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Christ-
Centered
Worship

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Christ- Centered Worship

LETTING *the* GOSPEL SHAPE
OUR PRACTICE

Bryan Chapell

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To my wife, Kathy,
whose flute, piano, voice, choir directing, and heart
daily bring the music of worship
into the life
the Lord has graced us to share.



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Part I

GOSPEL WORSHIP

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1

THE GOSPEL OF STRUCTURE

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Structures tell stories. Martin Luther knew this when he designed the first Protestant church in Torgau, Germany. Prior to the construction of this chapel for the castle of Luther's protector, the Elector John Frederick I, Protestant services were held mainly in churches that were formerly Roman Catholic. The main architectural change that occurred when Protestants took control of such churches was the replacement of a cross on the spire of the church with a rooster, symbol of the new dawn of the Reformation. And it was not rare in the competing tides of Reformation times that if Roman Catholic forces returned to power, they would replace the rooster with another cross.

Each faith movement signaled its control by the changed "hood ornament" most obvious to all in the town or region, but the basic architecture of the church changed little. Thus, when Luther had the opportunity to design a church that would reflect the new perspectives of the Reformation, he made sure that the basic structure of the church would convey the gospel story he wanted to tell. No structural change would have been more obvious to sixteenth-century worshipers than the placement of the pulpit. In deliberate contrast with the Roman Catholic practice of placing the pulpit at the front of the congregation, Luther arranged for the pastor to preach among the people. The pulpit was at the center of the long wall of the worship sanctuary. In addition, the altar, while still located at the

front of the church, was no longer separated from the people by screens that had designated sacred space for clergy alone.

Luther preached “the priesthood of believers,” and his structures conveyed the same message. The placement of the pulpit silently explained that the preacher was not more holy than the people. He ministered among them because all were fulfilling holy callings as they served God in the occupations for which he had gifted them. The architecture of the altar “said” there was no need for priestly intercession or separation, since everyone had equal and immediate access to God. The early Calvinistic churches of the French Reformation pushed the idea further by putting the pulpit in the center of a circled congregation.¹ This structure not only symbolized the priesthood of believers, but also asserted the centrality of the Word in Christian worship.

Informed, Not Ruled

I do not mention these architectural details in order to mandate designs for church architecture. In fact, the various ways in which the Reformers expressed their views can also argue for the liberties in church architecture that modern Christians have obviously exercised. But such freedom is best applied when we have some sense of the story we are trying to tell, and this requires understanding our place in God’s unfolding plan for his church. We should not ignore the wisdom of church forebears just because it’s old, or automatically reject it just because we didn’t think of it. We consider the history because God does not give all of his wisdom to any one time or people. Slavish loyalty to traditions will keep us from ministering effectively to our generation, but trashing the past entirely denies God’s purposes for the church on which we must build. If we do not learn from the past, we will lose insights God has granted others as they have interacted with his Word and people.

Always we are to be informed by tradition; never are we to be ruled by it. The Word of God is our only infallible rule of faith and practice, but an unwillingness to consider what previous generations have learned about applying God’s Word discloses either naïveté or arrogance. God intends for us to stand on the shoulders of those faithful before us. He gives us a mission for our time, but he also gives us a history to prepare us for our present calling. Without critically and constructively examining this foundation we are ill equipped for building the church God wants today. This is true not only for the structures of church architecture, but also for the structures of church worship.

1. Geoffrey Barraclough, ed., “Calvinism: The Majesty of God,” in *The Christian World: A Social and Cultural History* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1981): 178–79.

Designed to Communicate

Just as church leaders through the ages have structured their buildings to reflect their understanding of the gospel, they have also structured what happens inside those buildings to do the same. Already we have seen how the placement of pulpit, altar, and pew could convey a message. What was done in the pulpit, at the altar, and in the pew was also structured to communicate. For example, in the Roman Catholic Mass, the priest stood between the altar and the people when dispensing the elements to symbolize his intercessory role. By contrast, many Protestant Reformers intentionally stood behind the Communion Table when administering the Lord's Supper to demonstrate the people's immediate access to Christ.² The physical placement of the furniture, pastor, and people was designed to communicate a clear gospel message: "Nothing and no one comes between Christ and the believer."

