

Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

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Critical Mass

Part XXIII: Liturgy: Grammar, Dialect, and Accent

Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language. And they were all amazed and marvelled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galilaeans? And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born? (Acts 2:6-8).

If listeners cannot understand the gospel, they will not be saved. This is a simple proposition. It undergirds every translation of the Bible. The Bible is accessible to almost no one in its original languages, especially the all-capital Greek letters, no spaces between words, original New Testament manuscripts. Hardly anyone reads fluently in both Hebrew and Greek, including the vast majority of seminary professors who pretend they can. But the Bible can be accurately translated into every language without losing its original message.

In contrast, the Koran is regarded by Muslims to be a book incapable of precise translation. The Muslim who wants access to the full truth of the Koran is told to learn to read Arabic. Christians have never regarded the Bible's original languages as uniquely sacrosanct. Nevertheless, Presbyterian seminaries (but very few others) used to require their graduates to read Hebrew and koiné Greek, i.e., pass a series of exams in these two languages shortly before forgetting them. In other words, certain denominations recognized that the universal accessibility of the Bible in translation does not deny the reality of the specialized need for a handful of people to read the Bible in the original languages. We need both.

What no denomination has acknowledged is that this principle of broad and narrow applies to liturgy as well as to the Bible. None acknowledges that one liturgy is more appropriate for large numbers of members, but a different liturgy is necessary for those more skilled in the matters of formal worship. This blind spot remains an enormous hindrance to the spread of the gospel.

The Grammar of Liturgy

Every language has a grammar. The structure of the language is what makes communication possible. Grammar identifies a language as a separate tongue. So it is with worship.

If formal Christian worship is universal, then Christian liturgy must also be universal. What is there in every liturgy that any Christian in every era should recognize? These fall into four categories: singing, prayer, sacraments, and preaching.

There must be a universal theological content of teaching. Historically, this content has been summarized by the creeds of the church: Apostles, Nicene, and Chalcedonian. Trinitarian

creeds have unified the church: point one of the biblical covenant. There has never been universal agreement on the other four points: government, law, sacraments, and eschatology.

When should the grammar of faith be taught in formal worship? In the main worship services. This is the case for always reciting a short creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments. But the division of labor should also be honored in liturgy. There is more to liturgy than grammar.

The Dialect of Liturgy

Every widely dispersed language has dialects. These dialects distinguish specific national or regional subdivisions within the overall linguistic group. Punctuation and spelling may vary considerably. In medieval times, travel and communication were limited. Dialects varied so much that people in the same nation could barely understand each other, even in a nation as small as Holland. People are rooted in their dialects. They find it very difficult to be comfortable speaking another dialect. A new dialect must be learned and practiced.

Churches have dialects: unique ecclesiastical traditions and confessions. People who have been raised in one tradition are uncomfortable in another unless they came to Christ in the context of a new tradition and have rejected the earlier one.

The dialect of liturgy may be regional, but it is always historical. For a local church to identify its unique service proposition, it must identify its tradition. A local church dare not say that one tradition is as good as any other for every user, any more than a profit-seeking firm can advertise that every rival company's product line is as good as any other for every buyer. A church that fails to identify and emphasize its unique tradition or unique way of worshipping God will not survive the competition. If all churches are equal, then why switch? Or why join a small, struggling church when a large, influential church is available? If one church says that all churches are equal, and another church warns the prospect that its message is crucial, who is the prospect more likely to believe? Which message will create loyal members?

The dialects of faith are reflected in formal confessions. These confessions are more detailed than the historic creeds. Ordained leaders of a denomination must swear allegiance to one of these confessions, whereas a layman does not. The layman is not expected to master the church's dialect to the degree that a minister is.

To maintain a unique service proposition, the dialect must be passed down to the next generation. The dialect is imparted in the church's catechism for children. It is taught in membership classes. It is taught in evening teaching services.

The Accent of Liturgy

Every linguistic dialect has regional accents. Some accents are sharply defined. Others are more general. In the United States, the universal accent is called the Ohio accent. It is the accent of network television news anchormen. During a television interview in the United States, former Beatle John Lennon once ridiculed the upper class British accent by announcing "Hello. I'm from nowhere." He prided himself on having retained his lower class accent. But when the Beatles sang, they did not sing in "Liverpudlian." In group singing, regional accents normally disappear: the larger the group, the less distinguishable the accent. The more precise the enunciation – vital for large choirs to communicate the words – the less distinguishable the accent.

