

The Liturgical Shape of Christian Life

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‘All who have added something to the edifice of the church that does not correspond to its foundation will have laboured in vain.’

— John Calvin (Institutes II.v)

The argument in a nutshell:

‘From maintenance to mission!’ That has been the catch-cry of the church in recent years as it has sought to do something about the steep fall-off in church membership and attendance since the 1970’s. Like motherhood and apple pie, the mission imperative can hardly be objected to by anyone who knows what the church is about. But, therein lies the rub; do we know what the church is about? The suggestion I wish to make in this paper is that we will not know what the church is about unless we give priority to maintenance, priority, that is, to tending the flock we already have. Maintenance is not an impediment to mission; it is intrinsic to the missionary being of the church. The slogan, ‘from maintenance to mission’, *can* be taken to imply a deep interdependence between the two; we move from the starting point of maintenance to an engagement in mission, and we keep doing that, over and over again. We keep tending to the work of maintenance, that is, precisely because it is the only sure foundation for mission. That is one interpretation of the slogan, but it is not, perhaps, the most common one. More often, I suggest, the slogan is taken to mean that the church ought to move out of maintenance mode—either treating the tasks of maintenance as relatively unimportant, or leaving them behind altogether—and into a new mode, that of mission.

If that is the interpretation that prevails, then the church has succumbed, to a disease, a disease that is, quite simply, a dis-ease with the gospel itself. The dis-ease has many symptoms. One such symptom is the church casting around for innovative forms of ministry and proclamation that will override the strange unpopularity of the invitation to ‘take up your cross’. Another is the church chasing after the nine lepers who did not return to give thanks for their healing and asking them whether they would perhaps have preferred something else instead. In a desperate bid to be relevant

the church busies itself with providing whatever else it supposes the wider community wants, and consents to offer its services on the wider community's terms. I find quite alarming in our church at present the prevalence of the assumption that we can simply make things up as we go along with no allegiance to the accrued wisdom of the tradition, either theological or liturgical. That too is a symptom of profound dis-ease, even wilful disregard, of the gospel once given to the saints. These symptoms of disease each constitute a means of leaving the gospel behind, and the only way to guard against them, I suggest, is to attend properly to the task of maintenance. That, in brief, is the argument I will seek to develop in this lecture, and I will develop it around one further point, namely, that the primary locus for attending to the task of maintenance is the liturgy, the hour or so of worship for which the church is gathered Sunday by Sunday.

Retrieval before innovation

We do not need reminding in the present age that Christian discipleship is a minority activity. Although the regularly cited claim that only 10% of New Zealanders attend church regularly is misleading, even the probably more accurate figure of 20% still leaves the church with cause to fret that its influence in society is much diminished and that somehow it is failing in its task of 'making disciples of all nations and baptising them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit' (Matt. 28:19). Something must be done we all agree, and much energy is devoted to finding out what that something is. Some suggest that what we need most of all is structural change. The structures of the National Church and of Presbyterian polity, it is argued, are the greatest impediment to mission. Others contend that it is our forms of worship that need radical transformation, or the music we sing, or the buildings we inhabit. These fail to connect, it is said, with the culture of the contemporary world.

My purpose is not to contest these and other accounts of what must be done. The church does need to be innovative and creative now that it has been relieved of the burden of trying to maintain Christendom,¹ but innovation, creativity and genuine progress in mission must be grounded in a retrieval of the ancient things of the faith.² To put it otherwise, creativity and innovation require that we understand the grammar of the gospel. The linguistic analogy may be teased out a little further.

¹ I take the point from Ian Stackhouse, *The Gospel-Driven Church: Retrieving Classical Ministries for Contemporary Revivalism* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2004). 134.

² The point is argued for at some length by Ian Stackhouse in *The Gospel-Driven Church*. See especially, p.78.

Those who communicate in language most effectively — the poets, the orators, the preachers — those whose eloquence stops us in our tracks and opens up for us a new understanding of the truth, are those who know the rules of language. To abandon those rules does not facilitate creativity and freedom of speech; instead it reduces speech to nonsense — the speaker makes no sense! Likewise in music, or painting, or architecture, the truly profound and creative practitioners of those arts are those who have the laws of music or colour or architecture written on their hearts. It is not that they are slaves to those laws. Rather, the laws are the conditions under which their freedom and creativity of expression become possible. Similarly, to communicate the gospel creatively, effectively, and above all, faithfully, requires that we have the gospel written on our hearts, written in such fashion that it is apparent in all that we do.

