

What About Liturgy?

By Santiago Lange



Liturgical worship, is an important element in many religions, including the Christian faith. Through God's grace, Christians strive to mature in their relationship with Jesus. This endeavor does require us to make adjustments in our views. One of the areas where this might apply is our understanding regarding the usefulness and value of traditions. Some Evangelicals condemn all "church traditions" and "liturgical practices" (whatever they may mean by that) as a cloaked attempt to undermine and weaken the authority of the inspired Holy Scriptures. But, is this true?

In England, at the Tower of London, every afternoon at exactly 4 PM there is an interesting ceremony. The Beefeaters, British royalty's ceremonial guards, come out of the Tower and feed the ravens on the front lawn. There is a legend that as long as the ravens are fed, London would never fall to her enemies. During WW2 and the Battle of Britain, when London was being bombed by the Nazis, many ravens were frightened away. Prime Minister Winston Churchill ordered the Beefeaters to secretly clip the wings of the remaining ravens so they could not fly. Why? To provide a sense of stability and security to Londoners in a troubled time.

We know that Jesus is our strong anchor and that our primary identity must be in Him. We don't have to worry about "our ravens flying away". We are secure in our Savior's hands. And yet, there is a proper place in the Christian church for God honoring traditions. Simply defined a tradition is "*that which is handed down from generation to generation*". Of and by themselves traditions are neither "good" or "bad". The content and reason for our traditions determine their potential value.

The New Testament does speak of tradition in a positive light. In 2. Thessalonians 2:15 the apostle Paul writes: "*Stand firm and hold to the TEACHINGS (or traditions) we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter*". Jesus did many things for which the only authority is tradition. For example, attendance in a synagogue (Luke 4:16) is not mentioned once in the Law or entire Old Testament. Giving thanks before eating (Matthew 14:19) was not part of the Law. It was purely a Jewish tradition. The singing of a hymn at the end of the Passover meal (Matthew 26:30) was not part of the Law regarding proper Passover observance. The Feast of Dedication, that Christ attended (John 10:22) was a Jewish celebration. Do these facts have any implications for a liturgy that is not directly commanded for Christians under the New Covenant?

There are two extremes regarding traditions. The Pharisees were guilty of making tradition equal with the authority of Scripture. The Pharisees believed in the Oral Law, an unbroken set of traditions that they believed to be in existence since the days of Moses. The Pharisees

taught that both the Oral and Written Law was binding. And, based on their particular understanding, they introduced traditions and “liturgical practices” that did not honor God.

As always, an explanation of terms can be instructive. One scholarly source defines the term “liturgy” as follows: Liturgy (Gk. λειτουργία from λείω ‘people’ and ἔργον ‘work’). The original Gk. word was used of a public work of any kind, not only religious, but in the Septuagint, it is applied particularly to the services of the Temple. The word in English is used in two senses: (1) of all the prescribed services of the Church, e.g. incl. the canonical hours, as contrasted with private devotion; and (2) specifically as a title of the Eucharist (as the chief act of public worship). It is commonly so used among the Eastern Churches...”. Cross, F. L., & Livingstone, E. A. (Eds.). (2005). In *The Oxford dictionary of the Christian Church* (3rd ed. rev., p. 994). Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

Over the centuries some Christians have defended traditions or certain “liturgical practices” as having an equal footing with Scripture. As Evangelicals we believe and assert that God's Word is our final authority in matters of faith and practice. The most notable „liturgical celebration” directly instructed by our Lord to His disciples is the Eucharist, often called the “Lord’s Supper”. But, this does not prohibit Christians from framing, expanding, teaching and cherishing a God honoring “liturgy” in our congregations that focuses on the story of God’s people, God’s mighty deeds, and on WHO God is. The mentioned examples and the New Testament witness clearly underscore this claim. More specifically, “liturgical practices” can help us focus on the Christian story with Jesus’ life, death, resurrection and ascension at its core and center.

The RCL (Revised Common Lectionary) offers Christians a widely accepted and meaningful liturgical pattern of worship strongly focusing on the Gospel. While there might be other legitimate „liturgical approaches“ we might want to recall Winston Churchill who famously said: *“The RCL is the worst form of systematically reading the Bible as church, except for all the others.”* □