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*Without Form and Void: The Usefulness
of Liturgies and Written Prayers*



Monte Wilson

Knowing the truth, biblically, is always contingent upon doing the truth (John 3:21). For this reason orthodoxy, or right reflection upon the truth, must properly preserve the dialectical tension that keeps it rooted in orthopraxis, or action. Thus, right understanding of truth must always be kept carefully rooted in right obedience, or orthodoxy degenerates into truth claims without the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ.

JOHN H. ARMSTRONG

They therefore form opinions on what is beyond the limits of understanding. For this cause also the Apostle says, "Be not wise beyond what it is fitting to be wise, but be wise prudently" (Romans 12:3).

IRENAEUS (A.D. 180)

I still remember my first "liturgical service." I'd been preaching in an evangelistic crusade in south Florida. Hundreds of young people attended every evening. One of the young people went to an Episcopalian minister and encouraged him to invite me to speak in their church, which he did. I was a bit nervous about the venue, to say the least. My father was a Southern Baptist pastor, so all my life I had heard about these "Whiskypalians" who utilized the smoke and mirrors of prayers by rote and sermonettes by mini-popes to mask the reality that God was nowhere to be found. I decided to go ahead and minister—after all, these folks obviously needed the pure gospel.

I was humiliated. In all my years I had never witnessed such fervent devotion, depth of commitment, or so high a degree of biblical literacy. Not only did the service contain more use of the Scriptures than in any service I had ever attended but it also dripped with God's presence.

I had always considered "forms" to be devices of the Devil, instruments with which to quench the Spirit. Of course, the fact that my Baptist service followed an unwritten-but-always-followed-form never crossed my mind.

One of my chief arguments with any notion of "form" was that I believed it to be a substitute for "content." Worship

could have one or the other, but not both. The Pharisees had their forms, but they—both Pharisees and forms—were without the Spirit. End of discussion.

Moreover, how could the church blindly embrace practices that were nowhere to be found in the Bible? First Corinthians left no room for misunderstanding: everyone was to arrive to worship with something to offer, whether it be a gift, a psalm, a spiritual song or a reading from Scripture. This seemed to me to mean that the congregation must be led of the Spirit, which meant that forms were of no use. "Spontaneity" was to be the ruling principle.

TO FORM . . .

I remember the day God began to reshape my approach to worship and the idea of forms. I was reading the creation account in Genesis chapter one. "The earth was a formless void." Did God leave the earth in this state? No. He spent the next days giving form and filling the void. After he created Adam, God told him to take creation and shape it into something even more beautiful than it was in its present condition. Mankind was commissioned to beautify creation, to subdue the earth and all it contained for God's glory. Adam was to bring "form" to creation.

When Solomon built the temple, God gave instruction to utilize colors, shapes and textures to add to the beauty of worship. More important to our subject, God also demanded certain forms be established to guide the saints in their worship. Further, these forms were not to be handled as mere suggestions—but as strict, detailed directions in how worshipers were to approach God.

From the beginning, we humans have always had a proclivity for freelancing. We want to map out our own way to be saved, to worship, and to live. God said the heart was most important but that if the heart were "right," it would follow certain forms. Of course we know from Old Testament history that Israel often followed the forms while hearts were being unfaithful to God. This didn't mean that the forms were not important, only that their importance could never be

divorced from the condition of the worshiper's heart.

The forms themselves were to support the worshiper. They were put in place to direct his actions. In many ways, the forms were symbols that were to reflect back to him what was—or should be—going on in his heart. Slaughtered lambs, poured-out water, laying hands on a scapegoat and such were not arbitrary actions which had no basis in spiritual reality. On the contrary, such forms most definitely pointed to those realities.

When the New Testament Church began to worship, it did not do so in a historical vacuum. These people were Israelites. For century after century their worship had taken on certain forms. Of course, some of the forms would now cease, but some would be converted to Christian use. Take the celebration of Pentecost, for example. Feasts were part of the form of the worship of Israel. What believers did in keeping Pentecost was now given the added meaning of the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Church.

Was the keeping of Pentecost something mandated by one of the apostles? No, but we do see Paul returning to Jerusalem in order to keep this feast. What do we say about Paul's journey to Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost with the other apostles? Was the chief protagonist of Judaizers guilty of importing a false, extrabiblical form for worship?

