Liturgical Worship: a fresh look, how it works, why it matters

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What is 'liturgy'?  

Most Christians, of whatever Church and tradition, are comfortable with the word 'worship'. The word 'liturgy', however, is not so universally used or understood. To some it feels more obscure, more technical, only for 'that sort of Christian'. I spent years avoiding the term, always preferring what I saw as the more straightforward term 'worship'.

Liturgy is a technical term and, though technical terms can be off-putting, they do act as a concise way of making meaning more precise.

- As we saw in Chapter 1, Christian 'worship' means both living our lives for God and gathering as God's people with a focus on God.

  *'Liturgy' is always about the corporate gathering.*

- 'Worship' can also cover private devotions or singing along to a praise tape on your own in the car.

  *'Liturgy' is always bigger than the personal, even though it may encompass it.*

• Within the corporate gathering, 'worship' can be used in different ways. It can mean the whole service (as on the notice board which proclaims, 'Divine Worship at 11.00am') and it can also be used in more limited ways to refer particularly to the human-to-God dimension (as in, 'Let's worship God') or to particular aspects of that worship (as in, 'We'll now have a time of worship', meaning, 'We're going to sing some songs').

  *'Liturgy' always encompasses the whole service with its three dimensions: human-to-human, God-to-human, human-to-God.*

There is worship which is liturgical and there is worship which is not: the two terms are not straight alternatives, even though their meanings overlap.
Understanding the word
Put simply, 'liturgy' is the term that the Church adopted to describe what we would call a 'church service'.

It comes from a Greek word and means literally 'public works'. In the Roman world, outside the Church, it described the duty of citizens to engage in good works of benefit to the community, including religious rites performed for the public good. In common usage it came to mean any service done for someone else. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament (often called the Septuagint) the word was used for the service of the priests and Levites in doing their specifically religious 'work'. When the Church began to draw parallels between Christian leaders and the priests of the Old Testament, the word was taken from its Old Testament context and attached to Christian gatherings for worship, especially to the Eucharist.

However, the New Testament is clear that the body of Christ is a Church of priests, rather than a Church with priests. That meant that the term 'liturgy' could not be attached only to the work of the ordained leaders: in the Church everyone has work to do for God and others, both in the world and in corporate worship. The earlier use of liturgy to mean 'service to others' surfaced again — our corporate worship serves God, one another and the world. Within it we each have a 'liturgy', a part to play for the good of the whole rather than our personal benefit.

Is your church 'liturgical'?
Though liturgy can be a useful technical term, its primary meaning can be clouded by association with secondary elements.

Imagine that a friend has invited you to go to church with her on Sunday. You ask casually what sort of service it will be. 'Oh, we're fairly liturgical,' she says. What image does that conjure up? You might be expecting some or all of the following:

- books (or printed orders of service in card or booklet form);
- some form of special clothes for the leader;
- words for the congregation to join in saying or singing (in addition to songs or hymns);
- some sort of special title for the day (such as 'Third Sunday of Epiphany');
What is 'liturgy'?  

- a building or worship space which seems to be full of clearly symbolic furniture and may be elaborate or highly decorated;
- the use of symbolic actions and objects, such as formal processions, lighted candles or the burning of incense.

It's no wonder that we often think of liturgy as a 'style' of worship. Other things being equal, we expect it to be towards the more formal end of the spectrum, perhaps a bit 'churchy' in its language, and fairly elaborate in its ceremonies and the decor of the building. But liturgy is much more than a matter of style.

Words
Sometimes 'liturgy' is used to mean the spoken words in the service, as opposed to the songs or hymns. When Spring Harvest started printing Bible passages and prayers interspersed with the songs in their songbook, they at first called them 'Words for Worship' and 'spoken responses'. Later they started calling them 'Prayers and Liturgy' – where 'liturgy' meant sets of words that included congregational responses, as distinguished from the songs. In casual usage in churches, this is often what is meant by 'liturgy'.

Even in churches where some 'liturgical texts' (such as the Gloria in Excelsis or a eucharistic prayer) are sung, people sometimes talk about 'the liturgy' when they mean the words in the service book, to distinguish them from words that are in the hymn-book.

