

# THE ORDER OF WORSHIP: SUNDAY MORNINGS SET IN CONCRETE

## Chapter 3

“Custom without truth is error grown old.”

-TERTULLIAN, THIRD-CENTURY THEOLOGIAN

“Son of man, describe to the people of Israel the Temple I have shown you, so they will be ashamed.”

-Ezekiel 43:10, NLT

IF YOU ARE A CHURCHGOING CHRISTIAN, it is likely that you observe the same perfunctory order of worship every time you go to church. It does not matter what stripe of Prot you belong to-be it Baptist, Methodist, Reformed, Presbyterian, Evangelical Free, Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ, CMA, Pentecostal, Charismatic, or nondenominational-your Sunday morning service is virtually identical to that of all other Protestant churches. Even among the so-called cutting-edge denominations (like the Vineyard and Calvary Chapel), the variations are minor.

Granted some churches use contemporary choruses while others use hymns. In some churches, congregants raise their hands. In others, their hands never get above their hips. Some churches observe the Lord's Supper weekly. Others observe it quarterly. In some churches, the liturgy (order of worship) is written out in a bulletin. In others, the liturgy is unwritten, yet it is just as mechanical and predictable as if it were set to print. Despite these slight variations, the order of worship is essentially the same in virtually all Protestant churches.

# THE SUNDAY MORNING ORDER OF WORSHIP

Peel away the superficial alterations that make each church service distinct and you will find the same prescribed liturgy. See how many of the following elements you recall from the last weekend service you attended:

*The Greeting.* As you enter the building, you are greeted by an usher or an appointed greeter—who should be smiling! You are then handed a bulletin or announcement page. (Note: If you are part of some newer denominations, you may drink coffee and eat doughnuts before you are seated.)

*Prayer or Scripture Reading.* Usually given by the pastor or song leader.

*The Song Service.* Led by a professional song leader, choir, or worship team. In charismatic-styled churches, this part of the service typically lasts thirty to forty-five consecutive minutes. In other churches, it is shorter and may be divided into several segments.

*The Announcements.* News about upcoming events. Usually given by the pastor or some other church leader.

*The Offering.* Sometimes called “the offertory,” it is usually accompanied by special music by the choir, worship team, or a soloist.

*The Sermon.* Typically, the pastor delivers an oration lasting twenty to forty-five minutes. The current average is thirty-two minutes.

Your service may also have included one or more of the following post-sermon activities:

An after-the-sermon pastoral prayer,

An altar call,

More singing led by the choir or worship team,

The Lord's Supper,

Prayer for the sick or afflicted.

*The Benediction.* This may be in the form of a blessing from the pastor or a song to end the service.

With some minor rearrangements, this is the unbroken liturgy that 345 million Protestants across the globe observe religiously week after week. And for the last five hundred years, few people have questioned it.

Look again at the order of worship. Notice that it includes a threefold structure: (1) singing, (2) the sermon, and (3) closing prayer or song. This order of worship is viewed as sacrosanct in the eyes of many present-day Christians. But why? Again, it is due simply to the titanic power of tradition. And that tradition has set the Sunday morning order of worship in concrete for five centuries...never to be moved.

# WHERE DID THE PROTESTANT ORDER OF WORSHIP COME FROM?

Pastors who routinely tell their congregations that “we do everything by the Book” and still perform this ironclad liturgy are simply not correct. (In their defense, the lack of truthfulness is due to ignorance rather than overt deception.)

You can scour your Bible from beginning to end, and you will never find anything that remotely resembles our order of worship. This is because the first-century Christians knew no such thing. In fact, the Protestant order of worship has about as much biblical support as does the Roman Catholic Mass. Both have few points of contact with the New Testament.

The meetings of the early church were marked by every-member functioning, spontaneity, freedom, vibrancy, and open participation (see, for example, 1 Corinthians 14:1-33 and Hebrews 10:25). The first century church meeting was a fluid gathering, not a static ritual. And it was often unpredictable, unlike the contemporary church service.

Further, the first-century church meeting was not patterned after the Jewish synagogue services as some recent authors have suggested. Instead, it was totally unique to the culture.

So where did the Protestant order of worship come from? It has its basic roots in the medieval Catholic Mass. Significantly, the Mass did not originate with the New Testament; it grew out of ancient Judaism and paganism. According to Will Durant, the Catholic Mass was “based partly on the Judaic Temple service, partly on Greek mystery rituals of purification, vicarious sacrifice, and participation.”

Gregory the Great (540-604), the first monk to be made pope, is the man responsible for shaping the medieval Mass. While Gregory is recognized as an extremely generous man and an able administrator and diplomat, Durant notes that Gregory was also an incredibly superstitious man whose thinking was influenced by magical paganistic concepts. He embodied the medieval mind, which was influenced by heathenism, magic, and Christianity. It is no accident that Durant calls Gregory “the first completely medieval man.”