Thus the question is, how do we learn the gospel? We learn it, above all, in the midst of the community that lives it, and most especially, in the event of worship by which that community is gathered together for the purpose of hearing and confessing and enacting the gospel. Without the maintenance of this practice, according to the rules determined by the gospel itself, there can be no effective Christian mission. The apostle Paul, arguably the church's greatest ever missionary, devoted his energies to the establishment of a church in each of the places he visited, and then took great care to instruct them what should be done when they come together for worship.³ We might take particular note of Paul's concluding insistence in 1 Cor 14: 40 that all things in worship should be done 'decently and in order'. Paul, in fact, offers remarkably little advice about how the church should engage in 'mission' as we typically understand that term. He is much more concerned with making clear the content of the gospel and with 'in-house' matters, with how the fledgling churches ought to conduct themselves as a community of believers. The task of 'making disciples', Paul understood, is not complete when the newly converted have been gathered into the church. That feature of the 'great commission' has only just begun. Maintenance is the work of disciple-making, a task that takes place, above all, when the community is gathered for worship. That is to say, it takes place through the liturgy.

The liturgical shape of Christian life

³ See, for example, 1 Cor. 11:17-34; 14:26-40.

Let me begin my development of this theme by clearing up a misconception. Liturgy is not an Anglican term. It does not refer only to the kind of thing we find in the Prayer Book, a written order of worship with collects, responses, prepared prayers, and so on. That is one form that liturgy may take, but liturgy refers simply to the form and content of corporate worship — any corporate worship, whether it be high Anglican, low Presbyterian, middle-of-the road Methodist or charismatic. Liturgy is simply the form and content of worship. The question, therefore, is not whether or not we wish to be liturgical; the question is what form will our liturgy take. However various, creative and innovative our liturgies may be, the first responsibility of those who lead worship, I suggest, is to ensure that the liturgy conforms to the grammar of the gospel.

Concern for the grammar of the gospel is what prompted Paul's admonition of the Corinthian church whose celebration of the Lord's Supper had become an offense to the gospel. 'For when the time comes to eat,' Paul says,

...each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you! (1 Cor. 11:21-2)

Paul's complaint is that the celebration of the supper had become an occasion for individual indulgence instead of a gathering together of rich and poor, slave and free, men and women into the fellowship of Christ's body. The Corinthian liturgy violated the grammar of the gospel. It had ceased to be an enactment of the good news.

A further instance of the way worship is bound up with the grammar of the gospel appears in the fourth century debates about the person of Christ. The church had continued the practice, seen in the New Testament, of worshipping Christ. When Arius and his followers began to deny the divinity of Christ it was pointed out that if Christ were not fully divine then the Arians' worship of Christ would be idolatrous. During the course of the debate the Nicene Creed was developed as an expression of the 'rule of faith', a rule articulating, in this case, the coherence between liturgical practice and the church's faith. In what follows I propose to explore more fully that coherence, thus to reveal the liturgical shape of Christian life.

The call to worship.

The place to begin is with a child sleeping in the temple of the Lord. The Lord called to the child, saying, ‘Samuel, Samuel’. Three times the child heard the call, and did not understand that it was the voice of the Lord. Then Eli, a priest—a minister if you prefer—perceived that the Lord was calling the boy and he said to Samuel, ‘Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening”’ (1 Sam. 3:8-9). Worship is precisely that encounter, an encounter initiated by the call of God in which disciples are made. Notice the role of the priest in this encounter. The priest ministers by assisting Samuel to recognise the Lord’s voice. There is a grammar here which ought to be reflected in the conduct of worship. It is a grammar of divine initiative. The Lord calls, seeks us out, and finds us sleeping often enough. The Lord’s call wakens us, wakens us from whatever slumber has rendered us unable to recognise the voice of God and leads us into a divine encounter, an encounter in which we are transformed. Liturgy, I suggest, does well to follow this pattern. It does not do well when it suggests instead that God is at our beck and call. A call to worship, with which liturgy begins, is thus God’s call, and the minister serves well when she helps the congregation to recognise God’s voice. That is what ministry is about; it contributes to the making of disciples by helping people to recognise God’s voice. And then it will be content to let God speak for himself.

