

OpenTheo

Q&A#103 How Should We Introduce Evangelicals to Liturgy?

February 13, 2019



Alastair Roberts

Today's question: "I have been following the resurgence of interest in ancient liturgies and have read your two part article on Theopolis as well as several podcasts where you speak about this topic. As a lifetime evangelical who has been awakened and inspired by the depths of church history, sacramental theology, and liturgy in the past year, I am incredibly excited to see more and more evangelicals looking into what worship truly means Biblically and how it forms us as worshipers through liturgy.

I am wondering in what ways you could see the "liturgically opposed" churches such as the ones I was raised in embrace some of these historical forms and practices while avoiding the pitfalls you pointed out in your articles? I am a worship leader with a deep desire to shape our services into a more Biblical, liturgical form but don't really know where to start.

Any other resources you could recommend to me would be greatly appreciated!"

I mention Jeff Meyer's book, *The Lord's Service* in this video (<https://amzn.to/2DAcg49>). Also, my articles on liturgy on Theopolis: <https://theopolisinstitute.com/article/christians-liturgy-and-the-past/> and <https://theopolisinstitute.com/article/christians-liturgy-and-the-past-2/>.

My blog for my podcasts and videos is found here: <https://adversariapodcast.com/>.

If you have any questions, you can leave them on my Curious Cat account: <https://curiouscat.me/zugzwanged>.

If you have enjoyed these talks, please tell your friends and consider supporting me on Patreon: <https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>. You can also support me using my PayPal account: <https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>.

The audio of all of my videos is available on my Soundcloud account: <https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these

episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, I have been following the resurgence of interest in ancient liturgies and have read your two-part article on Theopolis, as well as several podcasts where you speak about this topic. As a lifetime evangelical who has been awakened and inspired by the depths of church history, sacramental theology, and liturgy in the past year, I'm incredibly excited to see more and more evangelicals looking into what worship truly means biblically and how it forms us, worshippers, through liturgy.

I'm wondering in what ways you could see the liturgically opposed churches, such as the ones I was raised in, embrace some of these historical forms and practices, while avoiding the pitfalls you mentioned in your articles. I'm a worship leader with a deep desire to shape our services into a more biblical liturgical form, but don't really know where to start. Any other resources you could recommend to me would be greatly appreciated.

These are questions that I get from time to time, and they're very important ones. For me, the starting point that I've found the most helpful is simply with the biblical teaching. So focus upon the biblical teaching about just theology in general and think about how does this relate to our worship? What does it mean, for instance, that we are the temple of the Holy Spirit? My father was preaching upon this in our church on Sunday evening, and it was interesting thinking about how that theological doctrine can actually be played out in worship.

Because there's a question, if this is indeed true about us, how are we expressing this in our worship? How is the body of Christ being expressed as temple? How about the fact that we are the bride? What are some ways that we can do that? Well, one way we can do about it is by having a sung liturgy, because singing is the way that we speak when we're in love. The lover sings, as Augustine spoke about. Only the lover sings, as Augustine described.

There is something about that form of worship that is fitting for the theological truth. Likewise, what is the character of salvation? Is salvation very much about my personal salvation in detachment from everything else? And thinking about an *ordo salutis*, an order of salvation that relates to my individual life that's detached from broader cosmic work of Christ, well, clearly not. When we look at the Bible, there's a lot more going on.

But that sense of a *historia salutis* is often best expressed through a church calendar that brings us through those patterns of church history, those patterns of redemptive history, where we are inhabiting them. As we inhabit these cycles of the church

calendar, cycles of expectation and anticipation, cycles of celebration of feasting and times of fasting, all of these things give us a sense of inhabiting the text, of inhabiting the world of Scripture and ultimately being in Christ. That's a way in which we express the theology in practice.

And it's very much a matter of prudence. It's a matter in which we learn the biblical theological truth by actually living it out, by practicing it. Other ways we can think about this is the importance of psalm singing.

Psalm singing teaches us the language of worship, the language of prayer, the language of lament. And it gives us a vocabulary, it gives us a realm of Christian doctrine that we can relate to our very practical experience, a language that we can express the deepest struggles of the heart within. And when we think about the significance of the psalms, the psalms are for the most part the songs of the King.

Christ is the one who stands in the midst of his people and worships as the King and we join in his worship. We are those who participate in his song. Christ is the one who prayed the psalms.

He's the one who in his death, he spoke a series of psalms. There are a number of ways in which the psalms are alluded to. And even afterwards we see, for instance, the imprecatory psalms referenced within Acts 1 and places like that.

These are part of the tapestry of Christian faith, but also a means by which we participate in the life of Christ, in the word of Christ. We can think about other practices that we have. The practice of the offertory.

