Why Evangelicals Think They Hate Liturgy

By D.G. Hart

One of the common ways of configuring the world of American Protestantism is to divide it along the lines of worship practice. Accordingly, there are liturgical and non-liturgical churches. What makes communions liturgical is their use of prayer books, set forms for worship, ministers dressing in garb different from the congregation (gowns or robes), an occasional processional and recessional to begin and end the service, the weekly observance of the Lord's Supper, and generally a sober and dignified mood in worship. Most typically we think of evangelicals as having perfected the non-liturgical worship service. Evangelicals are non-liturgical because they refrain from those very elements that characterize liturgical worship: prayers offered extemporaneously, the avoidance of routine or prescribed orders of worship, ministers dressing in suits or sometimes even more informally, no special festivity to mark the beginning or end of the worship service, a lengthy sermon beginning in almost clock-like fashion at the middle of the service, the occasional celebration of the Lord's Supper (monthly or bi-monthly), and a casual atmosphere.

The Liturgy of the Great Commission

But evangelical hostility to liturgy, in the sense of balking at formality, decorum, and sobriety in worship, came well before the rise and appeal of charismatics. One of the first threats to accepted patterns of worship, whether Lutheran, Reformed, Episcopalian, Quaker or even Anabaptist, occurred during the triumph of revivalism and mass evangelism. This victory happened not with the crusades of Charles Finney during the Second Great Awakening (1820's and 1830's)-Finney merely built upon assumptions about worship that had been forged almost a century earlier. Rather, the origins of mass evangelism can be traced to the efforts and practices of George Whitefield and his supporters during the First Great Awakening (1740's). Few historians of that revival study Whitefield's liturgy, and for good reason. The settings in which Whitefield spoke, whether out in the field, in the market, or within a church (the latter were rare because church buildings could not accommodate large crowds), were not services of worship to the triune God of the Bible. Instead, they were vehicles designed to move individuals to an experience of converting grace. Whitefield's audiences may have sung praise, he may have led them in prayer and confession of sin, and he might even have begun with an invocation, but the chief reason why people came to hear him was to hear his message, not to worship God. For this reason the modern equivalent of Whitefield's revivals is not a church service but rather the mass meetings sponsored by Promise Keepers.

Of course, we cannot blame the excesses of revivalism on Whitefield, whose theology was Calvinistic in outline. Charles Finney codified the standard feature of a revival, one which has become the one piece of evangelical liturgy, namely, the altar call (though Methodist circuit riders could rightly claim this innovation for themselves). But while the altar call used to be reserved for the revival meeting and is still the way Billy Graham closes his services, it eventually became a regular part of evangelical worship. This is why it became a standard practice for evangelical churches to conclude sermons with an invitation by the pastor to come forward to accept Christ or rededicate oneself to a holy life, and with the seemingly endless repetition of the verses of "Just As I Am," to induce sinners and lapsed saints out of the security of their pews. Rather than following the sermon with the celebration of the Lord's Supper, where believers would come forward to table or rail to receive Christ in the elements of bread and wine, with the advent of revivals evangelicals would come forward to meet Christ in the form of the altar call.

Just as destructive was revivalism in re-configuring the purpose of worship. Worship in evangelical circles has been oriented primarily to reaching the lost rather than in ascribing kingdom, power, and glory to God. Once the gathering of the saints and the proclamation of the Word becomes chiefly a way to reach the lost, worship moves from its properly God-centered-orientation to one where pleasing men and women, preferably the lost (or in today's lingo, "seekers"), becomes the overarching goal.

Worship as Homeroom

While revivalism upended Protestant patterns of worship wherever it went, thus making evangelicals hostile to accepted liturgies and redefining the meaning of worship, it has also proved to be destructive to a proper understanding of the work of the church. One of the curious features of the relatively recent novelties associated with church growth is the decline of the altar call in churches desiring to reach unchurched Harry and Harriet. This is curious because the first seeker-sensitive ministers and churches were those who took an active interest in the work of revivals. Revivals, after all, were the way to reach the lost. But in an era of refined consumer tastes and sharp competition for market share, altar calls don't appear to be the most effective anymore. Why would the owners of a half-a-million dollar home in the suburbs want to subject themselves to the embarrassment of walking down the aisle to pray a prayer of conversion in a place where they are strangers? These same homeowners would probably be just as reluctant at a local meeting of the PTA to walk down to the front at the end of the meeting to volunteer for assisting with the school lunch program. Such a leaving of the seat is a bit too uncomfortable and exacting for consumers who want the comforts of faith without the commitments.