We may think that "the medium is the message" is a modern insight, but the ancient church practiced such communication principles long before Marshall McLuhan coined the phrase. Church leaders understood that if the message was inconsistent with the means by which it was communicated, then the message could easily get lost. Thus, they painted the message of the gospel with every communication brush their structures would provide: building architecture, decoration, pulpit design, furniture placement, the position of worship leaders, and even the placement of participants in the worship service.

Never was there only one right structure for communicating the gospel for all regions, cultures, and times. Nor was adequate wisdom always applied. Sometimes the truth of the message got lost in embellishment; other times the beauty of the gospel was veiled in reactionary starkness. But in every age, including our own, those who build churches have been forced to consider how their understanding of the gospel gets communicated by the structures in which it is presented.

Gospel Worship

Gospel understanding is not only embedded in physical structures, but it is also communicated in the worship patterns of the church.³ The structure

2. K. Deddens, "A Missing Link in Reformed Liturgy," *Clarion* 37, nos. 15–19 (1998): 6, <http://www.spindleworks.com/library/deddens/missing.htm>.

3. Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship: Proclaiming and Enacting God's Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 110.

of a church's worship service is called its liturgy.⁴ Many Protestants think "liturgy" only describes highly ceremonial worship in Catholic, Orthodox, or Anglican churches. We normally talk about our worship in terms of a "Sunday service" or the "worship time." The activities that surround the Sermon we may describe as the "song service," "the service of prayer," or simply as "the worship." However, the biblical word for all that's included in our worship is "liturgy" (*latreia*, see Rom. 12:1), and it simply describes the public way a church honors God in its times of gathered praise, prayer, instruction, and commitment.⁵ All churches that gather to worship have a liturgy—even if it's a very simple liturgy.

The customary ways that a church arranges the aspects and components of its public worship form its liturgical tradition. Similar to church architecture, a church's traditional worship practices can be very elaborate (sometimes called liturgical, or high church) or simple (non-liturgical, or low church). The differences in worship services can be significant, leading many onlookers to think there is no rhyme or reason to the varying liturgical approaches. In this increasingly secularized era, even church leaders may not know why different elements of their worship services are present or sequenced as they are—and may think everything is up for grabs as long as people are not put off by the changes.

But, analogous to church architecture, the *order of worship* (another way of describing the liturgy) conveys an understanding of the gospel. Whether one intends it or not, our worship patterns always communicate something. Even if one simply goes along with what is either historically accepted or currently preferred, an understanding of the gospel inevitably unfolds. If a leader sets aside time for Confession of Sin⁶ (whether by prayer, or by song, or by Scripture reading), then something about the gospel gets communicated. If there is no Confession in the course of the service, then something else is communicated—even though the message conveyed may not have been intended.

Similar to church architecture, differing church traditions and cultural contexts have resulted in great variation in the structure of Christian liturgy. But, also similar to the physical structures of the church, where the truths of the gospel are maintained there remain commonalities of worship structure that transcend culture. Despite having great architectural variety,

4. Peter Leithart, "For Whom Is Worship?" *New Horizons* 23, no. 4 (April 2002): 5.

5. John W. de Gruchy, "Aesthetic Creativity, Eucharistic Celebration and Liturgical Renewal: With Special Reference to the Reformed Tradition" (paper for the Buvton Conference, Stellenbosch, South Africa, September 1, 2003), 1.

6. Here and elsewhere in this book terms such as Confession of Sin that may have a common and generic meaning in Christian devotion are capitalized when they refer to a distinct or formal component of a worship service.