The medieval Mass reflected the mind of its originator. It was a blending of pagan and Judaistic ritual sprinkled with Catholic theology and Christian vocabulary. Durant points out that the Mass was deeply steeped in pagan magical thinking as well as Greek drama. He writes, “The Greek mind, dying, came to a transmigrated life in the theology and liturgy of the church; the Greek language, having reigned for centuries over philosophy, became the vehicle of Christian literature and ritual; the Greek mysteries passed down into the impressive mystery of the Mass.

in effect, the Catholic Mass that emerged in the sixth century was fundamentally pagan. Christians incorporated the vestments of the pagan priests, the use of incense and holy water in purification rites, the burning of candles in worship, the architecture of the Roman basilica for their church buildings, the law of Rome as the basis of “canon law,” the title *Pontifex Maximus* for the head bishop, and the pagan rituals for the Catholic Mass.

Once established, the Mass changed little over a thousand years. But the liturgical deadlock underwent its first revision when Martin Luther (1483-1546) entered the scene. As various other Protestant denominations were born, they also helped reshape the Catholic liturgy. While the transformation was a complex one that is too vast to chronicle in this book we can survey the basic story.

# LUTHER'S CONTRIBUTION

In 1520, Luther launched an impassioned campaign against the Roman Catholic Mass. The high point of the Catholic Mass has always been the Eucharist, also known as “communion” or “the Lord’s Supper.” Everything centers on and leads up to the moment when the priest breaks the bread and gives it to the people. To the medieval Catholic mind, the offering of the Eucharist was the resacrificing of Jesus Christ. As far back as Gregory the Great, the Catholic church taught that Jesus Christ is sacrificed anew through the Mass.

Luther railed (often uncouthly) against the miters and staffs of the Roman Catholic leadership and its teaching on the Eucharist. The cardinal error of the Mass, said Luther, was that it was a human “work” based on an inaccurate understanding of Christ’s sacrifice. So in 1523, Luther set forth his own revisions to the Catholic Mass. These revisions are the foundation for worship in most Protestant churches. The heart of them is this: Luther made preaching, rather than the Eucharist, the center of the gathering.

Accordingly, in the contemporary Protestant worship service, the pulpit, rather than the altar table, is the central element. (The altar table is where the Eucharist is placed in Catholic, Anglican, and Episcopal churches.) Luther gets the credit for making the sermon the climax of the Protestant service. Read his words: “A Christian congregation should never gather together without the preaching of God’s Word and prayer, no matter how briefly” ... “the preaching and teaching of God’s Word is the most important part of Divine service.”

Luther’s belief in the centrality of preaching as the mark of the worship service has stuck till this day. Yet making preaching the center of the church gathering has no biblical precedent. As one historian put it, “The pulpit is the throne of the Protestant pastor.” For this reason ordained Protestant ministers are routinely called “preachers.”



But aside from this change, Luther's liturgy varied little from the Catholic Mass, since Luther tried to preserve what he thought were the "Christian" elements in the old Catholic order. Consequently, if you compare Luther's order of worship with Gregory's liturgy, it is virtually the same. He kept the ceremony, believing it was proper.

For instance, Luther retained the act that marked the high moment of the Catholic Mass: the elevation of the bread and cup to consecrate them, a practice that began in the thirteenth century and was based mostly on superstition. Luther merely reinterpreted the meaning of this act, seeing it as an expression of the grace Christ has extended to God's people. Yet it is still observed by many pastors today.

In like manner, Luther did drastic surgery to the Eucharistic prayer, retaining only the "words of institution" from 1 Corinthians 11:23ff. (web)-"That the Lord Jesus on the night in which he was betrayed took bread...and said, 'Take, eat. This is my body.'" Even today, Protestant pastors religiously recite this text before administering Communion.

In the end, Luther's liturgy was nothing more than a truncated version of the Catholic Mass. And the Lutheran order of service contributed to the same problems: The congregants were still passive spectators (though they could now sing), and the entire liturgy was still directed by an ordained clergyman (the pastor had replaced the priest). This was in stark contradiction to the glorious, free—flowing, open participatory, every-member-functioning church meetings led by Jesus Christ that the New Testament envisions (see 1 Corinthians 14:25; Hebrews 10:24-25).

In Luther's own words, "it is not now nor ever has been our intention to abolish the liturgical service of God completely, but rather to purify the one that is now in use from the wretched accretions which corrupt it." Tragically, Luther did not realize that new wine cannot be repackaged into old wineskins. At no time did Luther (or any of the other mainstream Reformers) demonstrate a desire to return to the principles of the first-century church. These men set out merely to reform the theology of the Catholic church.