Response

Eli the minister guides Samuel to say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’ Liturgy involves, as does discipleship itself, listening, attentiveness, waiting upon the Lord. But it also involves our response. The word of the Lord is a word of address. It asks something of us; it opens a dialogue. The minister serves well, when he or she guides our response while still enabling it to be ours. Manipulation and coercion have no place in the worship of the Christian church.

Attentiveness to the Word of the Lord involves, centrally, attention to the words of Scripture. It has been the experience of the church that God addresses us through these texts. Scripture is, to put it in language borrowed from John Webster, an instrument of the triune God’s self-communicative presence.⁴ It is an instrument of God’s self-presentation. The church itself, furthermore, is constituted by that address. We are church, that is to say, precisely as, and in virtue of the fact, that

⁴ John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) Ch.1.

we are addressed by God.⁵ Faith comes through the hearing of this address. So then, the liturgy will involve attention to God's Word. It is important to understand that the words of Scripture are at once both divine address and creaturely response. They are an instrument of divine communication and a human response to the divine initiative. There is not space here to develop this implicit doctrine of Scripture, but let me trace the liturgical implications of this position. Christian worship involves the reading of Scripture as the primary means of attending to the Word of the Lord, but it also involves taking up the words of Scripture in response to God's call. One part of the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture, through which an account is given of Scripture as God's gift, is the acknowledgement that we are given words to pray, not least when we are unable to pray ourselves. Thus in song, in prayer, in responsive litany, and silent contemplation, Scripture furnishes us with words to offer that unite us with the communion of saints extended in space and time, and which sustain us in those moments when we have no words to offer on our own account. We have heard some of these words already: 'Speak, Lord for your servant is listening'; And of course there are many others: 'I will enter his gates with thanksgiving in my heart'; 'Grace to you and peace from our Lord Jesus Christ'; 'How long O Lord will our enemies prevail against us', and so on... The taking of these words to our lips in response to God's call is not to say that the liturgy will not also include words of our own making. But here too, it is Scripture that provides us with the grammar for Christian speech, and if we depart from that grammar we will not speak gospel anymore. So, in the maintenance work of Christian worship, a central part of which is attention to Scripture, we learn to speak the gospel. This work of maintenance is necessary work if we are to engage faithfully in mission.

In receiving the words of Scripture as words for our own response to God's call, we receive words that leave none of life untouched. There are words of praise and of lamentation, of joy and of outrage. There are words of anger at our enemies and anger at God. There are words of longing and words of gratitude, words of ecstasy and words of pain. Because Christian life is immersed in the full reality of human life, there will be a time when each of these words is needed. There will be a time for praying Psalm 58, for example, which cries out for vengeance. There will be times, that is, when our desire for vengeance should be placed in the hands of God. There will be a time, even, for praying Psalm 137 that calls for the babies of our enemies to be dashed against the rocks. There will be times when outrage requires expression lest we become indifferent to the brutality to which

⁵ Classically expressed, the church is a 'creature of the Word'.

human beings often descend. Praying our outrage entails the confession that we need God's help to know how else we should respond. There will be a time for praying the psalms of lament, just as there will be a time for praying the psalms of joy. We are given these words to pray, in the Psalms and elsewhere, and in liturgy we learn how to pray them in the company of Christ who is the leader of our worship. With these words of Christian Scripture we may bring the whole of our lives and the whole of creation before God in intercession and priestly offering. That is what discipleship entails. Intercession and priestly offering, as we shall explore further below, are not the least of what is required of a church engaged in mission.