OR NOT TO FORM

Sadly, far too many people within the Reformed tradition are dispensationalists when it comes to defining what is or is not "biblical worship." Read these words of Samuel Miller (1769-1850), professor of ecclesiastical history and church government at Princeton Seminary, from his book *Thoughts on Public Prayer*:

We are persuaded that liturgies have no countenance in the word of God, and were unknown in the primitive apostolic Church; and, as Protestants, we feel bound to adopt and act upon the principle, that that which is not contained in Holy Scripture, or which cannot by good and necessary consequence

be deduced from that which is contained in it, ought to have no place in the Church of God.¹

It is as if the Old Testament is considered utterly irrelevant to post-resurrection worship. While "Holy Scripture" is mentioned, Miller is obviously referring to the "New Testament." Interestingly, the "primitive apostolic Church" did not have the New Testament, so were left with the Old Testament Scriptures to guide their worship—Scriptures that were replete with forms and liturgies that said, "Do this first, this next, then this." Is this not a "liturgy"? Can we not, "by good and necessary consequence," deduce that forms are not only legitimate but advantageous?

The Church gradually adopted various forms to serve its quest to worship God, both biblically and appropriately. As Thomas Oden notes:

Worship requires outward order to be accountable to its inner reality. No garden exists without order; without it the land merely spawns weeds. Christian worship from its earliest beginning has been ordered, for example, around a regular day of the week. . . .

The experienced liturgist comes especially to appreciate those recurrent signposts and familiar pathways that remind the community of its historical experience and continuity through time. As the psalmists have sung, we now sing. Where the prophets, apostles, and martyrs have walked, we now walk. Gradually there is engendered a rich sense of placement in time that has a reference point transcending time. One sees one's current activity as illumined by that placement in time. . . . Eucharist is something that the communicant has done before and tasted many times anew. Part of the liturgist's task is to look for ways in which those pathways and signposts can still function meaningfully to address modern consciousness. The pastor does well to resist exaggerated forms of faddism and hunger for novelty which so plague modern religious aspirations. But on the other side, the pastor does well to make good use of the wisest and best efforts at liturgical renewal that have been consensually formed on the basis of careful scriptural and historical study.²

Two ways a modern Christian can denigrate liturgical forms are to ignore the Old Testament and to discount the direction in which the Holy Spirit led the Church for almost 2,000 years. Any explanation of the Regulative Principle that ignores the Old Testament is doomed to produce an anemic, minimalistic worship.

WRITTEN PRAYERS

One of the more questioned practices of modern day liturgical forms is the use of written prayers. Again, Miller: "Prescribed forms of prayer appear to have been unknown in the Christian Church for several hundred years after Christ."³

Let's see now. Denominations were unknown for the first centuries, as well. Would Miller then renounce his Presbyterianism? And since the Church never knew of a Presbyterian form of Church government until the days of Calvin, would he then say that such a government was "wrong" or "evil" or "extra-biblical"?

By the way, there are a number of corporate prayers passed down from the first century. The first one that comes to mind is from the *Didache*, A.D. 100: "As this piece of bread was scattered over the hills and then was brought together and made one, so let your Church be brought together from the ends of the earth into your Kingdom. For yours is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ forever."

And what of the fact that the early Christians, as Jewish converts, utilized the corporate prayers of worship from the liturgy they had used in the synagogue?

Miller's sentiment is, I believe, to honor God with our obedience. We cannot simply do or say whatever-we-feel-led-of-the-Spirit-to-do-and-say, and justify it with "but my heart is right." If the Bible says, "No," then, however golden-intentioned we are, our actions are sinful. However, if the Bible does not expressly forbid something that we insist is sinful, we fall into a punctilious Phariseeism.

To Miller's thinking, written prayers not only have a questionable pedigree, they also transmit a spiritual disease.

Confining ministers to forms of prayer in public worship tends to restrain and discourage both the Spirit and the gift of prayer. The constant repetition of the same words, from year to year, is, undoubtedly, adapted, with multitudes of persons, to produce dullness and a loss of interest.⁴

And, of course, it's not just written prayers, but forms themselves that put the soul to sleep. "[A] constant form is a certain way to bring the soul to a cold, insensible, formal worship."⁵

I assume Samuel repeatedly told his wife or friends, "I love you." Did he lose interest in her or them? Did his various family rituals surrounding meals, the celebration of Christmas and such freeze his soul toward his wife and children?

Should we throw creeds out because reciting them repeatedly will cause us to lose interest in their doctrinal summations? The early Church ate the Lord's Supper every Lord's Day; clearly they weren't concerned that repetition would dull the senses.

Imagine an Old Testament worshiper coming to one of the priests. "Hey Levi. We have been doing this sacrifice the same way over and over for century after century. How 'bout some creativity next Saturday, okay? We're getting bored out here." Dullness is a problem of the heart, not the form. Many leaders within the charismatic movement will readily confess to a fair number of services where the people were jaded and dull. Spontaneity and a laissez-faire approach to worship do not ensure warm hearts. Forms no more quench the Spirit than freedom ensures his presence.