Accent is a product of a regional culture or a subculture. It fits into a pattern of acceptable behavior: etiquette. In *My Fair Lady*, Henry Higgins sought to prove that accent is destiny. But is this assumption correct? The hilarious scene at the race track was designed to show that accent has its limits. Eliza's small talk was perfectly accentuated, but its content did not fit. Higgins then had to work on the content of her speech, not her accent, before he could pass her off as royalty at the grand ball. The play does not show how he did this. He himself did not fit into upper class society – another theme of the play. Class is reflected in accent, but it is not limited to accent.

I once saw a very brief and very funny comedy routine by comedian Steve Landsberg which began with a question: What would a Jew reared in the South sound like? He did an early Andy Griffith version of a man getting ready for synagogue. "Mabel, we gonna be late. Yah'all got to get movin'." The humor was based on an assumption: Jews, even if they live in the South, are not of the South, and their accents reveal this fact. The thought of a Jew who sounds like Andy Griffith is funny because it reinforces our assumption that Jews do not integrate into "foreign" cultures. The mark of integration is accent.

A similar joke was George Carlin's remark that when he grew up in an Irish neighborhood in New York City on the border of a black ghetto, the Irish guys would say to the blacks, "Hey, man, what's happenin'?" The integration was all one way. He never heard a black say, "Top o' the mornin' to yuh!"

Every congregation has a liturgical accent. The question is: Does it fit the regional accent? A Greek Orthodox church in the middle of some southern town would not fit. It would exclude more people than it includes. This would not bother the congregation; Greek Orthodox churches are not evangelical. If they were, members would suffer great frustration. Non-Greeks rarely submit to a two-hour liturgy in ancient Greek.

All high church liturgies were developed in illiterate societies in which church membership was legally compulsory. These were established churches. The reaction against establishmentarianism and Catholicism was accompanied by low church liturgies. Universal literacy also accelerated the replacement of high church repetitive responses and prayers.

New England Congregationalism was low church from the beginning. The upper class South was high church; so was New York. The Civil War's defeat replaced Episcopalianism's influence in the South, as well as Presbyterianism's influence; these churches had provided the region's cultural leadership. Presbyterianism has a mid-church liturgy. It prevailed in the western areas of the colonial states, especially after the first Great

Awakening (1740-1750). The United States became progressively low church after the American Revolution. Baptists and Methodists dominated the revivals of the second Great Awakening (1800-1859). Presbyterian and Episcopalian ordination required so much education that they could not meet the demand. They never caught up after 1800.

Protestant liturgies in growth-oriented evangelical churches have become progressively more entertainment-oriented, although entertainment was always a powerful element of the post-1800 revivals. Revivalism's tent meetings have always had a circus element about them. Lower class people who have not been reared as Roman Catholics initially respond better to lower church liturgies. They feel more comfortable. The division today between Pentecostals and charismatics has more to do with liturgy than theology, status rather than confession.

The Unity of Liturgy

Regional accents disappear in church singing. When choir members open their mouths wide and use controlled breathing to project, the accent becomes universal. I once spoke at a large meeting in Jamaica. The man next to me was British. When over a thousand Jamaicans were singing, I asked him: "What accent do you hear, American or Jamaican?" He said: "American." He meant Ohio. It is the accent I hear when a British choir sings. I think we all hear the same thing, like the listeners in Acts 2. The choir sounds the same – familiar – to all of us. We do not notice that it does not have a regional or national accent.

It is singing that unites the dialects and accents of liturgy. Common music bonds churches across the boundaries of geography and time. No better way exists to create a sect than to isolate its members from the common hymns of the church. No better way exists to shrink a confessionally orthodox church.

Conclusion

A church must decide: Is its commitment to its dialect greater than its commitment to growth? Is its traditional liturgy more important than the harvesting of souls at 11 a.m.? The way for a dialect-driven church to do both – maximize growth and tradition – is either to remain in a region where the church's dialect has for over a century participated in the shaping of the regional cultural accent, or to go where its culturally identifiable members have moved: a ghetto church.

General rule: **high liturgy = low evangelism**. High churches rely on a trickle of members of other traditions who mature and then abandon their cultural and theological accents and dialects. The pejorative phrase for this is **sheep-stealing**. But all churches inevitably steal sheep when they advertise – yes, **advertise** – their unique service proposition to the lost; local sheep do switch shepherds. The question is: Do most new members come mainly from other churches? If so, the church is a scavenger church. It will die if its regional host churches die. This is a risky way to grow in an era of declining faith.

In a low church culture, high church and mid-church liturgies alienate most visitors. To maintain a high church dialect and also grow, a church must be willing to adopt a lower church liturgy – the region's accent – for its 11 a.m. worship service. Very few traditional churches have done this, which is why most of them are either shrinking, going liberal – form without substance – or both.

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