Confession

I began with Samuel, wakened by the Lord's call. Let me move now to Isaiah, and to Zacchaeus in the New Testament. Their encounters with God—in the temple, and in the company of Jesus—sent them to their knees in confession of their unworthiness and of their sin. 'Woe is me', said Isaiah, 'I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!' (Isa. 6:5). Zacchaeus too, discovered through his encounter with Jesus, the fraud that his life had been until then and repented of his sin. The liturgical act of confession, in which sin is acknowledged and repented of should not be an act in which people experience the condemnation of the church. It is, rather, the response people find themselves needing to make when confronted with God's grace. Repentance, the confession of those things that weigh one down, is intrinsic to the rest offered to the weary and heavy laden. To avoid confession in our liturgy is to presume that there has been no encounter with grace, and it denies to the weary and heavy-laden the rest that is promised in Christ.

Bill Dyrness writes of the importance of confession in worship:

Worship does not come naturally to us, fundamentally because we are sinners. All of our relationships — with God, with each other, and with creation — are damaged. Shalom, God's original intent for each of us, has been destroyed. The meaning of the confession of sin and the assurance of pardon is very profound: it is the place in worship where shalom between God and

people is restored. Christ has reconciled the believer to God and opened the way for us to worship ‘in spirit and in truth’ (John 4:24).⁶

In addition to opening the way to a true worship of God, confession and pardon also opens the way to participation in the mission of God. On confessing that he was unclean and lived among a people of unclean lips, a seraph of the Lord touched Isaiah’s mouth with a burning coal and said to him, ‘Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.’

Immediately thereafter Isaiah heard the voice of the Lord once more saying: ‘Whom shall I send and who will go for us?’ And Isaiah said, ‘Here am I; send me!’ (Isa. 6:8). The maintenance work of confession and absolution were not incidental to Isaiah’s engagement in mission. He could not have done without it. It remains the case that a people engaged in mission have need of that very same work.

Praise

In Isaiah’s encounter with God he heard the call of the seraphs saying ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory’ (Isa. 6:3). Those gathered for Christian worship are invited to join in that song. It is not, first of all, our song — a mode of self-expression, and dominated by our own interests. The song of worship in which we are invited to join is the song of the heavenly hosts. We are chosen to sing along, to sing a theme already established and to celebrate a gospel already declared. We are invited to add our voice to creation’s hymn of praise.

In the story portrayed in the 2004 movie, ‘As it is in Heaven’, an internationally acclaimed conductor and violinist returns to his hometown in Sweden. After a time he agrees to conduct the small church choir and introduces the choristers to a new understanding of what music really is. He is appalled to discover, however, that one of the choristers has entered the choir in a competition. ‘You cannot compete in music’, he says. Eventually, however, he relents but promises that the audience in Vienna where the competition is to be held will hear music as they have never heard it before. When the day of the competition comes, the conductor fails to arrive in the auditorium. Instead he lies dying in a room backstage. But he lives long enough to hear his choristers take up the song he had taught them, not so much a song in fact but a vocal symphony. Symphony means

⁶ William A. Dyrness, ‘Confession and Assurance, Sin and Grace’ in Leanne Van Dyk, ed. *A More Profound Alleluia: Theology and Worship in Harmony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 31-54, 32.

‘sounding together’ and as the choristers, following the lead of one of the least among them, successively add layers of harmony, members of the audience slowly rise to their feet and, no longer competing, add their own voices to the song. ‘As it is in Heaven’ the film is called. Liturgical praise is an anticipation of the eschatological gathering into harmonious co-existence of all that God has made. It is a participation ahead of time in the reconciliation of all things made possible in Christ and by which God’s glory is acclaimed.

Preaching

I have referred already to the fact that worship is, fundamentally, the encounter and communion of God with God’s people. That communion involves attention to the Word of God as it is given to us in the Scriptures and mediated by the Spirit. Scripture is read. What is more, it should *all* be read. We will, of course, select parts of Scripture to be read on particular occasions, but we have no business excluding other parts from ever being read. During the course of a particular congregation’s life, in a cycle perhaps of three to four years, all of Scripture should be read. If it is not, then we will miss something of what God has to say. There are parts of Scripture that it would be easier to avoid, parts that speak of the wrath of God, parts that make uncomfortable demands, and parts that speak of God’s ordaining of things that we find ourselves unable easily to approve. The avoidance of such passages, however, involves the domestication of God, the idolatrous fashioning of God according to what we are able to approve. Responsible liturgy and responsible preaching will not avoid those difficult passages. It will provide space for the gathered congregation to struggle with them, even to rail against them, trusting that, like Jacob at Peniel, the struggle with God will bring blessing in the end.