What if we continually offer up scriptural prayers such as the Lord's Prayer? If we pray this prayer every Sunday or every day, will our souls become cold? Well, possibly. But, is it the fault of the words, of repetition? Or, is it the fault of the heart?

Contrary to Miller's concerns, Calvin believed that forms and written prayers were quite useful. Not only did they help keep the Church on track and rooted in biblical realities, they assisted the minister in his leadership.

I highly approve of it that there be a certain form, from which the ministers be not allowed to vary: That first, some provision be made to help the simplicity and unskilfulness of some; second, that the consent and harmony of the churches one with another may appear; and lastly, that the capricious giddiness and levity of such as affect innovations may be prevented. To which end I have showed that a catechism will be very useful. Therefore there ought to be a stated catechism, a stated form of prayer, and administration of the sacraments.⁶

"Capricious giddiness and levity of such as affect innovations"—does this sound like a description of modern evangelical church-ville? Our highest value is placed on being creative and innovative. To the modern mind, only that which is "new" is authentic. If it is something passed down by our forefathers or if it is something that someone else has already done or said, then it cannot be truly spiritual. Such a mind-set was foreign to the Church up until the last century or so.

Written prayers passed down from generation to generation are like treasures bequeathed to us from our forefathers. These prayers have stood the test of time and have been used for the edification of hundreds of thousands of people for one thousand years. These prayers have had their content sifted for alien material, their syntax has been perfected for beauty and appropriateness, and their fruitfulness verified for usefulness.

Written prayers are for me, not for God. I have a desire to speak to him in an appropriate manner. How do I do this? Sometimes I hear a mature believer say something in his or her prayer and, without even realizing it, I begin reciting the same words as my own. It is like my son using my sentences to explain his beliefs or ideas. Young believers—often unsure of how to form the confession or prayer—will repeat the words of the community until those words truly become their words.

One of the blessings of written prayers that has become part of a believer's soul is that, in times of crisis, tragedy or severe need, the prayer comes readily to mind. Rather than

muddling around for words and wondering what is biblical or appropriate in such circumstances, the prayer is right there to serve the troubled soul.

Another usefulness of written prayers concerns "agreement." Jesus said, "If any two of you agree . . . ". Written prayers keep us all on the same page, praying for the same thing. Moreover, returning to Calvin's thoughts on the matter, written prayers give visible expression to the unity and harmony of the churches. It is not just my local church praying this particular prayer on this particular day, but all of these churches praying the same thing.

THUS SAYS THE LORD, "BE REASONABLE!"

Of course, the real question is whether or not the Bible permits such prayer. Some people define the Regulative Principle in such a manner as to declare that unless the New Testament commands it, we cannot do it. There are, however, a number of problems with such a definition.

First, as I have already mentioned, only a dispensational hermeneutic permits such an approach to the Scriptures. Those of us in the Reformed tradition, who approach the Bible with a covenantal paradigm, assert that unless the New Testament specifically negates or adjusts a teaching in the Old Testament, the Old Testament teaching is still binding upon Christians. Simply because there is no prohibition to bestiality in the New Testament, does not mean God has changed his mind!

Second, while it is true the Bible's silence means that we cannot require the use of written prayers, we cannot then conclude such prayers are not useful. The Church has always produced hymns for the congregation to sing in unison to God. Are not such hymns simply prayers and praises put to music? So what if the congregation decides to confess or pray these same hymns without the music? Is it all of a sudden a sin for them to do so? Or is it a sin if they use it more than once a year? Or would it be twice, or three times before we would cross the line from spontaneous freedom to the sinful chains of a form? By what standard do we decide how much repeti-

tion is too much repetition? And where in the Bible is that standard?

And what is this minimalist approach to the Scriptures? If the Bible does not tell us we can take more than one day off each week, then is it a sin to take off two days? If the Bible does not tell us about pews and carpets and nurseries and church bulletins, have we pushed the envelope too far to use such things? If the Apostolic Church spent hours worshipping on the Lord's day, are we in sin if we do not follow their pattern and end our services after fifty minutes?

Luther, Calvin, and Hooker believed the Church could utilize reason regarding polity or ecclesiology as long as it was not contrary to the Scriptures. This is a far cry from the modern notion that we can practice only what Scripture commands.