Consequently, the strategy of many churches that want to grow and make an impact (or "transform the culture," in Reformed lingo) is to sponsor a variety of programs designed to meet the felt needs of residents in the vicinity. This way of growing the local church has had a profound effect upon worship and says volumes about the way evangelicals regard the task of the church. If the real work of the church is the ministry that all the saints perform for each other throughout the week, whether in Christian aerobics class, story hour for pre-schoolers, classes on parenting for first-time fathers and mothers, or even the more legitimate evening Bible study, then the weekly gathering of the saints on the Lord's Day takes on a much different character and purpose. Word and sacrament, the traditional marks and purposes of the church, and as the Westminster Shorter Catechism describes them, "the outward and ordinary means whereby God communicates to us the benefits of redemption," become less important. Ministry is no longer defined by these means of grace, but rather shifts to all of the things that believers do in times of fellowship and support groups. (This is not to say that fellowship and support are unimportant, but only to note that fellowship and support are things that spheres such as the family and neighborhood also provide and may not be at the heart, but more the fruit, of the church's ministry.) In the process, worship becomes, not a time for the proclamation of the Word in preaching and sacrament, but rather a time to rally support for all of the programs of the church. In other words, worship in the "successful" church becomes homeroom.

Homeroom, as all graduates of public high schools know, is that time usually at the beginning of the school day where the logistics of the educational enterprise are addressed. The teacher takes attendance, pupils say the Pledge of Allegiance, administrators or teachers make announcements about upcoming school events and programs, and the time provides an opportunity for other record-keeping activities. In many churches this is exactly what worship has become. The attendance pads at the end of pews provide a record of individuals present for church. Praise songs projected overhead become the equivalent of the Pledge of Allegiance. And the announcements that come in a variety of forms perform the function of, well, announcements. It is interesting to note the many ways in which

announcements come in evangelical worship. Not only do ministers or various heads of committees talk about upcoming events in the church. But testimonies, or people talking about the work of God in their lives, also become plugs for a specific program in the congregation. Then there is the time for recognizing or even commissioning various workers in the church, whether Sunday School or Vacation Bible School teachers, which also serves to draw attention to church programs and the need for more laborers.

The significant difference between evangelical worship and public high school homeroom is the collection of the offering and the pastor's message. Public schools have real estate taxes to rely upon and so have no need to pass the plate in homeroom unless, of course, there is a field trip not covered by the annual budget. Public schools also have the sense to put lectures in real class time, not having it mixed up with the details of operating the school. But the message in evangelical worship does provide a valuable vehicle by allowing the pastor to give a pep talk which will inspire church members to become involved in the weekly activities of the congregation. In the process, the means of grace become the means of motivation. Rather than regarding the proclamation of the word, again as the Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it, as the way of "convincing and converting sinners and of building them up in holiness and comfort," preaching has become a tool for inspiring believers to become involved in the real work of the church, that is, all of the activities and programs throughout the week. As a result, preaching and the other elements of worship, indeed, the whole liturgy, suffer. People no longer see them as the means of being nurtured in the Faith, but instead perceive "special ministries" as the way of reaching out, growing the church, and making members more devout.

Spiritual Positivism

The mention of devoutness brings up the question of what counts for devotion in evangelical circles. And this question also has important implications for why evangelicals do not care for liturgy, whether in the sense of an ethos of formality and sobriety, or in the sense of using prayer books, hymnals, Scripture lessons, and exegetical preaching. For the way that evangelicals have come to judge whether devotion or piety is genuine stems from a faulty view of religious experience.