It is the preacher’s task to lead the congregation in giving attention to the Word. The preacher undertakes that task by virtue of the fact that he or she has spent time during the week in study and in prayer, giving attention him or herself to what God is saying to the church. It is not the preacher’s task, by contrast, to set Scripture to one side and then to speak for herself. The pulpit or the lectern is not the place for the preacher’s home-spun wisdom or homely good advice. Nor is it the place from which to hear the preacher’s plans for the church. In all that the preacher says, which might be a great deal, her task is to help the gathered congregation to recognise the voice of the Lord. Good preaching is, essentially, a mode of speech that allows God to speak for himself.

It is one of the most astonishing acts of grace that God should enlist in his service the stumbling and inadequate words that we human beings typically muster in order to speak of God. But God does that, again and again. Putting one's trust in God to do that once more is the only justification the preacher can possibly have for mounting the pulpit steps. The preacher who has not said with Jeremiah, 'Ah Lord, truly I do not know how to speak' (Jer. 1:6), has no business in the pulpit. But the preacher who has confessed her inadequacy in preaching will likely have heard in response something akin to the words spoken to Jeremiah: "Do not be afraid [said the Lord]... for I am with you to deliver you"... Then the Lord put out his hand and touched [Jeremiah's] mouth; and the Lord said to [him], Now I have put my words in your mouth...' (Jer. 1: 8-9). Everything said in preaching depends upon that act of grace, submission to which is precisely what the ministry of the Word is about.

Preachers who offer only their home-spun wisdom or who lay out in the pulpit their own plans for the church or their own urging of the congregation to do this or that are not ministers of the Word. They do not participate in the making of disciples because they offer no assistance to those of their congregations who come seeking to hear the voice of God. I am doubtful, myself, about the model of preaching which supposes that the preacher must offer a lesson followed by the application — 'this is what the Bible says, now this is how you should apply it in your lives'. That model, I suggest, intervenes too much on the work of the Spirit. The Word of God must be allowed to do its own work, speaking into the hearts and minds of those who hear it according to God's understanding of their need. That is between God and the people and the preacher's job is not to get in the way. In all that the preacher says, therefore—let me repeat the point—she or he must be content to let the Word of God speak for itself. To preach otherwise is to adopt a paternalistic tone with one's congregation and, which is worse, subverts the adequacy of God's Word.

Offering and Intercession

In Dietrich Bonhoeffer's famous distinction between free grace and cheap grace the point is made that the grace of God asks something of us. It asks, indeed, the offering of our whole lives in joyful service of the One upon whom our lives depend. This service is not subservience, precisely because the offering is not coerced. It is instead the whole-hearted response of love to a divine love that will not let us go, even when we defy it. Liturgy needs to provide space for this response. The prayer of confession as already described, is one such space. The more explicitly named space for that

response, however, is the making of free-will offerings. Liturgical care needs to be taken at this point so that the offering is not reduced to a merely pragmatic gift of a few dollars in order to keep the church afloat. The monetary offerings, like the sacrifices made in Israel's worship, are not a payment of dues, but expressive of the fact that since all of life's blessing is the gift of God, all of it is to be used in conformity with God's purpose. The portion is a token of the whole. The practice of standing as the offering is brought forward is one way of signifying that the whole of who we are is included in the offering now prayed over and offered into God's service. Because the significance of standing may be lost on some, care should be taken to see that what is signified is somehow retained.