Somehow we must resist the tendency toward becoming neo-Amish in our approach to the faith. Certainly, the quest for biblical fidelity is necessary. However, the faith has come to us through history. None of us would dream of reading the Bible in ways contrary to the Nicene, Athanasian, or Chalcedon creeds. The Holy Spirit led the Church to produce these instruments of confession for guarding the deposit of faith and passing it along intact to the next generation. However, while we insist on noting and honoring the divinely-led historical process that produced these creeds, we are repelled by any notion of considering how the Church crafted its worship for century after century. "Who cares how our mothers and fathers worshiped for one thousand years? We just want the Bible and the immediate direction of the Holy Spirit." Such inconsistency in how we view history is one of the larger causes for our spiritual bankruptcy.

OFFERINGS TO GOD

A year ago, I gave one of my daughters away in marriage. The plans for this ceremony took close to a year. Questions of what to wear, how many flowers, what music, how much food and drink to serve, preoccupied our thinking. This was to be a covenant-making service; its significance demanded we do all

within our power to comport ourselves with a dignity that honored the weightiness of what was being done.

I am not saying that had we all just shown up at a park in jeans and T-shirts, that God would not have acknowledged the covenant that was being made—not at all. The ritual, the use of symbols, the ceremony were all for our benefit. They were used to remind us of what was going on. Moreover, they were our attempt to present our best to God.

Why do people feel it necessary to dress differently when attending a meeting with a civil authority or dignitary? They wish to be respectful. Why do we dress differently for a wedding than we do for a picnic? We wish to be respectful of what is taking place. Why has there always been a desire to beautify our places of worship? Well, because we wish for such places to demonstrate our desire to give our best to God and because we want to create an ambiance that says, "Bow in honor and worship before the King."

I suggest that prayers are offerings to God. We praise him, we entreat him and we extol his mercies. When I speak to him, I remember that he is in heaven and I am on earth and I had better be careful with my words (Ecclesiastes 5). Consequently, I wish to weigh my words, considering their appropriateness for speaking to the God of my salvation.

Richard Hooker noted this motive to give God our best when he wrote:

The greater they are whom we honour, the more regard we have to the quality and choice of those presents which we bring them for honour's sake, it must needs follow that if we dare not disgrace our worldly superiors with offering unto them such refuse as we bring unto God himself, we shew plainly that our acknowledgment of his greatness is but feigned, in heart we fear him not so much as we dread them.⁷

In the Old Testament we occasionally read of God's anger when the offerings brought before him were sick or less than what was worthy of their creator and redeemer. It is only right that we give full attention to how we can bring our best before God, including the words we use in addressing him. As Hooker

writes, even if there are some who dislike written prayers—and I add, even if there are those who have abused them—this is no reason for us to refrain from using them.

[T]he causeless dislike whereof which others have conceived, is no sufficient reason for us as much as once to forbear in any place a thing uttered with true devotion and zeal of heart affordeth to God himself that glory, that aid to the weakest sort of men, to the most perfect that solid comfort which is unspeakable.⁸

Written prayers are like poetry. We wish we could be as creative and eloquent as a Donne or Tennyson, but so often our words fall far short of the emotions we wish to convey to those whom we love. Accordingly, we borrow everything from a line to a full poem and tell our lover, "This is how I feel. These words perfectly reflect my feelings for you." We use the golden words of another person so we can more appropriately articulate our sentiments. Certainly something would be amiss if we never used our "own" words. However, why refrain from using the words of another person merely because we do not presently have the ability to package our emotions or thoughts within the appropriate words and phrases?

Most of us have plagiarized King David, St. John, Augustine and J. I. Packer in our prayers. We cast about trying to find words that will express our faith, our needs, our fears and our hopes. And when something rings true, when a phrase or prayer from someone else resonates in our souls, we employ it in our prayers and praise. The written prayers contained in the various liturgies are such prayers, and they have resonated within the souls of believers for hundreds of years. "These are my feelings. This is my faith. This is what I am asking for." And the Church does well to say, "Amen."

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Notes

1. Samuel Miller, *Thoughts on Public Prayer* (Harrisonburg, Virginia: Sprinkle Publications, 1985), 151.
2. Thomas Oden, *Pastoral Theology: Essentials of Ministry* (Harper & Row, 1983), 94f.
3. Oden, *Pastoral Theology*, 154.
4. Oden, *Pastoral Theology*, 156.
5. Oden, *Pastoral Theology*, 163.
6. Charles Baird, *Presbyterian Liturgies* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1957), 23.
7. *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, Volume Two, (Ellicott City, Maryland: Via Media, Inc., 1994), 151.
8. *Ecclesiastical Polity*, 156.