy are forced to turn to the Old Testament – seemingly a theonomic approach to the Bible. Yet the reality is this: the New Covenant decisively breaks with the Mosaic Covenant's sacrificial system, and the recorded Mosaic liturgy was built around those centralized temple sacrifices.

Nevertheless, liturgical churches do appeal to the Mosaic law for their traditions. The more detailed and self-conscious they are in their formal liturgy, the more they base their case on examples from the Old Covenant. Yet we know almost nothing about what the synagogue system did. There may have been weekly meetings, but there is no clear testimony in the Old Testament about this. The Jews were required to bring their tithes to a local storehouse (Mal. 3), but this tells us nothing about forms of worship. In Jesus' day, Jews read from the Scriptures in local synagogues (Luke 4). But as to what they sang, we do not know. Musical notation was a medieval invention, so no trace of pre-medieval melodies or rhythms has survived. God stripped away all pre-Christian music in the West. What we know of the music of the ancient world is confined to lyrics.

What is my point? Simple: churches fight over music and liturgy, but there is little New Testament evidence to support any of the combatants. That which is central to formal corporate worship – liturgy – has almost no New Testament guidelines. The so-called New Testament **regulative principle** is a Presbyterian folk myth. If I am wrong about this, then where are the New Testament's clear-cut answers for these obvious questions: Should we meet only on Sunday evenings, as the disciples did on resurrection day (Luke 24:29-35)? Should preachers preach until midnight, as Paul did (Acts 20:7)? Should we get rid of our Sunday schools? Should we get rid of musical notation in our hymnals? Should we get rid of hymnals altogether? What about standing up and sitting down? What about responsive readings? What about kneeling? What about kneeling rails? (Are they a sell-out to "weak-kneed Christians"?) What about printed prayers? What about the recitation of a creed? What about altar calls? What about speaking in tongues when there is no second-party translator? What about baptism? (Why isn't this done in homes, as was true of the Philippian jailer?) What about the Lord's Supper: Wine or grape juice, leavened bread or unleavened? Those

Presbyterians who cling most dearly to the so-called regulative principle of worship are exclusive psalm singers. They do not tolerate hymns during formal worship. Some even reject musical instruments.

The only thing that absolutely is required by the New Testament – that we greet each other with a holy kiss (Rom. 16:16; I Cor. 16:20; II Cor. 13:12; I Thess. 5:26) – no modern church does. In short, there is no New Testament regulative principle that comes close to covering the whole of weekly church worship; denominational tradition prevails everywhere.

Liturgy and Theology

There are probably more church battles over liturgy than over doctrine. Consider the early days of the Puritan movement. What were the fundamental dividing issues? Were they theological? Hardly. The Anglican Church's thirty-nine articles were Calvinistic. Four key issues were the burning ecclesiastical issues of the day: the clergyman's surplice, the legitimacy of wedding rings, the legitimacy of coming forward to take communion at a railing, and tracing the sign of the cross on the forehead at baptism. (See J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness* [Crossway, 1990], p. 53.) Because the English Puritans could not abide by these four practices, they destroyed the unity of the Anglican Church.

Meanwhile, they said nothing about Erastianism: the king as the lawful head of the English church – or worse, the queen. This was not a matter for public discussion. Everyone in the Church accepted this theological and ecclesiastical abomination.

But weren't the early Puritans men of conscience? Yes; but they were not men of common sense. They strained at liturgical gnats and swallowed the Erastian camel. In Oliver Cromwell's day, they fought a life-and-death battle over theology, which was also a life-and-death struggle over politics. Two generations earlier, however, Puritans had sought to rend God's church over theological trifles. (Note: it is the writings of these early Puritans that have been reprinted by the pietistic neo-Puritan movement, e.g., Banner of Truth. Cromwell is never mentioned.)

Yet liturgy is ultimately a reflection of theology. In a broad sense, there is a correlation between what men believe about God, man, law, and time and how they worship. Eastern Orthodox liturgy is what it is because of the comparatively non-judicial, mystical, and kenotic (representative suffering) aspects of the Eastern Church's theology. The far less structured Baptist worship service is what it is because of the nominalist nature of the Baptists' theology of the sacraments: memorials rather than judicial events.

Liturgy also reveals church authority. The question, "Who's

in charge here?" can be answered by a close examination of the liturgy. Baptists have a decentralized polity and a decentralized liturgy. They shout "Amen!" They can also fire the pastor. Denominations that do not permit or at least unofficially discourage "Amening" also tend to have various centralized restrictions on the hiring or firing of pastors.

Consider the Roman Catholic Church. The radicals and liberals in the Church in the 1960's knew what they had to do to uproot and replace their traditionalist opponents: abandon the Latin mass. This liturgical strategy accompanied the assault on traditional Catholic dogma, and it was far more important institutionally than dogma. The abandonment of the Latin mass was the sign to all (except a handful of backward-looking Protestants still fighting sixteenth-century battles) that the Roman Church had made a decisive break with the past. This was the message sent liturgically to laymen. Pope John XXIII had replaced Pius XII, and Paul VI then replaced John. The Roman Church will never be the same.