But liturgy is bigger than words: it encompasses what we do in the service as well as what we say. To use technical language, liturgy is 'rite': a pattern of words and actions that have meaning for a community – like lighting the candles on a birthday cake and singing 'Happy Birthday'. It includes silence, movement, posture, symbol. It engages us as whole persons: body, mind and spirit.

Books
The false idea that liturgy is primarily about words leads us to expect to find liturgy in books – and often the connection is drawn so strongly that we imagine that liturgy is inherently connected with the use of books or some other printed form of service.

In fact books and orders of service were fairly late arrivals on the liturgical scene. Books only became used for worship when the services got complicated and the leaders needed to know what to
say. These books were hand-copied and only for the leaders. The people had no books – they knew their parts by heart.

At the time of the sixteenth-century Reformation the recent invention of moveable type allowed the Reformers to use printing to spread their ideas and to change worship. In the Church of England, printing enabled Archbishop Thomas Cranmer to enforce a changed liturgy literally overnight.

Print was also used by the Roman Catholic Church. In the medieval period, local churches copied the way things were done in prestigious centres. In England the most common version of the Catholic Mass was the 'use' (i.e. the form of service) of Sarum (i.e. Salisbury cathedral). Hand-copied service books for the priest were expensive and so were only rarely replaced. This meant that the liturgy evolved at a slow pace, with strong family likenesses but differences in the detail from one place to another. After the Council of Trent (1545-62) the Roman Catholic liturgy was standardized much more, again through the use of printing.

The printed word lends itself to liturgical forms of worship because of its inherent stability. Writing liturgy down (both words and instructions) can simply be a way of passing it on. It has been used as a means of bringing rapid change to forms of worship, but it can also be used as a way of making liturgy very resistant to change. Either way, liturgy itself is not dependent on the printed word, any more than singing is dependent on hymn-books.

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**Print and flexibility in liturgy**

Modern technology now allows us to use print but to vary the content according to the time of year or the needs of a particular congregation. The Church of England's *Common Worship* services were available in electronic form (including via the Internet) at the same time as they came out in book form. *The Methodist Worship Book* is also available electronically and many other denominations around the world put liturgical resources on the Internet. This enables even those congregations which are part of consciously 'liturgical' churches to produce their own orders of service tailored to their particular circumstances.
Overhead projection and data projectors are allowing some churches to use liturgical texts without any printed material at all — and that makes it even easier to use liturgical texts and structures flexibly, making last minute changes but still allowing for the congregation to have a part.

Fixity
If you put together the (false) idea that liturgy is primarily about words with the fact that those words are printed in books, the idea soon develops that liturgy is about fixity, stability and a lack of flexibility or spontaneity. For instance, when the Church of England began the process of introducing new forms of service *(Common Worship)* a common question asked by ordinary worshippers was, 'Why are they changing the services again?' The question revealed an assumption: that the natural state for liturgy was fixity and stability. Change was seen as an interruption to, rather than a natural element in, liturgical worship. The question should be the other way round: 'Why should the service stay the same?' Forms of liturgy originated simply as patterns of word and action that were shared between churches. Good practice and bright ideas were copied and passed around.

Liturgical worship has, historically, tended to remain fairly constant, to include standard elements and to repeat ritual actions and familiar words. But this is not confined to 'liturgical' churches: even churches that pride themselves on their freedom in worship tend to settle down into a regular pattern, and churches whose worship is dominated by hymns or worship songs will have a basic (if evolving) repertoire.

Liturgy is not conservative or resistant to change for deep theological reasons, but simply because *any* complex activity involving lots of people in different roles will tend to resist change if it is to continue to allow for participation by those present. For instance, the audience at a pantomime is only able to get involved and play its part if the script and the cast stick to the expected pattern. A decent round of 'Oh yes he did! — Oh no he didn't!' requires that people know the words and understand the right context in which to use them. If the cast don't give the right visual and verbal clues the audience won't know what to do. Change can come — but it won't happen overnight.
because it needs to take everyone with it. Incidentally, note that at
the pantomime no one in the audience needs to have their words
printed out. Like most rituals, we learn our part by participating with
others who have been there before. Ritual (like the Christian faith
itself) is passed on, not learnt from a book.