The act of offering is continued in prayers of intercession. Such prayers are not simply to be understood as asking God for things. Through prayers of intercession we are graciously enabled to participate in Christ's priestly work of presenting all things to the Father. Christ is already engaged in that task. His mission is nothing other than to find God's creatures in the far country to which they have wandered or been exiled and to bring them home. It is to heal the sick, to seek justice for the oppressed, release for the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. This is Christ's mission because it is the purpose of God that all should have life, and have it in abundance. Atonement, judgement, healing *and intercession*— all have their place within this overarching purpose of God who is present in Christ reconciling the world to himself (1 Cor. 5:19). That Christ intercedes for the world is again indicative of the fact that reconciliation is not coerced. The world is given time to respond, time to learn the gestures of love that love itself calls forth. And in the meantime there is one who intercedes for the world, one who makes those gestures on our behalf, one who presents to the Father the perfect offering of sacrifice and praise. The Spirit in turn unites us to Christ, enables us to share in the work of intercession, tutors us in the gestures of love, and gives us a share in the priestly work of Christ. The church is gathered Sunday by Sunday for this work. Without it, the church no longer participates in the missionary work of Christ.

The Sacraments

In the Reformed tradition not every service of worship includes a baptism or culminates in the celebration of the Lord's Supper and so it might be thought that the sacraments are merely occasional instruments of divine communication. We will come shortly to the matter of the Lord's Supper, but we ought to recognise first that every occasion of corporate worship is in fact a living

out of one's baptism. The sacrament of baptism bestows upon the baptised membership of a new community, a community that is distinguished, above all, by its worship of the triune God. It is understood, further, that in the sacrament of baptism a new person is brought into being, a person whose identity is determined by his or her belonging to Christ and to the people whom Christ has gathered into the communion of his body. Whenever people come from their homes and from their work, from their sickbed or from the marketplace, they are being bound by the Spirit into a new corporate reality, that of the Body of Christ. They are participating, furthermore, in the ongoing work of their formation as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Discipleship, we might add at this point, is not principally about the life of the individual. It is about the formation of a new people who have been gathered to share in Christ's work of service to the world. It is participation in a community that through its life and witness shows forth the redemptive purposes of God in the world and the coming kingdom of God. The practices are typically relational rather than individual — forgiveness, reconciliation, love of neighbour, *koinonia*. One has to be gathered into community in order for these practices to be worked out. Linking this life in community with baptism, Colin Gunton writes,

Baptism...gives social embodiment and expression to that different place in which justification sets the sinner, the place where the Word is heard and the Supper celebrated. To live under the discipline of the Word and the Table, *is* to be one whose way of being is altered...⁷

When, on occasion, the sacrament of baptism is celebrated explicitly in worship and new members are joined to the Body of Christ, the congregation is called upon to reaffirm their own commitment to that body, to share in the nurture and support of the newly baptised, and thus to contribute to the work of making disciples as they were commissioned to do when, at their own baptism, they were set free from sin and raised to new life in Christ.

The Lord's Supper, as we mentioned, is generally not celebrated every week in Reformed worship but the trend has been in recent years to celebrate more frequently than was once the quarterly norm. John Calvin himself thought that the Lord's Supper should be celebrated every week, and there is certainly an argument for doing so in an age when there is much less schooling in the gospel

⁷ Colin Gunton, *The Christian Faith: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002) 146.

elsewhere. Although the Lord's Supper is other things besides, it is also an evangelical ordinance, a means of setting forth the gospel, of telling the good news. 'This cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? This bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? (1 Cor. 10: 16). With these words, Scriptural words once more, the minister speaks gospel and as the bread and the cup are taken and passed in service from one hand to another the gathered people of God live out the gospel by being actually reconciled with neighbours, and perhaps strangers, who would not otherwise be their companions.

The Lord's Supper is a development of course of the Jewish celebration of the Passover, commemorating and announcing once more the saving work of God. In the Passover liturgy particular emphasis is placed on the pedagogical function of the liturgy. In the instructions given in Exodus 12 for the celebration of the Passover, for instance, we read, 'When your children ask you, "What do you mean by this observance?" you shall say, "It is the passover sacrifice to the Lord, for he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt..."' (Ex. 12:26-27). And again in Exodus 13:8: 'You shall tell your children on that day, "It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt"'. 'This response', says Brevard Childs, 'is not simply a report, but above all a confession to the ongoing participation of Israel in the decisive act of redemption from Egypt.'⁸ The Passover Haggadah, the liturgy now used by Jews whenever the feast is celebrated, takes up the challenge of proclaiming this redemption to succeeding generations. The children gathered at the table take a central role in the liturgy. It is they who ask after the meaning of the various elements of the celebration, and the liturgy itself is directed towards the purpose of assuring all who are gathered that the story here recounted is their story. A passage 'of central importance' in the Haggadah reads:

In every generation let each man look on himself as if he came forth out of Egypt.