In sum, the major enduring changes that Luther made to the Catholic Mass were as follows: (1) he performed the Mass in the language of the people rather than in Latin, (2) he gave the sermon a central place in the gathering, (3) he introduced congregational singing, (4) he abolished the idea that the Mass was a sacrifice of Christ, and (5) he allowed the congregation to partake of the bread and cup (rather than just the priest, as was the Catholic practice). Other than these differences, Luther kept the same order of worship as found in the Catholic Mass.

Worsd, although Luther talked much about the “priesthood of all believers,” he never abandoned the practice of an ordained clergy. In fact, so strong was his belief in an ordained clergy that he wrote, “the public ministry of the Word ought to be established by holy ordination as the highest and greatest of the functions of the church.” Under Luther’s influence, the Protestant pastor simply replaced the Catholic priest. And for the most part, there was little practical difference in the way these two offices functioned. This is still the case, as we will consider in chapter 5.

What follows is Luther’s order of worship. The general outline should look very familiar to you-for it is the taproot of the Sunday morning church service found in most Protestant denominations.

Singing

Prayer

Sermon

Admonition to the people

Lord’s Supper

Singing

Post-Communion Prayer

Benediction

# ZWINGLI'S CONTRIBUTION

With the advent of Gutenberg's printing press (about 1450), the bulk production of liturgical books accelerated the liturgical changes that the Reformers attempted to make. Those changes were now set to movable type and printed in mass quantity.

The Swiss Reformer Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) made a few of his own reforms that helped shape today's order of worship. He replaced the altar table with something called "the Communion table" from which the bread and wine were administered. He also had the bread and cup carried to the people in their pews using wooden trays and cups.

Most Protestant churches still have such a table. Two candles typically sit upon it—a custom that came directly from the ceremonial court of Roman emperors. And most carry the bread and cup to the people seated in their pews.

Zwingli also recommended that the Lord's Supper be taken quarterly (four times a year). This was in opposition to taking it weekly as other Reformers advocated. Many Protestants follow the quarterly observation of the Lord's Supper today. Some observe it monthly.

Zwingli is also credited with championing the "memorial" view of the Supper. This view is embraced by mainstream American Protestantism. It is the view that the bread and cup are mere symbols of Christ's body and blood. Nevertheless, aside from these variations, Zwingli's liturgy was not much different from Luther's. Like Luther, Zwingli emphasized the centrality of preaching, so much so that he and his coworkers preached fourteen times a week.

# THE CONTRIBUTION OF CALVIN AND COMPANY

Reformers John Calvin (1509-1564), John Knox (1513-1572), and Martin Bucer (1491-1551) added to the liturgical molding. These men created their own orders of worship between 1537 and 1562. Even though their liturgies were observed in different parts of the world, they were virtually identical. They merely made a few adjustments to Luther's liturgy. Most notable was the collection of money that followed the sermon.

Like Luther, Calvin stressed the centrality of preaching during the worship service. He believed that each believer has access to God through the preached Word rather than through the Eucharist. Given his theological genius, the preaching in Calvin's Geneva church was intensely theological and academic. It was also highly individualistic, a mark that never left Protestantism.

Calvin's Geneva church was held up as the model for all Reformed churches. Thus its order of worship spread far and wide. This accounts for the cerebral character of most Protestant churches today, particularly the Reformed and Presbyterian brand.

Because musical instruments were not explicitly mentioned in the New Testament, Calvin did away with pipe organs and choirs. All singing was a cappella. (some contemporary Protestants, like the Church of Christ, still follow Calvin's rigid non-instrumentalism.) This changed in the mid-nineteenth century when Reformed churches began using instrumental music and choirs. However, the Puritans (English Calvinists) continued in the spirit of Calvin, condemning both instrumental music and choir singing.

Probably the most damaging feature of Calvin's liturgy is that he led most of the service himself from his pulpit. Christianity has not yet recovered from this. Today, the pastor is the MC and CEO of the Sunday morning church service-just as the priest is the MC and CEO of the Catholic Mass. This is in stark contrast to the church meeting envisioned in Scripture. According to the New Testament, the Lord Jesus Christ is the leader, director, and CEO of the church meeting. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul tells us that Christ speaks through His entire body, not just one member. In such a meeting, His body freely functions under His headship (direct leadership) through the working of His Holy Spirit. First Corinthians 14 gives us a picture of such a gathering. This kind of meeting is vital for the spiritual growth of God's people and the full expression of His Son in the earth.

Another feature that Calvin contributed to the order of worship is the somber attitude that many Christians are encouraged to adopt when they enter the building. That atmosphere is one of a profound sense of self-abasement before sovereign and austere God.

Martin Bucer is equally credited with fostering this attitude. At the beginning of every service, he had the Ten Commandments uttered to create a sense of veneration. Out of this mentality grew some rather outrageous practices. Puritan New England was noted for fining children who smile in church! Add to this the creation of the "Tithingman" who would wake up sleeping congregants by poking them with a heavily-knobbed staff.

