A Defense of Reformed Liturgy

by Dr. Michael Horton

If anyone had told me that I would one day write an article defending any kind of liturgy, much less something called "Reformed liturgy," I would have politely changed the subject. But here I am, writing that very article and almost giddy with enthusiasm for the project. If the reader will permit a bit of brief autobiography, it may help make the point.

Raised in mainstream conservative evangelicalism, wrestling with God and his people became somewhat commonplace. In my early teens, I began questioning things and turned to the Book of Romans, at my brother's suggestion, for answers. What I found there contradicted much of what I was being taught in an Arminian private school and church, but there was no church in town that seemed to serve up a diet of "sovereign grace," so off I went to the "big city" next door, to Bidwell Presbyterian Church, a distinguished United Presbyterian congregation in Chico, California, whose well-preserved Victorian architecture and vaulted ceilings inspired a mixture of enchantment, awe, unfamiliarity and no small degree of fear. "Isn't this awfully 'Catholic,'" I recall having said to myself. The service itself contributed little to ease my worries in that regard, as the congregation in unison recited a creed, a confession of sin, and heard a declaration of pardon from the minister up front. It was all very strange. The songs were not the Bill Gaither choruses I had come to know and loathe. (I have always had trouble understanding the charge of contemporary worship that traditional worship music is boring, given the repetitious and unimaginative style of many of the praise choruses.) Instead, the almost demonic bass end of the organ's pipes nearly unhinged my jaws, as the processional made its way down the aisle with, "For All The Saints." The pastor got me reading serious theological work and I finally found compadres, soul mates, in this passion for the theology of the Book of Romans.

In later years, I would reflect on the harmony between that service and Romans. Each Sunday at Bidwell, the focus of the liturgy and singing would be on God and his saving work in Christ for his whole church, while at my home church, the focus was on me and my personal "willing and running," as Paul put it (Rom 9:12). Since then, I have studied liturgy in some depth and have come to believe that it is impossible to be Reformed in theology and have one's worship shaped by music companies in Nashville owned and operated by Pentecostals. I do not hate Pentecostals. But having experienced the deeply Arminian (even Pelagian) theology that fuels their experience-oriented style, I have come to believe that style and substance are indivisible. God-centered theology requires God-centered worship and piety, while human-centered theology will always lead to entertainment, emotional exuberance, subjective fanaticism, and the never-ending roller-coaster of repeating the same "high" next week. There is no reason why a Reformed church needs to adopt the resources of charismatic and Pentecostal groups, since the Reformed tradition has, by God's grace, produced some of the greatest hymns and choral music in church history. Its heritage of Psalm-singing, including the full range of psalms, set to appropriate tunes, is rich. There is a reason why that organ with its imposing and ominous-sounding pipes is given priority over the guitar. The ministry of Word and sacrament is one of proclamation, not chiefly of informal storytelling. The whole service centers not on an experience, but on an announcement! How do we best convey this sense to the people?

According to *The Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith*, "Reformed worship glorifies God, the holy God, whose gracious salvation is a free, undeserved gift. Therefore, Reformed worship can be described as 'objective'; with awe it glorifies the sovereign God, yet it is essentially thankful." It is important for those of us who call ourselves "Reformed" to realize that Reformed theology is not simply a new way of thinking or believing, but a new way of worship and service. First, Reformed worship is dialogical. That is, God speaks to us (guilt, followed by grace), and we respond (gratitude). This, by the way, is the division of the Heidelberg Catechism (1563): Guilt, Grace and Gratitude. As David G. Buttrick points out, "If medieval worship had become an 'office,' a propitiatory work offered to God securing mercy, Reformation worship was responsive-like the biblical leper who, healed, turned back to praise God." In the Reformed tradition, he notes, "worship is neither a transactional sacrifice nor an awareness of religious experience. God acts empty-handed and we respond to God's goodness in a 'sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving.'"

But, as Buttrick also observes, the Reformers were not innovators. On the contrary, they thought the medieval church had added too many new services and ceremonies that obscured the Law and the Gospel and the centrality of Christ.

Origins of Reformed Liturgy

While the differences pale in comparison to today's free-for-all, Reformed patterns varied slightly even during the Reformation. Zurich, for instance, led by Ulrich Zwingli, was largely out of fellowship with the rest of the Reformed movement, until after Zwingli's death, especially for its extreme views on the Lord's Supper (i.e., a memorialist view, chided as "the Real Absence" doctrine). One might expect Zwingli to have been a liturgical radical, as he had silenced the organs and whitewashed the walls. Yet, his service actually retained the sung Ave Maria and a Commemoration of the Dead and he only abandoned Latin, ceremonies and vestments under strong pressure from the people.