As it is said: "And thou shalt tell thy son in that day, saying: It is because of that which the Lord did for me when I came forth out of Egypt.

It was not only our fathers that the Holy One, blessed be he, redeemed, but us as well did he redeem along with them.

As it is said: "And he brought us out from thence, that he might bring us in, to give us the land which he swore unto our fathers."⁹

⁸ Brevard Childs, *Exodus: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1974) 200.

⁹ *The Passover Haggadah*, edited by Nahum Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1953) 59.

I cite this passage as an exemplary instance of how liturgy contributes to the formation of a people. The Exodus and redemption here recounted ‘are not to be taken as happenings in long bygone days, but as a personal experience.’¹⁰ ‘It was not only our [parents] that the Holy One... redeemed, but us as well did he redeem along with them’, the Passover liturgy proclaims. The celebration of the Passover is thus to be understood as an exercise of *paideia*, a process by which persons are formed. Israel’s observance of the Passover celebration is a central means by which Jewish identity is formed and safeguarded. In continuity with this conception of things, the celebration of the Lord’s Supper is likewise a process by which a people’s identity is established and disciples are formed. Who is a disciple?, we may ask. A disciple is one who receives the bread that Jesus took, and broke, and gave, saying, ‘this is my body; it is for you’. A disciple is one who receives the cup over which the Lord said, ‘this is the cup of the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it in remembrance of me.’ A disciple is one, furthermore, who consents to the authority of these words and, in the various forms their response may take, ‘proclaims the Lord’s death until he comes’.

Returning to Exodus 13, the Israelites are further advised that the observance of the Passover ordinance and the festival of unleavened bread is to be undertaken ‘so that the teaching of the Lord may be on your lips’ (Ex. 13:9). Faithful utterance of the teaching of the Lord is grounded thus in a particular set of practices, and in membership of a particular community. Here too, I think, there are salutary lessons for a church concerned with mission. Mission is grounded in a particular set of practices, practices which are principally liturgical — the practice of worship, the practice of faithful transmission of that which has been received, the practice of participation in a community brought into being by the redemptive and liberating work of God. Participation in these practices week by week, in answer to God’s call upon us, is the necessary antecedent condition of our being able to tell truthfully in mission the story that Scripture tells.

Creeds

The grammar of the gospel here laid out is found in more concentrated form in the creedal history of the church. Creeds and Confessions offer summary statements of what the Liturgy itself affirms. It is appropriate from time to time, therefore, that the congregation confesses together in creedal form the substance of its faith, a faith it shares with the world-wide church. It is sometimes said by

¹⁰ *The Passover Haggadah*, footnote commentary, p.59.

members of the church that they cannot believe this or that phrase in the ancient creeds, and this admission is accepted as a reason why Creeds are not used as much in worship as once they were.¹¹ But this is to misunderstand what is involved in the liturgical use of Creeds. Creeds are not statements of what an individual may or may not believe. They are statements of what the Church takes to be true. They are said, therefore, by the church together. Those who stand to recite the creed in the context of a service of worship are signifying above all that they belong to the community that lives by this confession; they belong to the community that holds to this faith and seeks to live out this gospel. Those who say the creed together confess that they depend upon and are sustained by their membership of this community even when they do not fully understand and when they struggle to believe—perhaps especially when they struggle to believe. Of course, the recital of the creed will only be understood in this way if the liturgical work of maintaining the faith has been properly attended to elsewhere. If that work is not done, our congregations are likely to confuse the gospel with what each one of us individually considers it judicious to approve and will feel justified in supposing that this or that element of the creed is not for them. The recital of the Creed should instead be an occasion for gratitude that we belong in a story and are sustained by a community that is both more profound and more enduring than we can conceive all by ourselves.

