

Making the Most of the Gathered Church:

How A Church's Liturgy Shapes Spiritual Formation and Growth

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Introduction

We planted a church in a megacity several years ago. Every context provides unique opportunities and challenges for planting new churches. Our megacity presented the challenge of limited time.

Many young professionals were open to the gospel and willing to engage with life in a new church. However, they simply had no extra time in their lives to devote to new things. As a church planting team, we needed to be wise regarding the commitments we asked from our new church members. We strategically assessed how best to utilize the limited time they possessed to promote spiritual formation and maturity. The Sunday gathering is the primary commitment for our church. We discovered that a theologically robust liturgy would allow us to maximize our time together. I do not think any of us foresaw the impact it would make. As this article will show, our church is benefitting from our intentional use of our liturgy.

What is Liturgy?

Baptists may be uncomfortable with the term *liturgy*, but we need not be alarmed at this word. Liturgy refers to the order, structure, and routine of a worship service or public gathering of a church. Every church has a liturgy. So, “the question is not whether a church will be liturgical but to what degree a church will reflect on and take into consideration the deep foundations, rhythms, and structures that undergird its worship habits.”¹ As Great Commission Baptists, our missionary endeavors “can be enhanced and furthered by a more reflective, theological, and missional engagement with the latent liturgical character of our worship.”²

Our Liturgy

We structured our liturgy around the biblical metanarrative.³ The biblical metanarrative is the story of God redeeming for himself a people from every tribe, tongue, and nation through Christ to his glory: “The story of human history, from beginning to end, is the story of worship.”⁴ Taylor Worley agrees, “the story that best serves the gathered believers and the lost in their midst is the gospel itself, for we all benefit from revisiting the gospel together.”⁵

¹ Taylor B. Worley, “Baptists, Corporate Worship, and the Christian Tradition” in *Baptists and the Christian Tradition: Towards an Evangelical Baptist Catholicity* (Nashville: B&H, 2020), 170.

² Worley, “Baptists, Corporate Worship, and the Christian Tradition,” 171.

³ Our leadership team thought we were clever for devising our liturgy, only to find out later that other churches were moving in this direction. Chad Ashby, “Good Liturgy is Theology in Action,” *Southern Equip*: <https://equip.sbts.edu/article/good-liturgy-is-theology-in-action/>, accessed 12 December 2022.

⁴ Jonathan Gibson, “Worship: On Earth as It Is in Heaven” in *Reformation Worship: Liturgies from the Past for the Present* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2018), 20.

⁵ Worley, “Baptists, Corporate Worship, and the Christian Tradition,” 176.

The movements in our time of gathering follow the major headings of the gospel narrative: creation, fall, redemption, and restoration.⁶

Creation

During the section headed creation, we worship the Creator. Our worship typically begins with a call to worship read from Scripture and prayer. Then our worship team leads us in singing three or four songs. During the singing, we also include a time of congregational reading of a passage of Scripture.

The Fall

When we transition to the fall, we focus on the need to confess truth and sin. During this time of our gathering, we are led to confess truth by reading from a historic confession of faith or systematically working through an evangelical catechism.⁷ Then we are led to confess sin and engage in a time of prayer and confession.

Redemption

We then turn to focus upon redemption. We read aloud the passage of Scripture to be preached. Then a preacher preaches a gospel-centered expository message. We follow the message with a brief song of response and transition to the Lord's Table. We celebrate that Lord's Supper every week. We believe it is the appropriate response of the church to celebrate the message of redemption.

⁶ Stephen Wellum, "The Story and Message of the Bible," *The Gospel Coalition*: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/the-story-and-message-of-the-bible/>. Accessed 12 December 2022.

⁷ Over the last two years we have followed *The New City Catechism* with minor adjustments to suit our baptistic ecclesiology. The Gospel Coalition, *The New City Catechism Devotional: God's Truth for Our Hearts and Minds*, ed. Collin Hansen (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017).

The Lord's Supper requires participation by the entire body and makes use of all our senses as we look to Christ's substitutionary atonement with thanksgiving. Each week we emphasize a different perspective offered in the Lord's Supper so that the practice does not grow stale.⁸ We cycle through looking inside, around, back, forward, and up. These focused looks allow us to appreciate and reflect upon the salvation won for us through Christ. This salvation was won in the past for a new people, is secure in the present, and guarantees a future celebration.