Christian churches still have common denominators: a place to proclaim the Word; a place to gather for prayer, praise, and receiving the Word; a place to administer and receive the sacraments; and others. No one has imposed these architectural features on all churches; rather, the way we dispense, receive, and respond to the gospel in a corporate setting has necessitated these familiar structures. For similar reasons, there are common liturgical structures that transcend individual contexts and traditions.

Gospel Continuity

Liturgy tells a story. We tell the gospel by the way we worship. Where a church maintains the truths of the gospel, it inevitably discovers aspects of worship that are in harmony with other faithful churches. In fact, worshipping with these aspects is one important way a church maintains fidelity with the gospel.

Because they understood the importance of our worship, early church fathers designed an architecture for worship that is still reflected in most churches today. As early as the second century,⁷ records indicate that the church divided its worship into two major segments: the Liturgy of the Word (see chart 1.1 on page 23) and the Liturgy of the Upper Room (see chart 1.2 on page 24).⁸ Today we think of the Liturgy of the Word as the portion of the worship service that culminates in preaching. We think of the Liturgy of the Upper Room as the part of the worship service that includes the Lord's Supper, or Communion. Even if our churches do not practice Communion every week, they still typically break the service into these two major segments on the occasions the ordinance is observed. By moving from Proclamation to Communion in the order of worship, churches through the ages retell the story that those who truly hear God's Word will share his love.⁹

My hope in writing this book is that readers who just had an “aha” moment in the preceding paragraph—discovering that their worship pattern unites them with multiple centuries of fellow Christians who have worshiped similarly—will also be delighted to find how their worship can unite them in mission with those fellow believers. In every age, we worship God to further the cause of his gospel. We know the “good news” of that gospel as we recognize the holiness of our Creator, confess our sin, seek his

7. De Gruchy, “Aesthetic Creativity,” 278.

8. John M. Barkley, *Worship of the Reformed Church* (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1967), 41.

9. Mark L. Dalbey, “A Biblical, Historical, and Contemporary Look at the Regulative Principle of Worship” (DMin diss., Covenant Theological Seminary, 1999), 37.

grace, are assured of his mercy, give him thanks, petition his aid, seek his instruction, and, in loving response to all his mercies, live for him. Charts 1.1 and 1.2 (see pages 23–24) show how different church traditions have tried to express these gospel truths through the architecture of their liturgy.

Liturgy Strategy

At first glance, what will be most apparent about these liturgies are their differences. Looking at them will be something like observing the skyline of a modern city. All we will see initially are the different shapes, sizes, and complexities of the structures. But the more we observe, and the more the architecture is explained, the more we will begin to understand that each of the architects built with the same basic materials and design principles. Form varies according to specific functions and design intentions, but every architect still had to make sure walls bore the proper weight, ceilings were the right height, and foundations were laid at sufficient depth. After further study, we may conclude that some did not design or build as well as others, but we will also see that the most successful still had to learn from those who preceded them. No one built without considering what others had learned.

Perhaps the simplest way to begin seeing common patterns among all the varying details of these charts is to note that even the two basic divisions of the liturgy have separate movements. The Liturgy of the Word, in each of the five traditions listed, has elements that lead to the preaching of the Word. Preaching is not the only thing done in the Liturgy of the Word. There is “Preparation” prior to “Proclamation.” This “Preparation,” as we will soon see, is not random or arbitrary. The components of the worship service prior to and after the Sermon lead the heart through various stages of awe, humility, assurance, and thanksgiving to make us receptive and responsive to the instruction of the Word. There is a strategy to the liturgy.

Opening “Stuff”

We will unfold the beauty and power of this strategy in later chapters. Essential now is the realization of how sad is the common misperception of what happens prior to the Sermon in many Protestant churches. I often hear that misperception when I am invited to preach during a regular pastor’s absence from a local church. A lay leader will often orient me to the worship service with words similar to these: “I’ll take care of the opening stuff, so that you can do the sermon.”