What does it mean to be a people whose work is oriented towards worship? That worship is something that takes in the world, takes in the world of our activity and our work during the week and then sends us out into that again. That requires thought in relating our work to the practice, for instance, of the Lord's Supper. And that is something that people have often struggled with.

If you talk to many people in many churches, they have not received much teaching on work. They don't have a clear sense of how their work relates to worship and actually is serving to build up the kingdom of God. They have very little sense of the value that worship, that work has and our vocations.

And so that's something that needs to be expressed in practice. And so liturgy is a way of thinking about how that theological truth can be made deeply practical for people. How can we think about the way that my weekly work relates to the gathering together with the people of God on Sunday morning? Well, one way to do that is through the offertory, through as part of the worship, bringing forth tokens of our work and stuff that we produce during the week.

Tokens of the money that we've earned during the week, but relating that very clearly to, for instance, the bringing forth of the elements for the supper. There is a sense that these are also aspects of our labour and that these are being rendered realms of these means of communion with God within the supper and that celebration of the Eucharist. That's another way that we can think about liturgy in terms of scripture.

Now, this is just an unpacking in practice of theological statements and truths. And these theological statements can often rattle around in our heads and they can be things that we believe in the abstract. But liturgy is a way of creating a transmission of these truths into practice.

And then that liturgy is confirmed during the week as we live in terms of those truths. And many people, they've not had that transmission of the truth from the actual word through the body in the form of the liturgy and then into their practice. When they've not had that transitional work through the liturgy, it can be very difficult to bring these things down to earth.

What does this actually mean in practice? And liturgy can often be the first stage of that. So, for instance, when we think about what does it mean to read the story of scripture? What does it mean to be a people that study the Old Testament? For many people, it's just an interesting text that we can learn certain doctrines from, maybe have certain moral examples from. But if we have a well-ordered liturgy, it can give you a deeper sense of what it means to inhabit this story.

That we are the sons and daughters of Abraham. That our forefathers all passed through the cloud and the sea. They were baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.

And they were examples for us. But not just examples for us. This is the earlier part of our story.

We are living in the same story. But that can be expressed in liturgy in ways that if you just give people the doctrine, it does not hit home in quite the same way. When it's expressed in practice.

For instance, as we follow up the teaching of the word with the supper and relate the teaching of the word to the supper, it makes a big difference. So, for instance, let's say you've been studying Genesis 12 to 14. Abraham goes into Egypt.

There's the taking of Sarah within Egypt and then the plagues upon Pharaoh. They get free. They're sent back and they leave with many gifts.

Go to the land of Canaan. Wander throughout the land of Canaan. Then there's a battle in the land of Canaan when they're fighting against the kings.

And Lot is delivered and then Melchizedek comes out bringing bread and wine. Now, you

can relate all of that, not just as an example of Abraham doing all these things that anticipates the later Exodus with Moses. But you can give a sense of what this means that we are part of this story, too.

That the greater Melchizedek, Christ, who is priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek, has brought out bread and wine for us. We are part of this story, too. As he brings out bread and wine for us, we are celebrating a victory in the midst of the land of promise.

We have not yet received this, but in anticipation we are participating. In the same way, bread and wine brought out by Lady Wisdom, inviting people into her house, saying, taste of my bread and my wine. And we are Lady Wisdom's feast.

It can be associated with the memorial offering and the drink offering associated with that, with the testing of jealousy, where there is a testing of the bride. Has she been faithful? Has she committed adultery? And she has to drink a cup of curse. But the anticipation being that it's most likely to prove her to have been unfaithful.

But we drink a cup of blessing. Now, there's still a testing, but the anticipation is that we'll be proved faithful and blessed. And there are all these different areas of biblical background that help us as they are placed in practice to make the transition from word to life.

And so these present us with truthful ways of life, ways of thinking about who we are. And not just thinking, but this deep imagination of who we are as the people of God. That's something that can be accomplished by liturgy in a very powerful way.

Think also about the order of liturgy. A helpful book on this in many ways is *The Lord's Service* by Jeff Myers. And that is one of the books that I would recommend to think about the order and the pattern.

That he looks into the pattern of the sacrifices, for instance, in Leviticus and sees that there's a logic to these things. And as we attend to that logic, it will help us to think about concept of worship, for instance, as covenant renewal. That there is a renewal of our covenant relationship with God and how that's practiced.

You can also think about these things in terms of regular practice. As we have regular practice as Christians, there is this matter of a temporal pattern. Every single week we gather together to celebrate as the people of God, to present ourselves before the Lord, to be sent out again into the world.

And that pattern is one that is a sort of temporal pattern. It's like every single time this is this great stone that was dropped into the lake of history in the work of Christ. Its ripples hit us once again as they go towards the shore of God's future.

