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## What It Means to Be Liturgical

By Scott C. Weidler

In this age of liturgical renewal on the one hand, and support for entertainment evangelism and church growth "gimmicks" on the other, being labeled "liturgical" can be either an honor or an accusation. However, few people really understand what it means to be liturgical, in the best sense of the word.

### What does it mean to be truly liturgical? [ [TOP](#) ]

To be sure, the answer to this question is a controversial one and complete agreement may never be reached, especially among liturgical scholars. However, it is crucial to understand this since it is a congregation's worship life which defines each particular community of faith.

### What it's not [ [TOP](#) ]

It's easy to determine what being liturgical is not.

- Being liturgical is not rigid formalism, although a sense of style, grace and good order does communicate the importance of the worship event.
- It is not rubrical legalism or necessarily doing it "by the book," although fully understanding and experiencing what the "experts" have prepared is very important. They must have been chosen to do their job for a good reason and must have a good reason for the decisions they've made.
- Being liturgical is not just "smells and bells," although participation in worship that attracts and uses all the senses is crucial to liturgical renewal.

Admittedly, all of the above "nots" are frequently the distinguishing characteristics of a liturgical congregation. This is an unfortunate situation and a major stumbling block to honest liturgical renewal.

If we know what it's not, then what is being liturgical all about? First of all, being liturgical means

being committed to an understanding of the Church, with a capital "C," as the priesthood of all believers regardless of culture, language, race, time or place. We profess this understanding every time the gathered assembly recites the Apostles' or Nicene Creed: "I believe in...the holy catholic Church" or "We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church."

## **Church [ [TOP](#) ]**

This means to take seriously the fact that the Church is not confined to one particular space on one particular Sunday morning. What a congregation does each Lord's Day is merely one visible manifestation of the holy catholic Church, that body of all God's faithful people regardless of time, location, denomination, culture or age. We are not alone in what we do. We are part of a link between the past and the future. We are a part of a connection between Christians in our own city, state, nation, Europe, Africa, Asia and heaven. We can only begin to humbly understand this when we accept the realization that God exists outside of time. Time is a human creation, which allows us to function in an orderly manner. Through our liturgy we are united to God, outside of human time and, therefore, united to believers of all places and ages.

If we seriously believe this, we must be committed to examining the traditions and practices of the faithful who have gone before us. If we really acknowledge that the Church is bigger than our particular congregation or denomination, then a phrase such as "we need to create our own liturgy for it to be relevant" has no place. The liturgy has been created for us over many centuries. It is awfully daring of us to assume we can create something better. This is not to say that the liturgy is stagnant. To be sure, it is constantly evolving with new modes of expression, especially in the areas of language and music, but the basic shape, texts and character of the liturgy have been with us for a long time and, no matter how often worship leaders deem it necessary to deviate from the tradition, it keeps coming back and will continue to into future generations. The historic liturgy, which has served the Church of all generations, is our most visible and experiential link with that Church and all her members. With proper training, understanding and care, worship leaders need not abandon the historic western rite to create relevant worship. Liturgical tradition has within it countless avenues for variety, accommodating itself to differing situations, themes, cultures, ages and concerns.

## **Word and Sacrament [ [TOP](#) ]**

Secondly, to be liturgical means to be committed to the full Christian expression of worship, that is Word and Sacrament, each and every Sunday. To gather on the Lord's Day and refuse to share in the Lord's Supper was unheard of in the early Church and throughout history, including the Reformation period. Martin Luther would be ashamed of many Lutheran congregations today, which fail to provide spiritual nourishment through both Word and Sacrament for her members each week. How can one be a part of the Body of Christ without regularly receiving the Body of Christ through bread and wine? When it comes to the Eucharist, we really are what we eat! Sadly enough, there are those who argue that communion just isn't popular in this fast-paced consumer society in which we live, or that it just takes too much time to do every week. What a shameful disregard of our theology, our heritage and the biblical witness. Any argument focusing on how much more "special" communion is when received less often is pointless. Dinner would be appreciated more if received only four times a year also, but we would never choose to limit our primary source of strength and sustenance in such a way!

When sharing in the Holy Eucharist becomes the heart and soul of a believer's week, it is impossible for him or her to imagine a Christian life without that weekly communal celebration.

### **Involving One's whole being in the worship of almighty God [ [TOP](#) ]**

Jesus was much smarter than are we. He compensated for our ever-wandering human minds by providing us not only with the Word, in print and in verbal proclamation, but with sources of receiving God through the very tangible and physical means of bread, wine and water. One who is liturgical will take this example and, realizing that we are bodily creatures, seek out ways of involving one's whole being in the worship of almighty God. To worship only with one's ears and mouths is to greatly limit our human potential. Physical gestures such as standing, sitting, kneeling, bowing, processing and, dare we follow Martin Luther's command, making the sign of the cross, all have their place in Christian worship, as do vivid colors and fabrics and other art. To be sure, these "extras" have been abused at times in history when they became requirements to faithful worship instead of aids to full participation, but that does not preclude their value in a well-balanced contemporary worship experience. The last thing anyone wants is a room full of robots all systematically making the sign of the cross and bowing in sync because someone has told them they must. However, if given the chance and the encouragement, many parishioners may come to cherish a more active, physical approach to worship without feeling self-conscious or embarrassed. Much free church worship and liturgical worship, while usually differing in style, come very close to one another in the area of physical involvement. Natural expression, using all of one's God-given senses, is a vital part of both traditions.