Restoration

We then have a brief hinge in our liturgy which straddles the *redemption* and *restoration* sections. Before we enter the restoration portion of the gathering, we direct the church to shift around and make small groups of 3-5 people. For ten minutes, these small groups discuss three questions provided by the preacher. These questions allow the church to process what they heard and begin to enjoy fellowship in the Word.

During our restoration portion, we focus on how our church can pursue and live out the salvation we celebrated in the Lord's Supper. Many churches call these *announcements*. We want to emphasize that our announcements are really informing the church how we can pursue God's design for our lives together. We also use it as a time to hear testimonies from our church and from new candidates for church membership. Upon a candidate's testimony, the church will affirm them into membership. We conclude this time with a commissioning for the gathered church to scatter into the city to live out the Great Commission.

⁸ John S. Hammett, *40 Questions about Baptism and the Lord's Supper* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2015), 305-307.

Four Ways Liturgy Fuels Our Church's Growth and Health

As noted earlier, our church is reaping benefits from the use of our liturgy. This purposeful liturgy provides a framework for spiritual formation, equips believers with gospel language, prioritizes church health, and promotes participation in gospel ministry.

Liturgy provides a framework for spiritual formation.

Since our liturgy follows the biblical metanarrative, we are constantly rehearsing the story of Scripture. Bryan Chapell astutely asserts, "Structures tell stories."⁹ The structure of our liturgy tells the story of Scripture. This structure provides framework for spiritual formation because it is Scripture that is forming disciples corporately.

The liturgy we use emphasizes the role of the Scriptures in forming mature Christians. Whether we are reading short or long passages of Scripture, singing songs informed by Scripture, hearing the Scripture preached, or discussing what we heard proclaimed, Scripture is given a prominent place in our liturgy. Bonhoeffer writes: "As a whole the Scriptures are God's revealing Word. Only in the infiniteness of its inner relationships, in the connection of Old and New Testaments, of promise and fulfillment, sacrifice and law, law and gospel, cross and resurrection, faith and obedience, having and hoping, will the full witness to Jesus Christ the Lord be perceived."¹⁰ The prominence and intentionality of reading Scripture in the liturgy is creating a church that loves the Word of God.

⁹ Bryan Chapell, *Christ Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 15.

¹⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, translated by John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper One, 1954), 51.

John Hammett admits that Baptist churches would do well to give more prominent place to Scripture in public gatherings: “Aside from the sermon text, Scripture is seldom read in many Baptist churches.” He adds, “A careful, thoughtful reading of Scripture serves both to honor God and to edify believers by exposing them to the whole counsel of God.”¹¹ Whether reading a portion of Scripture or committing to preach through books of the Bible, our church is intentionally depending upon God’s Word to shape and form us as his people.

By incorporating historical confessions, creeds, and catechisms, we ensure that our church is not cut off from faithful brothers and sisters in the faith who have preceded us. Hesselgrave agrees, “The biblical text needs to be read and interpreted in dialogue with the confessional tradition—that is, with the way in which the Scriptures have been understood in the church down through history. No one person is an island. Neither is any church.”¹² Allison concurs:

“To voice a common confession of faith as the church assembles together and in continuity with the church throughout the ages stimulates and demonstrates the unity of the body of Christ.”¹³ Allison also suggests that “confession of the common faith provides a hermeneutical framework for the church and its members.”¹⁴ So, whether we are reading or preaching Scripture or affirming the faith once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3), we are committed to a liturgy that provides a framework for spiritual formation.

¹¹ John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 241.

¹² David J. Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally: North American and Beyond*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 200), 223.

¹³ Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 137.

¹⁴ Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 140.

Liturgy equips the Christian with gospel truths.

Since our liturgy follows the biblical metanarrative and allows the Scripture to permeate our public gathering, our liturgy is also gospel heavy. The gospel takes center stage as we rehearse the story of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. By revisiting the gospel weekly, our church demonstrates the centrality of the gospel in the life of the believer and in the life of the church.