Liturgical worship often incorporates elements that seem archaic
(words, ceremonies, clothes, etc.). This is simply because things that
are 'passed on', even if they are still valuable today, often carry with
them the signs that they originated in a different era. This should,
however, never be allowed to develop into the idea that archaic
things are intrinsically 'better' or more holy.

\[ Liturgy in the East \]

In the Eastern (or 'Orthodox') Churches, 'liturgy' is used in a slightly
different way. 'The Liturgy' always means the Eucharist. In that
tradition 'liturgy' is assumed to be, in essence, unvarying and stable
over time and from place to place.

\[ Getting to the heart of the meaning \]

So liturgy is not about worship in a certain 'style'; it's not primarily
about words or books; neither is it about forms of service that are
unalterable or inherently archaic. At the heart of liturgy is an
understanding of public worship that goes beyond the personal
encounter with God (without denying it) to the corporate drama
of being the people of God.

The Christian way of life is itself a drama. In it, we take on a new role
that God has given us. It involves 'playing the part' of those who are
newborn by the Spirit, holy and loving, even while we know that we
fail to fulfil this role in many ways. This is not some sort of 'play-
acting' or pretending. God calls us to grow into these roles as we
grow as Christians. By his Spirit he transforms us into the likeness of
Christ. But this side of heaven, there is always that tension between
the person I am and the person God is making me. It is like the
tension in an actor between the actor's natural self and the part that
he or she is playing. To play the part you have to understand both the
points of contact and the contradictions between your natural self
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and the character in the play. If you play the part for long enough, the part influences you as much as you influence the part.

Liturgy is the rehearsal - the many rehearsals - for the parts we are called to take both in the world now and in eternity with God. We each have a part to play in God's work in the world, and liturgy reflects this, but our personal engagement with God at an individual level finds its proper place within the 'duty and joy' of the corporate event.

Hence, some worship may call itself 'liturgical', but if it turns us in on our own worshipping experience, fails to connect us with the bigger picture, or robs us of our part, it is not liturgy. Conversely, public worship which does not claim the title 'liturgy' but draws us into the drama, allows us to play our part and shapes us for life in Christ, can be true liturgy: the work of the people, for the people.

What should we expect from liturgy?

We have already seen that all corporate worship (whether you call it liturgy or not) has a powerful representative and symbolic aspect, which can shape our faith and our lives. What, then, are the core values and particular emphases of worship that is deliberately liturgical?

Liturgical worship is deliberately and consciously:

■ **clearly structured**, rather than 'accidentally' structured or deliberately unstructured;

■ **essentially corporate**, rather than focused on the individual's experience or local preferences;

    **richly holistic**, rather than focused on the mind alone or words alone.

Of course, this is not a description of liturgical worship as you may have experienced it: this is a summary of what liturgical worship, at its best, ought to be about. And any of these emphases may, naturally, be present in other forms of worship; true liturgical worship simply tries deliberately to hold them together.

**Clearly structured**

Perhaps the most obvious thing about liturgical worship is that it has a conscious structure (which has been determined, at least in part,
before the service begins and by the wider Church beyond the local congregation). In fact, all worship has a structure; liturgical worship simply gives attention to this structure in a deliberate way and with an eye to the long-term, as well as the short-term, implications.

Structure which is fixed in some way can become a prison, though it can also be thought of as a skeleton (or even a safety net). Though liturgical worship often does mean that the service is followed in much the same way each week, it needn't be like that. There is nothing inherent in liturgy that means there can be no room for the spontaneous, creative, 'Spirit-led', or extemporary. The liturgy provides a norm – a 'default' setting – to be followed unless there is a strong sense of the need to divert from it or add to it. It is founded on the belief that the Spirit of God works just as much through advance planning as through spontaneous changes; and just as much through the wider Church as through the views of a local leader.

**Isn't liturgy just 'vain repetition'?**

> When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases [or 'use not vain repetitions' as the Authorized Version puts it] as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words.