### **Participation by all [ [TOP](#) ]**

For many years, what most of experienced on Sunday mornings could be described as a "one man show." True, the choir had its few minutes and the congregation joined in a few hymns, the creed and the Lord's Prayer, but the pastor did everything else. The word "liturgy" can be literally translated, "the work of the people." That is why we now use the title "Presiding Minister" to define the chief role of the ordained in worship. He or she functions as a president or chairman of a meeting: calling the assembly to order, fulfilling unique duties reserved for him or her by the nature of their office, seeing that everyone participates as they are able, and wrapping the gathering up. Lay members, as representatives of the entire congregation, fulfill specific leadership roles also: choir members, other musicians, readers, writers and leaders of certain prayers, processional participants, communion assistants and so forth. The real "celebrants" of the liturgy, however, are the members of the assembly itself, functioning as a single body not as a gathering of individuals. The congregation in any one place is a symbol of the whole catholic Church, the Body of Christ. We worship, adore, sing, praise, listen, learn, share and receive the living God through Word and Sacrament together as a visible manifestation of the whole Church. When anyone who is physically in the room chooses not to participate, they weaken this gathered Body of Christ. It is also for this reason that simple liturgical responses, such as "and also with you," "thanks be to God" and "Amen" are so important. They are pregnant with theological meaning, yet simple enough for even the youngest Christian to grasp and use as a means of participation.

### **Lectionary [ [TOP](#) ]**

Another hallmark of liturgical renewal is a disciplined commitment to the use of the lectionary. This is

really another facet of a universal understanding of the Church, because for centuries, most Christians around this globe have been proclaiming the same, or at least, very similar, portions of scripture on the same days in the Christian year. This is a remarkable experience! To think that the scripture readings to which we listened and pondered, sang about and celebrated last Sunday were the same one that Anglicans in South Africa, Methodists in San Francisco, Presbyterians in Korea and Catholics in South America proclaimed, pondered, sang about and celebrated is exciting!

To use a lectionary fully is a discipline. It's not always easy, especially for the preacher. Many texts are uncomfortable for us today. Many texts seem to have nothing to say at a particular time. Yet, every sermon I've ever heard from a preacher committed to lectionary use has found insights pertinent to the current situation. When the perfect words don't quite find their way to the lips of the preachers, thank God that we are assured of God's presence through the bread and wine. Word and Sacrament do not compete for centrality in our worship. They work together to provide spiritual nourishment and strength. Lectionary use is also a discipline for the musician. Your favorite hymns or anthems may not fit the lessons for a day, but very often struggling with an uncomfortable or unfamiliar text will breed the freshest of musical possibilities. Musician and pastor working together to create a unified worship experience will fund unlimited possibilities with the lectionary as their basis for work and study. The lectionary can provide stimulating and reflective devotional material for all worshipers as well.

Lutherans have always been committed to the important of God's Word in worship and our lives. The lectionary ensures that we make use of the entirety of scripture. It is a vehicle whereby we allow the breadth of God to speak through us, rather than limiting the message to the worship leader's favorite, and most comfortable, passages.

### **Transcendent and Immanent [ [TOP](#) ]**

To be liturgical means to seek a balance between transcendent and immanent images of God. In our worship, we must create an environment that allows God to come to us not only as a friend and loving care-giver here and now, but also as a mighty king and ruler of all throughout eternity. All the images of God should find their way into our liturgical life. This implies the need for a careful evaluation of one's physical worship space and appropriately constructing the worship event in such a way as to compensate for a building's shortcomings. A grand Gothic structure can easily communicate a sense of awe and majesty, but issues of hospitality and nurture may need to be addressed through the conscious effort of worship leaders. A simple A-frame building, with little visual stimulation, may be an easy place to make people feel welcome and at ease, but to experience the transcendence can be difficult. The style in which we worship does communicate our beliefs. It is important that our worship truly be a vehicle for all the facets of our faith to be communicated.

### **We celebrate [ [TOP](#) ]**

Finally, to be liturgical means to admit that what we do when we gather as the Church is to celebrate a mystery. No human can fully comprehend the fullness of God's grace and how it is communicated to us. Part of being a community of God's people is to realize that a life-long journey is taking place. Something important is happening and it may take a lifetime to fully grow into an understanding of the Christian experience. Even then, some things may never be fully explained. That's where faith

comes into play for the Christian. Our worship life must reflect this reality. We must accept the fact that what we do as God's people will not be completely comfortable or familiar all the time and certainly not on first exposure. We cannot misuse this understanding as an excuse to ignore or exclude visitors or potential members of the Church. We must be hospitable and welcoming, providing them with enough information and materials to allow them to participate as they are able. But the gathered faithful must communicate to them, with a gracious sense of spirit, that what we do together is important enough for them to come back time and time again. We cannot accomplish this by weakening the vehicle used to communicate God's presence for centuries merely to appeal to the newcomer. We must not offer a worship experience of "dessert," devoid of any "meat and potatoes," just to get newcomers in the door and make them feel comfortable. That's blatantly admitting that we are embarrassed of our faith. The visit needs to feel a sense of importance. They must know that the assembly they are witnessing is part of something bigger than what they immediately see, hear and feel. They need to be attracted to what we celebrate, even if they might not understand it all. They need to be intrigued and enticed into discovering the fullness and depth of Christianity. They need to realize their need to join the journey! The liturgy is the vehicle through which this has been happening since the earliest days of the Church. If we are truly one Church with those Christians, then we need to learn that vital liturgical worship can allow God to speak to all people, regardless of age, culture, lifestyle, or their own place in the journey, whether they are newcomers to the faith or faithful members of the Christian community for many decades.

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