More principled reflection on biblical worship took place in Strasbourg, a German city during the Reformation, led by the Reformed theologian Martin Bucer, Calvin's mentor. In 1524 the Reformed service was the German mass, purged of its errant theology. The goal was to find the most ancient threads of the mass (which were in some way centered on a progress of guilt, grace, and gratitude) and expunging the more recent accretions that tended toward works-righteousness and the re-sacrifice of Christ. It was here where John Calvin developed his liturgical views and took them back to Geneva, where he had already attempted unsuccessfully to reform the liturgy away from Zwinglian lines that William Farel had established. In Strasbourg, Calvin pastored the French refugees and adapted Bucer's service. "Thus," writes Buttrick, "Calvin's new liturgy incorporated the basic shape of the Mass, Word, and sacrament, rather than the stark 'preachiness' of Farel's" service. "No meeting of the church," Calvin wrote, "should take place without the Word, prayers, partaking of the Supper, and almsgiving" (John Calvin's *Institutes* 4.17.44).

Although the Reformed departed from the Lutheran understanding of the Lord's Supper in certain essential respects, both agreed that Christ was actually present and was not only exhibited but given through the preached Word and received sacrament. Both rejected any Zwinglian

interpretation of the sacraments as "bare and naked signs" (see the Belgic, Second Helvetic and Westminster Confessions on the point), and emphasized the connection between Word, sacrament, and Spirit. While the Spirit is active in every aspect of our lives as Christians, he only dispenses his saving blessings in Christ through Word and sacrament. Thus, the service must be a "Word and sacrament" service, not cluttered with special music, excessive singing, and lavish ceremonies.

The outline of a Lutheran and Reformed service was basically identical. As Dr. Bryan Chapell (President of Covenant Theological Seminary) points out, the Liturgy of the Word, for both groups, began with the call to worship (hymn and blessing), recitation of a prayer of general confession, absolution or declaration of pardon, pastoral prayer (including specific requests on behalf of the congregation), Scripture readings, the Apostles' Creed, and sermon. Hymns and psalms, of course, were interspersed throughout. The Liturgy of the Upper Room (i.e., the Communion service), for both Lutheran and Reformed churches, began with the offering, the intercessions, the Lord's Prayer, followed by the Exhortation (i.e., warning against unlawful eating and drinking), the Creed (sung in the Reformed churches), Words of Institution, Prayer of Consecration, and the Fraction (breaking of the bread or wafer). Communicants then came forward to receive the common cup and the bread from a common loaf. As in the Liturgy of the Word, here hymns and psalms were interspersed as appropriate and the Aaronic Blessing was pronounced as a benediction.

What is the point in all of this? First, it is biblical. All of the described elements are evident in Scripture and are present in these services. Paul's warnings about properly exhorting the congregation and fencing the table are taken seriously here. As the early church simply adapted the synagogue worship (in which Jesus himself was reared and, when he taught his disciples to pray according to the form of the Lord's Prayer, seems to have endorsed) to Christian use. Jesus was raised with a service book, full of prayers and the Psalms, as were many of the first Christians. The basic elements of the services thus described are actually patterned on the earliest forms of Christian worship available.

Second, therefore, Reformed worship is God-centered. It focuses on the objective, what God has done in Christ for the salvation of sinners, applied by the Holy Spirit. Calvin himself insisted, against opposition on the city council, that there be an assurance of pardon and weekly Communion. Believers must constantly be reminded that they are sinners who require divine forgiveness even for the sinfulness that clings to their best works. They must never be allowed to fall back on themselves for assurance nor live again for themselves, so the service must concentrate on Guilt and Grace, with gratitude as the only appropriate creaturely response. Medieval worship had degenerated into a show, Calvin lamented in a number of places. Since people could not read or follow the Latin sermon and liturgy, their only point of contact with the service was emotional. In fact, morality plays--dramas--often overshadowed or even replaced sermons. Similarly today, images prevail and sermons and worship styles are increasingly reduced to the lowest common denominator. What results, of course, is another tyranny of images over words, "orthofeely" over orthodoxy, experience and entertainment over proclamation and announcement.

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