Such thinking is a throwback to the late medieval view of piety. Yet it was embraced and kept alive by Calvin and Bucer. While many contemporary Pentecostals and Charismatics broke with this tradition, it is mindlessly followed in many churches today. The message is: “Be quiet and solemn, for this is the house of God!”

One further practice that the Reformers retained from the Mass was the practice of the clergy walking to their allotted seats at the beginning of the service while the people stood singing. This practice started in the fourth century when the bishops walked into their magnificent basilica churches. It was a practice copied straight from the pagan imperial court ceremony. When the Roman magistrates entered into the courtroom, the people would stand singing. This practice is still observed today in many Protestant churches.

As Calvinism spread throughout Europe, Calvin’s Geneva liturgy was adopted in most Protestant churches. It was transplanted and took root in multiple countries. Here is what it looks like:

Prayer

Confession

Singing (Psalm)

Prayer for enlightenment of the Spirit in the preaching

Sermon

Collection of alms

General Prayer

Communion (at the appointed times) while Psalm is sung

Benediction

It should be noted that Calvin sought to model his order of worship after the writings of the early church fathers-particularly those who lived in the third through sixth centuries. This accounts for his lack of clarity on the character of the New Testament church meeting. The early fathers of the third through sixth centuries were intensely liturgical and ritualistic. They did not have a New Testament Christian mind-set. They were also theoreticians more than practitioners.

To put it another way, the church fathers of this period represent nascent (early) Catholicism. And that is what Calvin took as his main model for establishing a new order of worship. It is no wonder that the so-called Reformation brought very little reform in the way of church practice. As was the case with Luther's order of worship, the liturgy of the Reformed church "did not try to change the structures of the official [Catholic] liturgy but rather it tried to maintain the old liturgy while cultivating extra-liturgical devotions.

# THE PURITAN CONTRIBUTION

The Puritans were Calvinists from England. They embraced a rigorous biblicism and sought to adhere tightly to the New Testament order of worship. The Puritans felt that Calvin's order of worship was not biblical enough. Consequently, when pastors sermonize about "doing everything by the Word of God," they are echoing Puritan sentiments. But the Puritan effort to restore the New Testament church meeting did not succeed.

The forsaking of clerical vestments, icons, and ornaments, as well as clergymen writing their own sermons (as opposed to reading homilies), were positive contributions that the Puritans gave us. However, because of their emphasis on "spontaneous" prayer, the Puritans also bequeathed to us the long pastor prayer that precedes the sermon. This prayer in a Sunday morning Puritan service could easily last an hour or more!

The sermon reached its zenith with the American Puritans. They felt it was almost supernatural, since they saw it as God's primary means of speaking to His people. And they punished church members who missed the Sunday morning sermon. New England residents who failed to attend Sunday worship were fined or put in stocks. (Next time your pastor threatens you with God's unbridled wrath for missing "church," be sure to thank the Puritans.)

It is worth noting that in some Puritan churches the laity was allowed to speak at the end of the service. Immediately after the sermon, the pastor would sit down and answer the congregation's questions. Congregants would also be allowed to give testimonies. But with the advent of Frontier-Revivalism in the eighteenth century, this practice faded away, never again to be adopted by mainstream Christianity.

All in all, the Puritan contribution in shaping the Protestant liturgy did little in releasing God's people to freely function under Christ's headship. Like the liturgical reforms that preceded them, the Puritan order of worship was highly predictable. It was written out in detail and followed uniformly in every church.

What follows is the Puritan liturgy. Compare it to the liturgies of Luther and Calvin and you will notice that the central features did not change.

Call to worship

Opening Prayer

Reading of Scripture

Singing of the Psalms

Pre-sermon prayer

Sermon

Post-sermon prayer

(When Communion is observed, the minister exhorts the congregation, blesses the bread and cup, and passes them to the people)



In Time, the Puritans spawned their own offshoot denominations. Some of them were part of the “Free Church” tradition. The Free Churches created what is called the “hymn-sandwich, and this order of service is quite similar to that used by most evangelical churches today. Here is what it looks like:

Three hymns

Scripture reading

Choir music

Unison prayers

Pastoral Prayer

Sermon

Offering

Benediction

Does this look familiar to you? Rest assured, you cannot find it in the New Testament.

# METHODIST AND FRONTIER-REVIVAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Eighteenth-century Methodists brought to the Protestant order of worship an emotional dimension. People were invited to sing loudly with vigor and fervor. In this way, the Methodists were the forerunners of the Pentecostals.

Like the Puritans, the Methodists spiced up the pastor's Sunday morning pre-sermon prayer. The Methodist clerical prayer was long and universal in its scope. It swallowed up all other prayers, covering the waterfront of confession, intercession, and praise. But more importantly, it was always offered up in Elizabethan English (i.e., Thee, Thou, Thy, etc.).

Even today, in the twenty-first century, the Elizabethan pastoral prayer lives and breathes. Many contemporary pastors still pray in this outdated language—even though it has been a dead dialect for four hundred years! Why? Because of the power of tradition.