The fact is, an assault on liturgical tradition will face far more resistance in most denominations than an assault on officially held theology. For instance, there will be far more resistance to a typical Baptist preacher who seeks to abandon the service-ending altar call – an invention of American revivalist Presbyterian Charles G. Finney in the 1830's – than if he starts preaching theistic evolution or Barthian existentialism. I suspect that a charismatic preacher who stopped preaching about tongues could get away with this far more easily than if he tried to substitute the *Trinity Hymnal* for the spiral-bound praise book, or a *capella* singing for the guitar, drums, and piano combo. For the sake of better music he would be out of a job.

(Note: I much prefer the *Trinity Hymnal*, but from the point of view of the regulative principle of worship, a charismatic praise book is probably a lot closer to the New Testament church's practice: no musical notation, simple melodies, no harmony. By God's grace, Isaac Watts did not honor the regulative principle.)

Two-Track Membership and Two-Track Liturgy

In any congregation, there are two membership tracks: by birth and by evangelism, draftees and volunteers. There are therefore two liturgical pressures: grandpa's liturgy and Christian radio's "top-40" liturgy, i.e., the lowest common cultural denominator for a particular ethnic-national church.

If a church ceases to meet the demands of those who grew up with grandpa's liturgy, it will lose support from its long-term members. It will lose its experienced, tithing members. But if a church refuses to respond at all to contemporary tastes in music and worship, it will die of attrition or become totally dependent on the congregation's birth rate. The Mennonites can afford to take this risk: they do not allow birth control. The Roman Catholics used to be able to risk this, for the same reason. **Contraceptives have forced modern churches to find ways to integrate some aspects of popular culture into their liturgies if they intend to grow.**

Some traditional denominations prefer not to grow. These are tiny denominations, and intensely proud of it. Their operational slogan is: "Shrinking for Jesus!" They defend their traditional liturgies in the name of traditional theology. In these circles, church growth is presumed guilty until proven innocent: the Napoleonic Code approach to church growth. A pastor whose congregation is growing knows that those

pastors with stagnant or shrivelling congregations whisper that he is a compromiser – theologically, culturally, or both. How else could his congregation be growing?

In a profit-seeking business, managers know that long-term survival is based on gaining new customers. The really sophisticated managers know that high profitability rests on satisfying existing customers. So, a well-managed established business concentrates more heavily on the demands of existing customers than the demands of yet-to-be-recruited customers. But to ignore the demands of potential new customers is always suicidal in the long run. Both groups must be satisfied. The larger the existing customer base, the more attention must be paid to keeping existing customers satisfied. Small businesses will die soon if they do not gain new customers fast. Large businesses will die later if they do not gain new customers slowly. (Think: Wal-Mart vs. Sears; Compaq vs. IBM.)

Like a computer software company that refuses to upgrade its software often enough, so is a congregation that clings to its traditional liturgy. Similarly, like a software company that upgrades its latest programs by making each upgrade incompatible with the installed base of earlier versions, so is the large, established congregation that tries to keep pace with "top-40" Christian culture. At some point, the installed base gets too large to ignore.

How can congregations keep growing? By acknowledging the reality of both the "installed base" and the need for constant "upgrades." The two groups must remain satisfied. The safest way to do this is to make two morning worship services available: a 9 a.m. service for old-timers and an 11 a.m. worship service for potential converts – the walking wounded of modern American culture. To put it instrumentally, organs at 9 a.m.; guitars at 11 a.m. To put it symbolically, liturgical meat at 9 a.m.; liturgical milk at 11 a.m. Sunday school comes in between.

To put it in "bottom line" terms, tithers will tend to worship at 9 a.m. Enthusiastic evangelizers will worship at 11 a.m. As people mature in the faith, they tend to evangelize less. After six months in a congregation, new members tend to break away from their non-Christian circle of friends and move into church circles. Evangelism is automatically reduced unless systematic evangelism training is part of the local congregation's growth strategy, which it should be but is not in traditional liturgy denominations. This is why traditional liturgy denominations will shrink unless, like the Lutherans, they operate day care centers. (Lutheran churches run thousands of day care centers, which is why Lutheranism keeps growing.) For a traditional liturgy church to grow, it either has to outlaw contraceptives or start day cares or pre-schools. (The second approach is easier to sell to church members.) If it does neither, "top-40" liturgy churches will win. The kingdom of God will suffer.

Conclusion

The struggle for ecclesiastical survival is inescapably a struggle over liturgy. Whatever the traditional standard is, higher church liturgy is what retains the loyalty of members who were born in the church, while lower church liturgy is what attracts new members. Ignore either, and the "top-40" churches will win by default. So will the Christian ghetto's lowest common denominator.

Christian Reconstruction is published six times a year, alternating with **Biblical Economics Today**. It is published by the Institute for Christian Economics, a non-profit, tax-exempt educational organization. A free six-month subscription is sent to those who ask to be put on the mailing list. **Subscriptions:** P.O. Box 8000, Tyler, TX 75711. Donations are fully tax deductible. Checks should be made out to **Institute for Christian Economics**.