

Why We Worship Using a Liturgy

By Cn. Elizabeth Conkle

Why liturgy? This is what is often asked. Common is the claim that liturgical worship is just a form of dead ritual, and that prayer is what we do when we are alone in our prayer closets. Liturgy comes from a Greek New Testament word that means “work or service of the people.” To serve God is first and foremost to worship him. In Scripture, there are few examples of private prayer because worship is a corporate endeavor before it is a private enterprise. Individuals are produced by communities and learn to pray by being led in prayer in the communityⁱ and then are able to pray aright when alone with God.

1. Liturgy is Biblical

Christian liturgy is designed to draw us into the drama of the God Story, in which we are participants. As N.T. Wright says, we are not at liberty “to muck around with the plot.”ⁱⁱ The parts that make up the whole “drama” are not random but originate from the events of which Scripture testifies.

The Church’s worship is rooted in the worship of Israel, who sanctified space (Exodus 25:8-10), time (Genesis 2:3; Leviticus 23) and matter (Exodus 21:23; 28:4), and whose worship book was the Psalms. Israel’s communal worship pointed to their call to be a holy nation and a kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:6; Deuteronomy 26:19) in order to reveal God’s glory to the nations.

The first Christians were Jewish and thus, their communities were marked by the same kind of worship. “*They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to the prayers*” (Acts 2:42; Greek “the prayers”). Private prayer is rarely emphasized in the New Testament, but “*everyday they continued to meet together in the Temple courts*” (Acts 2:46). Their Scriptures were what we refer to as the Old Testament, and their liturgical prayer book was the Psalms. The Psalms are the raw prayers of the ancient gathered worshipping community of Israel, and the Church continued their daily use down through the centuries. Liturgy is not just Biblical in a historical sense, but it *is* Scripture read, sung, recited and prayed.

The liturgy of the *Book of Common Prayer* (2019) reconnects us to the ancient worship of Israel and the worship of the church down through the ages. The public reading of Scripture is a hallmark of the liturgy of the *Book of Common Prayer*. Its Sunday lectionary (a collection of scripture readings appointed for Christian worship for a given day or occasion) provides a three-year cycle of four readings for each Sunday, and its Daily Office is designed for reading the Bible in a year.

2. Liturgy delivers us from the tyranny of self by keeping us God-centered

We human beings tend to make everything about ourselves, including worship. Commonly heard from people exiting modern Western worship services are statements such as, “The worship today was boring,” “I didn’t get anything out of the music,” or “That worship made me feel so inspired.” Statements like these reveal a

modern church designed for the consumer and not for the worship of God. Worship is not about meeting our felt needs. We don't pray when we feel like it, but when the pastor or the worship leader says, "Let us Pray."ⁱⁱⁱ The church's liturgy directs our focus away from ourselves onto God, safeguarding us from making worship about us—which really isn't worship at all. From start to finish, we participate in a worship that proclaims the truth about God as revealed in Scripture, and we find ourselves pulled out of the mire of self-centeredness, pride, and fear into the narrative of God's saving work.

3. Liturgy is formative

Calvin maintained that our hearts are idol factories. We may not realize it, but the consumer culture around us is covertly training us to hunger and thirst for idols that do not satisfy.^{iv} Liturgy is intentionally designed for our re-formation as genuine human beings who rightly reflect the image of the God in whose image we were created. The *Book of Common Prayer* invites us into daily and weekly rhythms of worship, confession of sin, Scripture reading, the Lord's Supper, thanksgiving and prayer that over time, act on our souls, recalibrating our habits, our language, and our thoughts, forming us into God's holy people (1 Peter 2:9, 10). The cadence, the beauty, the story, the poetry, the symbols and images of the liturgy capture our imaginations and shape our hearts for the ultimate Real and for the True Good for which we were designed.

4. Liturgy sanctifies time

We, as the people of God, are to live according to a different set of priorities. We don't order our lives according to Black Friday or Cyber Monday or any other demands that the culture makes of us. We understand that time is an instrument that God uses to reveal himself and to redeem people. During the first half of the Christian year, from Advent through Pentecost, the prayers, songs, and scriptures of our liturgy invite us to participate in Jesus' birth, his life, his death, and his resurrection. During the second half of the church year, all the way to Christ the King Sunday, we are in ordinary time, which tells the story of God's people. Time and again, as we participate in the liturgy, we become immersed in the God story, which calls us out of our own time and reminds us that we live by a different narrative and "that we belong to eternity."^v

5. Liturgy recovers community

Prayer is communal before it is private. Liturgical worship draws us out of the world of self into the community of God's people. We join our hearts not just with our local community, but as we pray the Psalms and follow the scripture readings of the lectionary, we join with the global Body of Christ in prayer. The Psalms are prayers that not only aid us in worship of God, but they help us pray our joy, our hate, and our lament. If the Psalms assigned on a particular day don't happen to match our state of being, we can still pray with and on behalf of other brothers and sisters throughout the global Body of Christ, who may be in dire suffering. Bonhoeffer says that the Psalms teach us to pray as a fellowship, and enable us to participate in the

larger prayer of Christ's Church.^{vi} As we pray the Psalms, we are lifted above our personal concerns and are able to pray selflessly.

6. Liturgy is an invitation into the Divine conversation

We never initiate the conversation with God. We don't get a "glimpse of God and devise language to respond to or tell what we have glimpsed."^{vii} God addresses us first and reveals himself to us, and we use his words to respond to what he has said about himself. Liturgy provides those words and the words that we don't have but need in order to rightly address the Holy God that he is. Those words over time form and shape our hearts and conform our thinking to his holiness.

Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi. This famous Latin phrase literally means, "the law of what is to be prayed is the law of what is to be believed." Words matter because we gradually come to believe the words that we pray. Thus, we "belong in order to believe."^{viii}

Welcome the holy conversation with the Holy God who speaks first!

A word about words

While worshipping with Anglicans, you may hear the word "catholic." This word refers to the common, orthodox heritage of the church that is shared across an array of Christian traditions and expressed in our Nicene Creed.

ⁱ Peterson, Eugene. *Answering God: The Psalms as a Tool for Prayer.* San Francisco: Harper Collins. 1989.

ⁱⁱ Wright, N.T. *The Meal that Jesus Gave Us: Understanding Holy Communion.* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press. 2015.

ⁱⁱⁱ Peterson, Eugene. *Answering God: The Psalms as a Tool for Prayer.* San Francisco: Harper Collins. 1989.

^{iv} Smith, James K. A. Smith, James K. A. *You Are What You Love: the Spiritual Power of Habit.* Grand Rapids: Brazos Press. 2016

^v Bevins, Winfield. "Why do we Anglicans have a liturgy?" from:
<https://www.seedbed.com/untitled-45/>

^{vi} Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together.* San Francisco: Harper. 1954.

^{vii} Jensen, Robert W. "Joining the Eternal Conversation: John's Prologue and the Language of Worship"

^{viii} Smith, James K. A. Smith, 2016.