The Methodists also popularized the Sunday evening worship service. The discovery of incandescent gas as a means of lighting enabled John Wesley (1703-1791) to make this innovation popular. Today, many Protestant churches have a Sunday evening service—even though it is typically poorly attended.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries brought a new challenge to American Protestantism. It was the pressure to conform to the ever popular American Frontier-Revivalist services. These services greatly influenced the order of worship for scores of churches. Even today, the changes they injected into the bloodstream of American Protestantism are evident.

First, the Frontier-Revivalists changed the goal of preaching. They preached exclusively with one aim: to convert lost souls. To the mind of a Frontier-Revivalist, nothing beyond salvation was involved in God's plan. Salvation was God's supreme purpose for church and all of life. This emphasis finds its seeds in the innovative preaching of George Whitefield (1714-1770).

Second, Frontier-Revivalist music spoke to the soul and sought to elicit an emotional response to the salvation message. All the great revivalists had a musician on their team for this purpose. Worship began to be viewed as primarily individualistic, subjective, and emotional. This shift in emphasis was picked up by the Methodists, and it began to penetrate many other Protestant subcultures. The main goal of the church shifted from experiencing and expressing the Lord Jesus Christ corporately to the making of individual converts. In doing so, the church by and large lost sight of the fact that while Christ's atonement is absolutely essential to getting humanity back on track and restoring our relationship with God, it is not His sole purpose. God has an eternal purpose that goes beyond salvation. That purpose has to do with enlarging the eternal fellowship He has with His Son and making it visible on planet Earth. The theology of revivalism did not discuss God's eternal purpose and put little to no emphasis on the church.

Methodist choral music was designed to soften the hard hearts of sinners. Lyrics began to reflect the individual salvation experience as well as personal testimony. Charles Wesley (1707-1788) is credited for being the first to write invitational hymns.

Pastors who gear their Sunday morning sermons exclusively toward winning the lost still reflect the revivalist influence. This influence has pervaded the majority of today's television and radio evangelism. Many Protestant churches (not just Pentecostal and charismatic) begin with Frontier-Revivalists little more than a century ago.

Third, the Methodists and the Frontier-Revivalists gave birth to the "altar call." This practice began with the Methodists in the eighteenth century. The practice of inviting people who want prayer to stand to their feet and walk to the front to receive prayer was given to us by a Methodist evangelist named Lorenzo Dow.

Later, in 1807 in England, the Methodists created the mourner's bench. Anxious sinners now had a place to mourning for their sins when they were invited to walk down the sawdust trail. This method reached the United States a few years later and was given the name "anxious bench" by Charles Finney (1792-1875).

The "anxious bench" was located in the front where preachers stood on an erected platform. It was there that both sinners and needy saints were called forward to receive the minister's prayers. Finney's method was to ask those who wished to be saved to stand up and come forward. Finney made this method so popular that "after 1835, it was an indispensable fixture of modern revivals."

Finney later abandoned the anxious seat and simply invited sinners to come forward into the aisles and kneel at the front of the platform to receive Christ. Aside from popularizing the altar call, Finney is credited with inventing the practice of praying for persons by name, mobilizing groups of workers to visit homes, and displacing the routine services of the church with special services every night of the week.

In time, the "anxious bench" in the outdoor camp meeting was replaced by the "altar" in the church building. The "sawdust trail" was replaced by the church aisle. And so was born the famous "altar call."

Perhaps the most lasting element that Finney unwittingly contributed to contemporary Christianity was pragmatism. Pragmatism is the philosophy that teaches that if something works, it should be embraced regardless of ethical considerations. Finney believed that the New Testament did not teach any prescribed forms of worship. He taught that the sole purpose of preaching was to win converts. Any devices that helped accomplish that goal were acceptable. Under Finney, eighteenth-century revivalism was turned into a science and brought into mainstream churches.

Contemporary Christianity still reflects this ideology. Pragmatism is unspiritual, not just because it encourages ethical considerations to be secondary, but because it depends on techniques rather than on God to produce the desired effects. Genuine spirituality is marked by the realization that in spiritual things, we mortals are utterly and completely dependent on the Lord. Recall the Lord's word that "unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain" (Psalm 127:1, Esv) and "without me ye can do nothing" (John 15:5). Unfortunately, pragmatism ("if it works let's do it"), not biblical principle or spirituality, governs the activities of many present-day churches. (Many "seeker sensitive" churches have excelled at following in Finney's footsteps.) Pragmatism is harmful because it teaches "the end justifies the means." If the end is considered "holy," just about any "means" are acceptable.

The philosophy of pragmatism opens the door for human manipulation and a complete reliance upon oneself rather than upon God. Note that there is a monumental difference between well motivated humans working for God in their own strength, wisdom, and power versus God working through humans.

