

Many evangelical Christians associate the word “liturgy” with Episcopalian and Roman Catholic churches. It suggests to them a highly structured, formal, and probably lifeless ritual. But the truth is, every church has a liturgy. The liturgy is simply the order of things in a worship service. If a church only sings a hymn, takes an offering, offers a prayer, and hears a sermon it has a liturgy. Too often the difference between “liturgical” churches and “non-liturgical” churches is simply that liturgical churches have thought carefully about their worship services and non-liturgical churches haven’t.

The Bible does not give us a liturgy precisely. Even the OT sacrificial services, portions of which are described in detail, are not described from beginning to end. But that does not mean that we are to attach little or no importance to what things should be done in Lord’s Day worship and in what order. By direct instruction and commandment, by illustration, and by implication, the Bible teaches us that the church’s worship should begin with a call to worship, should contain hymns, prayers, offerings, the reading and preaching of God’s Word, and the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, and should conclude with a benediction. Certain of the actions in this worship are reserved to ministers and there is considerable freedom in the arrangement of others (e.g. both choir and congregation sang in the worship service of the temple; both ministers and people prayed in the worship service of the church in Corinth).

More than that, the particular order of events itself conveys meaning in worship. Order is everything in life. Sex before marriage is the order of death; sex in marriage is the order of life. The difference can be life and death but the only thing that has changed is the order in which things are done. In Lev. 1:3-9 there is a scrupulous attention to the order of events in sacrificial worship. It is one religion, paganism, if the worshipper killed the animal and then put his hands on its head. It is another religion, Christianity, if the worshipper put his hands on the animal’s head and then killed it. The acts are the same, only the order is different. As Paul often made clear in his letters, it is legalism if ethics (God’s law and our obedience to it) come first and then salvation. It is Christianity if salvation comes first and then ethics. And so his letters betray that order, the exposition of God’s work in saving us through Christ from sin and death (Rom. 1-11; Eph. 1-3; Col. 1-2) followed by a “therefore” and his exposition of the Christian life (Rom. 12-15; Eph. 4-6; Col. 3-4). We must obey God’s law, but it matters mightily whether that obedience is put before or after our salvation, that is, whether we obey *in order to be saved* or *because we have been saved*! It is because of the powerful way in which the order of events conveys the meaning of those events that in the history of Christian worship there have been many arguments over the order in which things should be done in a worship service. For example, should the reading of God’s law come before or after the confession of sin. The Lutherans said before, the Reformed said after.

Our worship at Faith Presbyterian Church follows a definite order. It is the order of the gospel and, for that reason, we hope that it instills in us and in our children a gospel instinct and an understanding in depth. Our liturgy takes its cue from the order of Isaiah’s encounter with God in Isaiah 6:1-9. After a call to worship (a liturgical element taken from other texts and many psalms), God is set before us in his holiness in the form of a hymn, like the “Sanctus” the angels sang (v.3). That sight of God leads to the recognition of our sin and need of forgiveness which

we express in a prayer of confession (v. 5). There follows the absolution or the assurance of pardon (vv. 6-7) which we follow, further, with a confession of our faith in God our Savior and Christ's atonement (a hymn to Christ, a creedal statement, etc.). Then follows in our service a set of biblical elements all of which, in different ways, amount to our response to God's grace and our saying to Him, "Here we are, send us!" (v.8) The reading of God's law, offerings, petitionary prayer, and the hearing of God's Word with the intention to believe and obey it make up this part of the service. That is followed by the sacrament, that signifies and seals the whole of the gospel that has been recapitulated in our worship, both God's gracious gift and our response of faith and love. The whole is concluded with the benediction in the words that God appointed to be used by his ministers to bless his people (Num. 6:22-27; 2 Cor. 13:14).

In this way, with this liturgy, we go over the sacred ground of the gospel and of our relationship with God by his grace every Lord's Day. We not only hear *about* the gospel, we actually *practice* it and *embrace it for ourselves* all over again. The gospel logic of this service is sufficiently obvious that our service is very like the worship services of mainstream Christianity from the earliest days until the present. It is very like the service, for example, that John Calvin developed for the church in Geneva in the days of the Reformation.

Someone has said, "The main thing in life is to keep the main thing in life the main thing in life." Properly ordered worship, offered to God from the heart and with the heart, is one of the most important means God has given us to do just that.