Evangelicals have for almost three centuries now distrusted the formal and the routine in worship. They discount forms in worship because they insist that genuine piety or faith must be expressed in an individual's own words. The idea that a believer would use the language of the Westminster Confession of Faith to express his own faith, or the fact that a believer would use prayers written by dead Christians suggests that someone is going through the motions and hasn't experienced a real outpouring of grace which would automatically express itself in personal and intimate language. Thus, evangelicals often ridicule the elements of various liturgies as dead and boring. Real Christian experience comes alive in new and different words, and the more emotional and intimate those words are, the better. Evangelicals are also suspicious of routine in worship for similar reasons. Order or set patterns of worship, according to evangelicals, restrict or confine the movement of the Holy Spirit. It doesn't seem to matter that these elements may be precisely the means that God uses to bring people to himself. If there are some people who don't respond well to the various elements of worship, such as the unchurched, then we need to find new ways of worship that will allow seekers to be moved by the Spirit.

The irony, of course, is that even the most seemingly spontaneous and informal worship can be just as formal and routine as the highest of Anglo-Catholic services. Again, anytime there is an order of service, even if only 30 minutes of praise songs, 30 minutes of talking by the pastor, and 20 minutes for prayer, announcements and offering, then worship is not spontaneous. Also, what evangelicals so often fail to remember is that outward expressions

of piety, whether the hymn, "A Mighty Fortress," or the praise song, "Majesty," do not guarantee or determine the state of the singer's heart. A participant in the most charismatic of services can fake waving hands, speaking in tongues, and falling in laughter on the floor just as much as the Presbyterian can fake recitation of the Nicene Creed, praying the Lord's Prayer, and paying attention to the sermon. None of us can see into the human heart. All we have to go on are outward appearances or a credible profession of faith. Worshiping in a particular manner does not indicate the state of the soul. Once this truth is conceded, once it is a given that all worship will be formal in some sense because we can't help but use forms in worship (again speaking in tongues is as much a form as a corporate prayer of confession), the question then becomes which forms of worship does God reveal to us are the forms we should use. The answer to that question is not announcements, testimonies, and special music. Rather the elements or forms of worship revealed in Scripture are the reading and preaching of the Word, prayer, singing of praise, and the administration of the sacraments.

But these forms are not satisfying to evangelicals, hence their hostility to liturgy. These forms are unsatisfying because evangelicals want absolute certainty in knowing who is and who isn't a real Christian. Because forms are not good barometers of the state of the human heart, evangelicals have looked for other clues. And the clue that seems to be the most convincing is experience, especially a religious experience which testifies to a dramatic and immediate work of God in the individual's life. Conversion filled the bill for a long time. But then came the second blessing of perfection, and with it speaking in tongues and, most recently, holy laughter. Whatever the manifestation, evangelicals want direct proof of God's activity. This activity has to be visible, a dramatically changed life or an extraordinary display of piety. Thus, evangelicals, despite their seemingly mystical stress on experience are really closet positivists. They need a physical manifestation of grace to be convinced that it has occurred and cannot be content with expressions of grace that may be formal, routine, restrained, and conventional. This conclusion only confirms David Bebbington's suggestive observation that evangelicalism originated at the same time as the Enlightenment and adopted criteria for spiritual truth that were remarkably similar to standards for truth scientists used in the natural world. Both Enlightenment philosophers and evangelical itinerant preachers demanded that truth be empirically discernible. Such a move was disastrous for Christianity. It repudiated what Scripture teaches about the inscrutability of God's dealings with mankind and the hiddenness of the human heart. It also denied the importance of the work of the church in providing a body of believers and pattern of devotion in which the individual's faith is disciplined and nurtured.

Liturgical Renewal?

Of course, some evangelicals are beginning to rediscover liturgy. A successful megachurch now will not only have a P&W service but also one with robes, choirs, and read prayers. But these dabblings in liturgy are not the genuine article. They display once more the entrepreneurial instinct of evangelicalism, another way to attract the unchurched, this time the ones with tastes too refined and minds too intelligent to be satisfied with the MTV-like worship that characterizes many evangelical services.

The solution, of course, is not for evangelicals to rediscover the value or appeal of liturgy. Rather it is for evangelicals to take stock theologically of what constitutes biblical worship, the real purpose and ministry of the church, and genuine Christian piety. But that kind of stock-taking would undo evangelicalism. For it would send evangelicals off to the riches of the Reformed, Lutheran and Anglican traditions where these matters have been defined and articulated and where worship is the logical extension of a congregation's confession of faith and lies at the heart of the church's mission. And it would get rid of those awful praise songs. Keep that thought.

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