Because of his far-reaching impact, Charles Finney has been called “the most influential liturgical Reformer in American history.” Finney believed that the revivalist methods that worked in his camp meetings could be imported into the Protestant churches to bring revival there. This notion was popularized and put into the Protestant mind-set via his 1835 book *Lectures on Revival*. To the contemporary Protestant mind, doctrine must be vigorously checked with Scripture before it is accepted. But when it comes to church practice, just about anything is acceptable as long as it works to win converts.

In all of these ways, American Frontier-Revivalism turned church into a preaching station. It reduced the experience of the Ekklesia into an evangelistic mission. It normalized Finney’s revivalist methods and created pulpit personalities as the dominating attraction for church. It also made the church an individualistic affair rather than a corporate one.

Put differently, the goal of the Frontier-Revivalists was to bring individual sinners to an individual decision for an individualistic faith. As a result, the goal of the early church –mutual edification and every-member functioning to corporately manifest Jesus Christ before principalities and powers–was altogether lost. Ironically, John Wesley, an early revivalist, understood the dangers of the revivalist movement. He wrote, “Christianity is essentially a social religion...to turn it into a solitary religion is indeed to destroy it.” With Albert Blake Dick’s invention of stencil duplicating in 1884, the order of worship began to be printed and distributed. Thus was born the famous Sunday morning bulletin.”

# THE STAGGERING INFLUENCE OF D.L. MOODY

The seeds of “revivalist gospel” were spread throughout the Western world by the mammoth influence of D.L. Moody (1837-1899). He traveled more than one million miles and preached to more than 100 million people—in the century before airplanes, microphones, television, or the Internet. Moody’s gospel, like Whitefield’s, had but one center—salvation for the sinner. He preached the gospel with a focus on individuals, and his theology was encapsulated in the three. Rs: ruined by sin, redeemed by Christ, and regenerated by the Spirit. While those are certainly critical elements of the faith, Moody apparently did not recognize that the eternal purpose of God goes far beyond redemption.

Moody’s preaching was dominated by this single interest—individual salvation. He instituted the solo hymn that followed the pastor’s sermon. The invitational solo hymn was sung by a soloist until George Beverly Shea encouraged Billy Graham to employ a choir to sing songs like “Just As I Am” as people came forward to receive Christ.

Moody gave us door-to-door witnessing and evangelistic advertising/campaigning. He gave us the “gospel song” or “gospel hymn.” And he popularized the “decision card,” an invention of Absalom B. Earle (1812-1895).

In addition, Moody was the first to ask those who wanted to be saved to stand up from their seats and be led in a “sinner’s prayer.” Some fifty years later, Billy Graham upgraded Moody’s technique. He introduced the practice of asking the audience to bow their heads, close their eyes (“with no on looking around”), and raise their hands in response to the salvation message. (All of these methods have met fierce opposition by those who argue that they are psychologically manipulative.)

For Moody, “the church was a voluntary association of the saved. So staggering was his influence that by 1874 the church was not seen as a grand corporate body but as a gathering of individuals. This emphasis was picked up by every revivalist who followed him. And it eventually entered into the marrow and bones of evangelical Christianity.

It is also worth noting that Moody was heavily influenced by the Plymouth Brethren teaching on the end times. This was the teaching that Christ may return at any second before the great Tribulation. (This teaching is also called “pre-tribulational dispensationalism.”)

Pretribulational dispensationalism gave rise to the idea that Christians must act quickly to save as many souls as possible before the world ends. With the founding of the Student Volunteer Movement by John Mott in 1888, a related idea sprang forth: “The evangelization of the world in one generation. The “in one generation” watchword still lives and breathes in the church today. Yet it does not map well with the mind-set of the first-century Christians who did not appear to be pressured into trying to get the entire world saved in one generation.

# THE PENTECOSTAL CONTRIBUTION

Beginning around 1906, the Pentecostal movement gave us a more emotional expression of congregational singing. This included the lifting of one's hands, dancing in pews, clapping, speaking in tongues, and the use of tambourines. The Pentecostal expression was in harmony with its emphasis on the ecstatic working of the Holy Spirit.

What few people realize is that if you removed the emotional features from a Pentecostal church service, it would look just like a Baptist liturgy. Thus no matter how loudly Pentecostals claim that they are following New Testament patterns, the typical Pentecostal or charismatic church follows the same order of worship as do most other Protestant bodies. There is simply more freedom for emotional expression in the pew.

Another interesting feature of Pentecostal worship occurs during the song service. Sometimes the singing will be punctuated by an occasional utterance in tongues, or word of "prophecy." But such utterances rarely last more than a minute or two. Such a pinched form of open participation cannot accurately be called "body ministry." The Pentecostal tradition also gave us solo or choral music (often tagged as "special music") That accompanies the offering.