The Lord's Prayer

We may be thankful that objections are less commonly heard to the recital of the Lord's Prayer. The prayer remains a well-established feature of Christian liturgy and properly so, for we do not know how to pray except as we are guided by the Lord himself. The prayer was given by Jesus to the disciples in response to their plea that he teach them how to pray. What he taught them was a pattern of praise, confession and petition that is reflected in the broader elements of the liturgy as I have sketched them in this lecture. The Lord's prayer is not only instruction, however; it is also a working out of the participatory logic of prayer, and of worship more generally. We do not simply imitate the prayer that is taught by Jesus; in praying the words he taught we are praying with him. We are drawn by the Spirit into the communion Jesus himself enjoys with the Father. To pray with Christ is to be gathered up into his reconciling work and to be made aware of the pattern our lives should take in a world yet to be made one with Christ.

¹¹ This varies across the traditions, of course, but extensively afflicts the tradition to which I belong.

Blessing

Services of Christian worship end with the Benediction at once a commissioning and a blessing. We have noted already in the encounters with God reported of Jeremiah and Isaiah that the encounter was also a commission. ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’, the Lord said. Encounter with God brings rest for the weary and heavy laden, a restoration of shalom between God and those who worship, but it also makes them restless for a ‘shalom’ in this world not yet realised in its fullness. Thus in worship we are confronted with the question, who then will go to do the work of making peace, of telling good news, of searching out the weary and heavy laden? In the Benediction we are commissioned for that work and assured of God’s blessing. We may be assured of God’s blessing because the work of mission is in fact a participation in what God is already bringing about.

The act of corporate worship thus comes to an end, but the liturgy as such does not. For ‘liturgy’ in its original sense means ‘the work of the people’. The grammar of the gospel heard and enacted in worship now becomes the grammar of Christian life. We are commissioned to go forth with the gospel written on our hearts, to proclaim and to enact it according to the grammar we have rehearsed in worship together.

In conclusion

By way of conclusion now, let me draw attention to an aspect of the church’s maintenance work so far unacknowledged, and then add a couple of further points derived from what I have said.

First, concerning the work of maintenance—the work of tending the flock we already have; I have suggested that the primary locus for this work of maintenance is the liturgy, the weekly gathering of the congregation for corporate worship. But there is a secondary locus, equally important, namely, the pastoral visit. Here too what is said and done is grounded in the grammar of the gospel and is a means of conveying good news to those who have need of encounter with God, of confession, of a hope to cling to, and of strengthening for the journey ahead. The nutrients for pastoral visitation again lie in the biblical narrative. There the stories are told of God’s encounters with human beings in their sinfulness, their sorrow, their pain and their joy. The experience gained from diligent

attention to these stories of divine encounter and grace is the indispensable resource for faithful Christian nurture.¹² Ministers are called in the pastoral arena too to be servants of the Word.

A second point: I began by acknowledging that we have need of creativity and innovation in facing the missionary challenges of our time. None of what I have said denies that. But! — creativity and innovation, whether in worship or in mission, must be securely grounded in the grammar of the gospel. If we do not observe that grammar, our worship and our mission will not make Christian sense. We are not free in worship to do whatever we please, or, whatever we suppose will bring the punters in. We have been entrusted with the news of God in Christ reconciling the world to himself, and we have no business—not in the name of Christ at least—of telling any other story or shaping our liturgy according to any other grammar.

And finally; we are observing today the beginning of a new year of training for ministry, and the establishment of a new Centre that seeks to undertake that work in renewed partnership with the church as a whole. Let me boldly suggest that the minister of Word and Sacrament who takes this particular calling seriously, and who prepares for and exercises this ministry both liturgically and pastorally won't have time in the week for very much else. But there is no cause for alarm. If this ministry of Word and Sacrament is exercised faithfully, then the whole people of God will have been prepared for mission. They will have heard and been heartened by the good news. They will have been restored to communion with God. They will have seen enacted and practised themselves the gestures of service and of love. They will have shared in the priesthood of Christ by which the needs of the world are presented in intercession to the Father. They will have been helped on Sunday morning and in pastoral conversation to live their lives creatively and innovatively according to the grammar of the gospel. That is what mission requires of us, and for that, the minister too will have all the time she needs.

¹² I take the point from Eugene Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 10.