And we're being born upon those towards the future that God has prepared for us, towards that great shore. And liturgy is very much shaping us within these patterns of life, punctuating human existence, giving us rhythms that we're doing the same thing again and again, but in slightly different ways. And there are these repeating patterns.

And on these repeating patterns, we see these variations. So, for instance, you'll be celebrating the Lord's Supper every single week, but it will vary according to the part, the time in the church calendar you're in, or the particular experience that the church is going through or you are going through. What does it mean to think about the person next to you as part of the body of Christ? Again, there are liturgical ways that you can recognize this, greeting each other with a kiss of peace.

That is a way in which you recognize that the person who's next to you is part of the significance. It's not just this event that's happening in your heart or something that you're being a spectator to. There's a deeper reality that we are the temple of the Holy Spirit.

We're being built together as a living temple made of living stones. And the person next to you is being built together with you. What does it mean to approach God? Well, it means to deal with sin first.

It means to have forgiveness and absolution. And it means to go through these different processes of being raised up into God's presence and of celebrating a meal with him, being sent out. And so liturgy, I think, can be best approached from the perspective of Scripture.

And evangelicals are strong on Scripture in their commitment to Scripture. That's what they're about. And whenever I've approached liturgy within an evangelical context, I've approached it in terms of deepening our commitment to Scripture.

We need to think about how Scripture is most fully played out, most fully needed into our imaginations. How do we work this into our imagination so it becomes part of the way in which we think? What does it mean to be a people who are a royal priesthood? Do we just have one person at the front who's doing everything? Well, one of the ways that liturgy has sought to express the fact that we are a royal priesthood is by seeing liturgy as the work of the people. We all participate.

We all have a voice within this. And they're set words, but we're not just saying words. We're praying words.

We're declaring words. We're confessing together. And in these different ways, we're expressing something about the truth of the faith.

Why do we say the creed? We say the creed in part because we are all part of this larger body of Christ. And what it means when one or two witnesses converge on the same

thing, it gives more weight to the thing that you're saying. And when the whole church joins together in confessing the creed, a creed that is confessed across churches, many different denominations, many different traditions, and they're all saying the same creed, it's a declaration of the strength of a collective witness to the truth of God.

And that's one of the reasons why we do something like declare the creed. It's an expression of a Christian and a biblical truth. This witness bearing, the church's response to the word of its Lord.

Why do we pray the Lord's Prayer together? It's an expression of, it's an orientation towards God. It's a recognition that he is our father, that we are joined together in this prayer. There's a corporate prayer.

We are praying together. The whole church is relating in this word of prayer towards God. Many other things we could say about the Lord's Prayer.

But liturgy, if we look at it more generally and think about the rationale for different aspects of it, it becomes clear that it's deeply theological and deeply biblical. This is not just a matter of tradition. It's a matter of tradition trying to establish the weight of scripture and the weight of Christian truth and protect that and outwork it to understand what it means to be people who are committed to approach God in the appropriate way.

To be people who are faithful to Christ and express that faithfulness in a way that's not just about individual expression. To express, to be part of a people that is a collective body, not just a lot of individuals. To be people who join together in a work, in a word of prayer, who join together in the act of worship.

And it's not just something that's spectated, that we spectate at. In all of these ways, I would bring people back to scripture, back to theology, back to those things that evangelicals are best at. And then work from those and show that they lead into these things.

When it comes to the practical changes, do it step by step. Explain why these things are being explored, why these things are being developed. That there is a biblical rationale for them and that the point is not just to adopt tradition wholesale and uncritically, but to be people who are more faithful to scripture.

To live out our fundamental commitments. And as we live that out, we'll often find that the tradition is there before us. It's been about preserving these things, developing these commitments and expressing them in the most coherent and consistent way possible.

And in that way, I've found that it's very easy to explain to evangelicals what liturgy is about. Because liturgy fundamentally is not opposed to scripture. It's a way in which we seek to be faithful to scripture.

Now that can take a bit of a shift in people's imagination. It can take a few steps for people to get that. But when people get it, I think it really clicks.

And their appreciation of liturgy is far deepened by the fact that it's grounded in a deep sense of scriptural authority. And the word of scripture and the world of scripture is something that comes alive in a new way through the liturgy. It's through baptism, the Lord's Supper, through the practice of corporate prayer, through the public reading of scripture.

Through all these different things that we have a deepened sense of coming to terms with the world of God's word. Now there's a lot more that I can say about this. Of course there's lots of follow-up questions that can be asked.

And I've rambled a bit but please follow up with any questions that you'd like to explore more. Thank you very much for listening. Lord willing I'll be back again tomorrow.

If you'd like to ask any further questions do so on my Curious Cat account. And if you'd like to support this in future videos please do so using my Patreon or PayPal accounts. Thank you very much.

God bless.