As in all Protestant churches, the sermon is the climax of the Pentecostal meeting. However, in the garden-variety Pentecostal church, the pastor will sometimes “feel the Spirit moving.” At such times he will suspend his sermon until the following week. The congregation will then sing and pray for the rest of the service. For many Pentecostals, this is the pinnacle of a great church service.

The way congregants describe these special services is fascinating. They typically say, “The Holy Spirit led our meeting this week. Pastor Cheswald did not get to preach.” Whenever such a remark is made, it begs the question, *Isn't the Holy Spirit supposed to lead all of our church meetings?*

Even so, as a result of being born in the afterglow of Frontier Revivalism, Pentecostal worship is highly subjective and individualistic. In the mind of the Pentecostal, as in the minds of most other Protestants, worshipping God is not a corporate affair, but a solo experience.

# MANY ADJUSTMENTS, NO VITAL CHANGE

Our study of the liturgical history of the Lutherans (sixteenth century), Reformed (sixteenth century), Puritans (seventeenth century), Methodists (eighteenth century), Frontier-Revivalists (eighteenth to nineteenth centuries), and Pentecostals (twentieth century) uncovers one inescapable point: For the last five hundred years, the Protestant order of worship has undergone minimal change.

In the end, all Protestant traditions share the same unbiblical features in their order of worship: They are officiated and directed by a clergyman, they make the sermon central, and the people are passive and not permitted to minister.

The Reformers accomplished a great deal in changing the theology of Roman Catholicism. But in terms of actual practice, they made only minor adjustments that did little to bring worship back to the New Testament model. The result: God's people have never broken free from the liturgical constraints they inherited from Roman Catholicism.

As one author put it, “The Reformers accepted in substance the ancient Catholic pattern of worship...the basic structures of their services were almost universally taken from the late medieval orders of various sorts.

In the end, then, the Reformers reformed the Catholic liturgy only slightly. Their main contribution was in changing the central focus. In the words of one scholar, “Catholicism increasingly followed the path of the [pagan] cults in making a rite the center of its activities, and Protestantism followed the path of the synagogue in placing the book at the center of its services. Unfortunately, neither Catholics nor Protestants were successful in allowing Jesus Christ to be the center and head of their gatherings. Nor were they successful at liberating and unleashing the body of Christ to minister one to another in the gathering, as the New Testament envisions.

Because of the Reformation, the Bible replaced the Eucharist and the pastor replaced the priest. But there is still a person directing God’s people, rendering them as silent spectators. The centrality of the Author of the Book was never restored. Hence, the Reformers dramatically failed to put their finger on the nerve of the original problem: a clergy led worship service attended by a passive laity. It is not surprising, then, that the Reformers viewed themselves as reformed Catholics.

# WHAT IS WRONG WITH THIS PICTURE?

It is clear that the protestant order of worship did not originate with the Lord Jesus, the apostles, or the New Testament Scriptures. This in itself does not make the order of worship misguided. It just means it has no biblical basis.

The use of chairs and pile carpets in Christian gatherings has no biblical support either. And both were invented by pagans. Nonetheless, who would claim that sitting in chairs or using carpets is “wrong” simply because they are postbiblical inventions authored by pagans?

The fact is that we do many things in our culture that have pagan roots. Consider our accepted calendar. The days of our week and the months of our year are named after pagan gods. But using the accepted calendar does not make us pagans.

So why is the Sunday morning order of worship a different matter than the type of chairs and carpeting we use in the place we worship? Not only is the traditional order of service unscriptural and heavily influenced by paganism (which runs contrary to what is often preached from the pulpit), it does not lead to the spiritual growth God intended. Consider the following.

First, the Protestant order of worship represses mutual participation and the growth of Christian community. It puts a choke hold on the functioning of the body of Christ by silencing its members. There is absolutely no room for anyone to give a word of exhortation, share an insight, start or introduce a song, or spontaneously lead a prayer. You are forced to be a muted, staid pewholder! You are prevented from being enriched by the other members of the body as well as being able to enrich them yourself.

Like every other “lay person,” you may open your mouth only during the congregational singing or prayer. (If you happen to be part of a typical Pentecostal/charismatic church, you may be permitted to give a one-minute ecstatic utterance. But then you must sit down and be quiet.)

Even though open sharing in a church meeting is completely scriptural, you would be breaking the liturgy if you dared try something so outrageous! You would be considered “out of order” and asked to behave yourself or leave.

Second, the Protestant order of worship strangles the headship of Jesus Christ. The entire service is directed by one person. You are limited to the knowledge, gifting, and experience of one member of the body—the pastor. Where is the freedom for our Lord Jesus to speak through His body at will? Where in the liturgy may God give a brother or a sister a word to share with the whole congregation? The order of worship allows for no such thing. Jesus Christ has no freedom to express Himself through His body at His discretion. He too is rendered a passive spectator.