Matthew 6.7

Some people worry that liturgy will descend into the 'vain repetition' that Jesus criticized. It can, of course – but so can using the same song or hymn more than once. What Jesus criticized was *vain* repetition – piling up the words, thinking that God is more likely to listen – not repetition as such. Though liturgical worship tends to repeat at least some of the same words and actions week by week, it avoids the repetition within one service, or even within one prayer, which so easily results if there is no structure and shape to worship. Liturgy can therefore be a way of avoiding repetition – especially if the Christian year is used to bring out different emphases at different times of the year.

On the other hand, a 'spontaneous' prayer which covers much the same ground each week could feel pretty repetitive...
At its most profound, liturgy is about bringing (or reflecting) God's order in a disordered world – an order that echoes the work of the Spirit brooding over the waters at the dawn of creation. Like the work of creation, it should never be static or leave us unmoved and unchanged. Liturgy should draw us inexorably into the eternal, creative, freedom-bringing order of the kingdom of heaven.

**Essentially corporate**

Liturgy always has a corporate aspect. How I praise God at home in my own prayers is between me and God. When I join with the Church, however, I am part of something bigger. I don't simply bring my private worship and put it together with the personal worship of others, like eggs that happen to be in the same eggbox. Liturgy is more like an omelette: eggs are broken and something new results. No wonder public worship is sometimes hard! It involves being broken in order to be remade, because it means balancing my preferences with the needs of others, perhaps even sacrificing my preferences. We worship in Christ, as part of the body.

Liturgical worship is also deliberately corporate in the sense that it belongs to all of us, not just to the leader. That limits the extent of the arbitrary decisions the leader can make and it means that all who are present have a part to play.

Worshippers can play an active part in different ways:

- One way is by allowing for, or relying on, spontaneous contributions, which support or determine the direction in which the act of worship moves. Quaker services are one example of this, and some churches deliberately allow time in worship for such things as the giving of testimony, the sharing of a 'prophecy' or some other message believed to be from God, or something as simple as suggesting the next song to sing.

- Another way is by planning in advance some particular parts for the congregation to play. Singing a hymn or song together is a simple example. Another example is the use of fixed forms of spoken words for the congregation, which could be either printed or known by heart. This sort of participation requires repeated actions and the use of existing words if it is truly to belong to the people corporately, rather than being determined by the leader or another individual.
Liturgical Worship

Liturgical Worship

Liturgy can encompass both forms of participation. Liturgy is also corporate in the larger sense: it usually involves the wider Church, beyond the local congregation, in making at least some of the decisions. In this way the service does not belong to the local congregation alone, and especially not to the particular leader. There are agreed parts for the congregation which the leader is not at liberty to change or drop on a whim because they are known by everyone. There are parts of the service which are determined by the wider Church, usually via some sort of corporate decision-making body. Most of the differences between the denominations on questions of liturgy and worship are to do with who makes the decisions and how binding they are.

The content of corporate worship will inevitably be seen as an indication of what a particular congregation or denomination believes. This will be significant both to those who belong and to those who visit. In some denominations the liturgy is deliberately treated as one of the key places where you can see what the Church believes. This is why great care is taken over its production, and why there are limits placed on the amount of flexibility permitted at the local level.

Where are the decisions taken?

Roman Catholic

The decisions are made centrally and 'local' forms of service are translated from a normative Latin text and have to be approved by the Vatican. At parish level there is plenty of scope for choosing hymns and songs but few choices to be made about the form of service or the particular prayers used.

Church of England

Key decisions about structure and some texts are made centrally by the General Synod, working on material produced by the Liturgical Commission. At congregational level there is considerable freedom to choose between different forms of service and to decide which particular words are used. Decisions of principle (such as which form of communion service to use) are shared between the ordained leaders and the representatives of the laity (the Parochial Church
Council or its equivalent). Decisions about the detail (such as which form of confession to use) are taken by the person leading the service. For some elements there is limitless scope; for other elements (typically confessions, credal material and eucharistic prayers) the choice is more restricted.

Hymns and songs are unrestricted and a matter for local choice.

**Methodist, United Reformed Church...**

For some Free Churches there is a liturgy or a service book. It is usually drafted by a central committee or working group, often used experimentally, revised and then given official status by the governing body of the denomination. However, it is usually a matter for the local congregation to determine how closely to follow these services, what choices to make within them, and whether or not to use them at all.

Hymns and songs are a matter of local choice, but it is significant that these churches often produce 'official' hymn-books, over which considerable time and energy is expended.

**Independent, 'New Church', Pentecostal...**

These churches are likely to have no fixed forms of service and no printed resources. This means that local congregations are free to draw on the resources of other churches (or not) as they choose. Decisions are usually made by the leader of a particular service, and this means that the structure and patterns of worship tend to develop out of unspoken assumptions and ideas about what is right or appropriate. The network or denomination has little control over local worship except through informal networking and oversight.

**Richly holistic**

Sometimes those who have studied liturgy get bogged down in questions about the words that are used. Partly this is because of the importance that the Western Church since the Reformation has attached to words and the doctrines they reflect. The twentieth century, however, saw an important shift of attention among liturgical experts away from the words to the *shape* of worship. This was more than a concern for getting the order of things right.
It connected with fresh thinking about the physical aspects of worship: posture, movement, action, clothing, symbol, ritual, ceremonial, drama, and so on. People began to see that the space in which corporate worship takes place, the arrangement and nature of furniture within that space, and the mood set by music, lighting or smell, also has an impact on the worshippers and speaks volumes about God. Liturgy is an event in three dimensions, not a script on a page, and it should engage us as whole persons: body, mind and spirit.

Creative liturgy?
We have seen that liturgy should consciously connect our corporate gathering with that of other Christians in other places and other times, and should shape that gathering so that it forms us for living as Christian disciples.

Is it then possible to have 'creative liturgy'? Certainly it is possible to have new and 'creative' prayers to say, in the same way that you can have new songs to sing. But we have already seen that liturgy is much more than sets of spoken words. If liturgy is, by its very nature, handed on and connected to a tradition, then there is a sense in which 'creative liturgy' could be a contradiction in terms.

But we have also seen that there is little in the way of 'forms of service' given to us in Scripture. Throughout Church history, as well as around the world and in different churches today, Christians consider themselves to be worshipping 'in spirit and in truth' in many different ways.

Creative liturgy is possible - but it means more than writing new prayers and using more symbols and fresh imagery. To be creative with the liturgy requires an awareness of the riches of the Church's inheritance (across all traditions) and how that inheritance has developed, so that it can be drawn upon and used with integrity. It also requires a close contact with the contemporary context in which worship is to be offered. It needs a sense of drama and event, and of the deep structures of corporate worship. Above all, it needs to have an understanding of how meanings can be broken and remade by juxtaposing words and actions. This is liturgy's prophetic edge. Creative liturgy can never be truly Christian if it becomes an excuse for us to engage only with forms and words with which we feel
comfortable: worship which is true to God, as well as true to us, must always stir us, call us and challenge us. To be re-shaped in the image of Christ is to be changed. That sort of liturgy is a dialogue with a living, developing tradition which seeks not to fossilize but to energize. Living, creative liturgy is the corporate worship of this congregation today, in dialogue with the Church universal in every time and place, which prepares us for the worship of eternity.

Conclusion

True liturgy

- empowers all God's people, not just leaders;
- connects with the past, and with the wider Church;
- engages the senses and uses symbolism and action as well as words;
- structures time and space to reflect the truths and priorities of God and his reign.

These are some of the primary aspects of liturgy.

Liturgical worship may, or may not, involve books, archaic language, special clothes, or elaborate ritual. All these things are secondary and not intrinsic to liturgy.

True liturgy will definitely be an event, a drama, in which all have a part to play, and which imprints on space and time the shape and pattern of the kingdom of God, which is here and yet to come.

For further reflection...

1. Reflect on your experiences of liturgical worship. What has been positive and what has been negative about them? Do you think your experiences reflect an encounter with the primary aspects of liturgy (structured, corporate, holistic), or with some of the secondary elements that sometimes become associated with liturgical worship?

3. Reflect on ways in which the regular corporate worship which you have experienced has shaped your assumptions about God, Christianity and worship itself. If you have worshipped in different traditions, list them and compare them, noting anything that you felt was missing and anything that you felt was a gain in the different experiences.