Again, Chapell believes the structure of a liturgy is crucial for local churches. He argues:

Analogous to church architecture, the order of worship (another way of describing the liturgy) conveys an understanding of the gospel. Whether one intended 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 Sin (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.¹⁵

We wanted to be sure our church's liturgy was governed by God's intention for church formation rather than by trying to meet some felt needs. By structuring the liturgy around the gospel, we intentionally sought to avoid miscommunicating the reason we gather as a church.

An emphasis on liturgies which emphasize the gospel is as old as the Protestant Reformation. Mark Earngey informs: "because the reformers understood the important interplay between how worshipers pray (*lex orandi*) and how worshippers believe (*lex credendi*), they saw liturgy as a powerful

¹⁵ Chapell, *Christ Centered Worship*, 18.

means by which to communicate theology.”¹⁶ Further, “If the patterns of prayer aligned with the truths of Scripture, then these would renovate and reinvigorate the theological convictions among the Reformation churches.”¹⁷ The liturgies of churches following the Reformation served a catalytic role in thrusting the right preaching and understanding of the gospel across Europe. Earngey describes the liturgies’ impact following the Reformation:

The often ingenious, and always careful, crafting of words in the liturgy permeated the hearts and lives of the worshipers. The liturgies were soaked in Scripture, and thus they did not return void. What they often did return were transformed congregations, confident in Christ and courageous in good works. Through the liturgies of the Reformation, evangelical doctrine was as much caught in public worship as it was taught in published writings.¹⁸

The careful and intentional structure of our liturgy equips our church to be ready to share the gospel. I remember one Sunday after church when a young man approached me about his efforts to share the gospel with a co-worker. I asked questions regarding what he thought he should share. He came to the realization that the gospel template of creation-fall-redemption-restoration was the story he could share with his colleague. I did not need to provide much counsel after he came to conclusions on his own in our conversation by reflecting on our church’s liturgy. Our liturgy equipped him to do the work of an evangelist.

¹⁶ Mark Earngey, “Soli Deo Gloria: The Reformation of Worship,” in *Reformation Worship: Liturgies from the Past for the Present* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2018), 26.

¹⁷ Earngey, “Soli Deo Gloria: The Reformation of Worship,” 26.

¹⁸ Earngey, “Soli Deo Gloria: The Reformation of Worship,” 27.

Liturgy prioritizes church health.

Healthy churches flourish where they are planted. These churches become launching pads for equipping healthy disciples, healthy church growth and church planting. Many characteristics of healthy churches can be fueled by a gospel-saturated liturgy.¹⁹

Foundations rightly identifies the local church as the context for biblical discipleship.²⁰ Our liturgy promotes intentional investment in one another's lives for the sake of Christian maturity. Discipleship is expressed through the learning and obeying of Christ's commands. The "one another" passages highlighted in the New Testament give some direction to what discipleship in the church looks like. These passages focus mainly on disciples of Jesus being in unity with one another, loving one another, and exercising humility with one another.²¹ In gathering and following this liturgy, we can pursue many of the characteristics of a healthy church.

Our liturgy provides space for other aspects of a healthy church to flourish. Biblical leadership is on display. Leaders exercise shepherding and teaching gifts as the liturgy's content is constructed week to week. Biblical preaching and teaching are prioritized as space is provided for the preaching of gospel-centered, expository messages. The regular observance of the biblical ordinances promotes church health. As noted, the Lord's Supper is observed on a weekly basis. Baptism is announced when new believers profess faith.²² The church worships in singing, praying, reading scripture,

¹⁹ See, International Mission Board, "12 Characteristics of a Healthy Church" in *Foundations*, v. 4 (Richmond, VA: 2022), 80-83.

²⁰ "While discipleship happens in a variety of settings, God provides the local church as the necessary setting and the primary relationships for the full measure of biblical discipleship this side of Pentecost. If there is no local church, it necessarily requires church planting." *Foundations*, 57.

²¹ Jeffrey Kranz, "All the 'one another' commands in the NT" overviewbible.com, <https://overviewbible.com/one-another-infographic/>, accessed 28 January 2023.

²² Due to the limitations of the facility we rent for our gathering time, we have to conduct baptisms at different times and in different locations. So, we are not able to incorporate

and hearing testimonies. Biblical fellowship is intentionally structured in the liturgy. Members discuss God's Word during the gathering. They stir up one another for love and good works. Biblical prayer is modeled for the church. The time devoted to prayer demonstrates what healthy prayer is and provides a framework for prayer in a disciple's daily life.²³ Our gathering ends with a commissioning. This commissioning is clear directive to our church to scatter into the world to be witnesses for Jesus until we return to meet again the next Lord's Day.

One of our church's ministry leaders had concerns about the repetitive nature of our liturgy. She particularly had reservations about the weekly observance of the Lord's Supper. She had always been told at other churches that they celebrated the Lord's Supper only sporadically so that it would not lose its meaningfulness. After our church was a few years old, she reported that she loved how we walked through our worship service—especially observing the Lord's Supper every week. She told me that weekly observing the Lord's Supper fueled a love for Christ and served to remind her that she was not alone in her walk with Christ. An entire church was covenanted together to walk alongside one another to pursue Christ together.

Liturgy promotes participation in place of performance.

When our church gathers, we do so to participate together in the gospel whether through singing, praying, listening, reciting, or dialoguing. We

baptism into a normal gathering time. However, we do hear a baptismal candidate's testimony, the church is able to affirm the testimony and the baptism to come and we can pray for the candidate. Ordinarily we depart immediately from our gathering to a place where we can perform the baptism. Typically, the whole church comes for the baptism as they are able.

²³ A typical time of prayer focuses on an ACTS model: adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication. During the time of supplication, we pray for another church in our city, pray for government leaders, and pray for people in our own congregation. This model is usually followed. The model is a helpful template as we disciple new believers because we can always point the example they hear on a weekly basis.

are not simply being entertained, but we are participating in the gathering of the saints for the worship of God. Many churches in our context have talented men and women who perform during a worship service for the good of a congregation, but they often require nothing from the congregation in response. The gathering is centered upon a *come-and-see* approach. By utilizing a liturgy, our church emphasizes the idea of everyone participating in the worship of God and promoting the gospel together.

In fact, I hesitate to call our gathering a worship service because we do so much more than worship. Timms and Chester remind us:

The goal of our meetings should be to encourage one another to worship God—not just then and there, but throughout the week. We meet to “stir up one another to love and good works” (Hebrews 10 v 24). That is the criterion by which to judge all contributions to our gatherings. Even our corporate singing is to be judged by this criterion (Colossians 3 v 16). And the job of the person leading the meeting is to provide a framework in which we can exhort one another to serve God and proclaim His glory to the nations.²⁴

Our liturgy emphasizes the participation of everyone. It is normal for us to serve the church while we gather.

When the church embraces participation in the gospel rather than being passive recipients of a staged performance, they are on their way to be the church God created her to be. Chris Abner writes:

At the moment a new church is planted she is all God designed her to be, but she has not yet achieved all her creator’s expectations. Churches are expected to grow, mature, and multiply. A flourishing church grows where she is planted. She matures and bears witness to the gospel in the community surrounding

²⁴ Steve Timms and Tim Chester, *Gospel-Centered Church* (The Good Book Company: 2002), 24, epub.

her and to the nations. A church that flourishes will ultimately multiply by sending gospel workers to establish new churches in new locations among new communities. The aim of every church planter should be to establish churches that can flourish where they are planted.²⁵

Utilizing a liturgy that promotes participation equips church members to go out into the world and engage in gospel ministry. Participating in the liturgy service provides opportunities for members to gain confidence in the gospel and the God who saved them. We have seen the use of this liturgy serve as a launching point to send workers into the harvest and plant new churches.

For example, a young couple was just sent out by our church to be part of a church planting team. Their participation in the gospel in our church equipped them to lead out in establishing a new church. We pray many more following this young couple.

Conclusion

What our church planting team once viewed as an obstacle in our efforts to plant a church—that is, the lack of time people have—became an opportunity to rediscover the value of intentional liturgy in our church’s public gathering. The use of liturgy maximized our time together and became an indispensable component to the health and growth of our church.

²⁵ Robert Christopher Abner, “An Embryonic Ecclesiology Enabling Church Planting Movements to Flourish,” (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2019), 50-51.

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