Granted, Christ may be able to express Himself through one or two members of the church—usually the pastor and the music leader. But this is a very limited expression. The Lord is stifled from manifesting Himself through the other members of the body. Consequently, the Protestant liturgy cripples the body of Christ. It turns it into one huge tongue (the pastor) and many little ears (the congregation). This does violence to Paul's vision of the body of Christ, where every member functions in the church meeting for the common good (see 1 Corinthians 12).

Third, for many Christians, the Sunday morning service is shamefully boring. It is without variety or spontaneity. It is highly predictable, highly perfunctory, and highly mechanical. There is a little in the way of freshness or innovation. It has remained frozen for five centuries. Put bluntly, the order of worship embodies the ambiguous power of the rote. And the rote very quickly decays into the routine, which in turn becomes tired, meaningless, and ultimately invisible.

Seeker-sensitive churches have recognized the sterile nature of the contemporary church service. In response, they have incorporated the contemporary church service. In response, they have incorporated a vast array of media and theatrical modernizations into the liturgy. This is done to market worship to the unchurched. Employing the latest electronic technology, seeker-sensitive churches have been successful at swelling their ranks. As a result, they have garnered a large portion of the American Protestant market share.

But despite the added entertainment it affords, the market-driven seeker-sensitive service is still held captive by the pastor, the threefold “hymn sandwich” remains intact, and the congregants continue to be muted spectators (only they are more entertained in their spectating).

Fourth, the Protestant liturgy that you quietly sit through every Sunday, year after year, actually hinders spiritual transformation. It does so because (1) it encourages passivity, (2) it limits functioning, and (3) it implies that putting in one hour a per week is the key to the victorious Christian life.

Every Sunday you attend the service to be bandaged and recharged, like all other wounded soldiers. Far too often, however, the bandaging and the recharging never takes place. The reason is quite simple. The New Testament never links sitting through an ossified ritual that we mislabel “church” as having anything to do with spiritual transformation. We grow by functioning, not by passively watching and listening.

Let’s face it. The Protestant order of worship is largely unscriptural, impractical, and unspiritual. It has no analog in the New Testament. Rather, it finds its roots in the culture of fallen man. It rips the heart of primitive Christianity, which was informal and free of ritual. Five centuries after the Reformation, the Protestant order of worship still varies little from the Catholic Mass—a religious ritual that is a fusion of pagan and Judaistic elements.

I (Frank) am no armchair liturgist. What I have written above open meetings under the headship of Christ is not fanciful theory. I have participated in such meetings for the last nineteen years.



Such meetings are marked by incredible variety. They are not bound to a one-man, pulpit-dominated pattern of worship. There is a great deal of spontaneity, creativity, and freshness. The overarching hallmark of these meetings is the visible headship of Christ and the free yet orderly functioning of the body of Christ. I was in such a meeting not too long ago. Let me describe it to you.

About thirty of us gathered together in a home and greeted one another. Some of us stepped into the center of the living room and began singing a capella. Quickly, the entire church was singing in unison, arms around one another. Someone else began another song, and we all joined in. Between each song, prayers were uttered by different people. Some of the songs had been written by the members themselves. We sang several of the songs several times. Some people turned the words of the songs into prayers. On several occasions, a few of the members exhorted the church in relation to what we had just sung.

After we sang, rejoiced, spontaneously prayed, and exhorted one another, we sat down. Then, very quickly a woman stood and began explaining what the Lord had showed her during the week. She spoke for about three minutes. After she sat down, a man stood up and shared a portion of Scripture and exalted the Lord Jesus through it. Next another gentleman stood up to add a few very edifying to what he said. A woman then broke into a new song that went right along with what the two men had just shared. The whole church sang with her. Another woman stood and read a poem that the Lord had given her during the week...and it meshed perfectly with what the others had shared up to that point.

One by one, brothers and sisters in Christ stood up to tell us what they had experienced in their relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ that week. Exhortations, teaching, encouragements, poems, songs, and testimonies all followed one right after the other. And a common theme, one that revealed the glories of Jesus Christ, emerged. Some of those gathered wept.

None of this was rehearsed, prescribed, or planned. Yet the meeting was electric. It was so rich, so glorious, and so edifying that it became evident to everyone that someone was indeed leading the meeting. But He was not visible. It was the Lord Jesus Christ! His headship was being made manifest among His people. We were reminded again that He in fact is alive...alive enough to direct His church.

The New Testament is not silent with respect to how we Christians are to meet. Shall we, therefore, opt for man's tradition when it clearly runs contrary to God's thought for His church? Shall we continue to undermine the functioning headship of Christ for the sake of our sacrosanct liturgy? Is the church of Jesus Christ the pillar and ground of truth or the defender of man's tradition (1 Timothy 3:15)?

Perhaps the only sure way to thaw out God's frozen people is to make a dramatic break with the Sunday morning ritual. May we not be found guilty of our Lord's bone-rattling words: "Full well do you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition."