

Protagonist Corner

Liturgical Renewal or "Busy Worship"

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Worship is of primary importance to our life as the people of God. It is the principal means by which the faith is formed within us and the most visible way the faith is expressed. Because everything the church is or does flows from its worship, liturgical reform is a major concern confronting the church today. . . . The primary concern involved in the reform of worship life is that our worship may have integrity and be an instrument whereby the Holy Spirit strengthens our union with Christ and engages us in ministry.¹

It would be difficult to find a better statement of the significance of corporate worship than these words from the preface to *The Service for the Lord's Day*—Supplemental Liturgical Resource I, prepared by the Joint Office of Worship for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. Worship clearly is at the heart and center of the life of the church. Everything the church is or does flows from worship and is tested by worship. But how does the church fashion and order its worship of God so that it has theological integrity and is "an instrument whereby the Holy Spirit strengthens our union with Christ and engages us in ministry?" That is the question that all who care about the renewal of the church and its worship must continually address.

The concern that lies behind this column is based on the feeling that we in the Reformed tradition (and I suspect a good many other traditions, which I will have to let answer for themselves) are simply not doing a very adequate job of developing forms of worship that meet that criterion. To put it very bluntly, we seem to be in the process of adopting as the norm for corporate worship a mongrelized blend of elements from both the liturgical and the free-church traditions, a blend that leaves our people unmoved and uninspired and that adds to the trivialization of the church which is its most deadly enemy.

Having perhaps overstated my case, let me explain my concern. Count the pages of your church's bulletin and compare that length with the length of the bulletin ten to twenty years ago. The difference should be clear. In most cases the amount of printed material in the bulletin for use in worship will have dramatically increased. That is even more evident at gatherings of the governing bodies of the church and at study conferences and retreats. Freed from the constraints of the normal Sunday bulletin, the worship sheets at such gatherings may run as long as eight pages.

Why such vastly expanded printed material? The answer given is "congregational participation." The assumption seems to be that the more the congregation says, the more it participates in the act of worship. It is that assumption

that I believe needs serious reexamination. Is reading printed prayers and litanies the same as participating in worship? Obviously it is not . . . any more than reading erotic literature is the same as making love to your spouse. So, is lengthy printed material in worship the best way to encourage authentic congregational participation?

For me the answer is No, and judging from conversations with members of the church, I am not the only one who finds that to be the case. Often I find that the more I must read, the less I actually comprehend and the less I participate. I am much more deeply involved in worship when my mind is focused on the content of what is being said or sung, rather than when I am merely following words on a page, no matter how well written the words may be. Too much printed material, at least for me, does not result in authentic participation. It merely results in what I like to call “busy worship.” I stay so busy trying to follow what is written that I don’t pay that much attention to the meaning of the words. Form triumphs over content . . . and that always spells the death of Protestant, or at least Reformed, worship.

What seems to be happening is that the liturgical forms of denominations which have traditionally emphasized the importance (and the beauty) of a well-ordered liturgy have been blended with the language and thought-forms of the free church tradition with its emphasis on spontaneity and freedom. Trendy concerns of the moment, expressed in the basically casual style of language of the free church tradition, are made to fit into the structured forms of ancient liturgies. The result is a strange hybrid that does justice to the values and virtues of neither tradition.

My concern is not with the use of liturgical forms themselves. In a time characterized by massive biblical illiteracy, liturgical forms that use the best of biblical resources are a significant teaching device. Repetition does not necessarily lead to boredom and meaninglessness. It can be a way in which important affirmations become a part of who we are. Significant material, repeated often enough, can deeply effect the soul and over time shape in a profound way one’s sense of identity and belonging as a part of the Covenant People of God.

What it seems to me is so needed in our worship today is a blend of theological substance . . . literary artistry of a high order . . . and spiritual depth. Most busy pastors simply cannot produce such material on a regular basis . . . nor should they be expected to. But surely some can and should be encouraged to do so. James Kirk made a start with his books *When We Gather*, worship resources based on the lectionary readings for each Sunday in the year. But there is still a long way to go. I simply refuse to believe that the church today cannot develop liturgical resources

- that use and teach biblical content (especially the Psalms)
- that do so with theological integrity and faithfulness
- that are expressed in language that reflects a simple dignity and unpretentious gracefulness of style
- that express the best insights of our tradition
- that deepen the faith and devotion of the People of God.

The worship of the church is important and serious business. It demands our highest attention and best gifts of heart and mind. But let us remember

that the liturgical tradition of the church is not something that we can create on our own week by week. It is something given . . . something handed over to us as a result of the labors and loves, the tears and joys, of generations of God's faithful people.

Hughes Oliphant Old, in his study of Reformed worship, tells the story of a noted Presbyterian liturgist who at an ecumenical conference was leading a workshop in the creation of liturgies. As a part of the course each participant was asked to write a liturgy. But one woman in the class was from the Orthodox Church of Ethiopia. "How could she write a liturgy?" she asked. "A liturgy was something which had developed over the centuries. How could she just sit down and make one up in the course of a few hours?" The liturgist patiently worked with her and the next morning the liturgy she had developed was used at matins. When he asked her afterwards what she thought of it, she shook her head and said, "The liturgy can come only from many tears."²

Exactly! On our own we cannot fashion week by week liturgies that will move and inspire the People of God. But we can receive the best from the past. We can use and adapt it to the needs of our situation, and, as a church, if we really value it, we can see that those with special gifts for the task are challenged to develop worship resources that capture the imagination, that move the soul, and that deepen the faith and understanding of God's people today. Only the worship that has authentic biblical and theological integrity can be used "as an instrument whereby the Holy Spirit strengthens our union with Christ and engages us in ministry." We dare settle for nothing less.

NOTES

¹*The Service for the Lord's Day*, Supplemental Liturgical Resource 1 prepared by the Joint Office of Worship for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), preface, 7.

²Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship*, Guides to the Reformed Tradition, ed. Leith and Kuykendall, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984), 163.