

THE REFORMED CHURCH RE-DISCOVERS THE LITURGY

I should like to begin the consideration of this topic by a historical study of our Reformed liturgical history. I am somewhat tempted to refrain from that approach, however, by the knowledge that the main outlines of that history are as well known to you as they are to me and that to repeat them here would be a waste of time. But because our history does have a vital role in our present recovery, perhaps you will permit me to use a brief historical summary as a reminder of certain points which we need to bear in mind.

For it is our history which has brought us sharply face to face with the fact that there is such a thing as a Reformed concept of liturgy. Again, I must plead ignorance of precise conditions in South Africa. But almost everywhere else in the Reformed world, there were centuries when even the idea of a Reformed liturgy would have seemed a contradiction in terms. To be sure, in some places, though by no means universally, the Reformed Church had preserved a few formularies to be used on Sacramental occasions. Where the Reformed mind had not completely yielded to the viewpoint of English Puritanism, at least the main festivals of the Christian year were still celebrated. But with these exceptions, the Reformed Church rather prided itself upon its unliturgical worship and its devotion to freedom in such matters.

In this, of course, as we now see, we were claiming not the inheritance of the Reformation, but the inheritance of both pietism and rationalism which had set themselves to destroy the liturgical spirit of earlier days. The student of the history of liturgy can trace out with minute accuracy

the process as it took place in various sections of the Reformed family of churches. It happened differently in different areas, of course. But almost universally, nevertheless, the liturgical landmarks left by the Reformation were removed one by one as fossilrelics of an imperfect development. Some of them lasted for a long time. I was interested to discover, for example, that the use of the traditional pericopes, Gospel and Epistle for each Sunday in the Church year, was maintained in the Reformed Church in Friesland until the beginning of the 19th century. That surely is something of a record! As early as 1638 in Scotland the process was complete; in other places it took longer. But I should imagine that by the opening years of the eighteenth century, save for pockets of resistance like the one I have mentioned, all of the Reformed Churches practiced a form of worship that was completely free.

I have put the blame on the twin forces of rationalism and pietism. And I am sure that much of it belongs there. The rational tendency in the Reformed Church found the language of the liturgy, instinct as it was with the piety of the 16th century, crude and forbidding. He wanted something more expressive of the polished and refined thought of his own day. The pietist tendency found the same forms wooden and lifeless, lacking in evangelical fervor. To his mind, that was true not just because of the language of these particular forms, but was true of all forms which he considered shackles that bound the freedom of the Spirit that bloweth where it listeth. And because in Holland and Germany and elsewhere the Reformed Church was threatened with serious losses to the various pietist group, it was thought better to yield the liturgy than to lose so many adherents, a policy, I may say, that was not without its strong opponents at least in the Netherlands.

But while I think that these factors account externally for the development I wonder whether we can safely ignore what I might call the internal factor. Could pietism and rationalism ever have met with such success had there not been something within the life of the Reformed Church which found them appealing? What I mean, of course, is this: while our liturgical impoverishment may be traced to the influence of these forces in part, I think it can also be traced to the logical conclusion drawn from our position as a Church of the Word. That was the exclusive interpretation of ourselves which we chose to follow; and in the following of it we quite naturally let go of everything which was not essential to our main purpose. It is not surprising that our worship became essentially a sermon which eventually came to dominate the entire liturgical order. The lessons from Scripture were chosen to re-enforce the point of the sermon; the psalms and hymns were selected to bear on it from their angle; and even the prayers, in many instances, became ancillary introductions and conclusion to what the sermon contained, thinly disguised as petitions to the Almighty.

And now our historians have reminded us that such a state of affairs

can hardly be called the mind of the Reformed Reformation with regard to the worship of the Church. Dr. William Maxwell of Scotland has traced out in great detail the exact steps by which the Roman Catholic mass was transformed into the Sunday service of the Reformed church, the evolutions which it underwent from the time of its first translation in Strasbourg to its final stabilization by John Calvin. Whatever may be our opinions of the result, there is its genealogy in a wealth of scholarly detail which cannot be disputed.

I have no desire here to enter into a detailed account of John Calvin's Sunday service, which is probably as well known to you as it is to me. But since I am sure you will agree that that Sunday service is perhaps the most important single document to be considered in any Reformed revival of the liturgy, I think we can profitably spend a few moments in considering some of its features. I should remind you at this point that there are in reality two documents in question here, that which Calvin worked out for the French congregation in Strasbourg and the later version which was accepted on his return to Geneva. But since he himself left very detailed explanations of the accommodations which he made to the situation in Geneva, we are quite justified, I think, in treating in two services as one indication of Calvin's liturgical mind.

The first point to which I would direct your attention is the fact that in theory, at least, this service is a service of Word and Sacrament. I say in theory, for as you know in practice it was only once a month in Strasbourg and four times a year in Geneva that Calvin's idea of the New Testament norm of Word and Sacrament was realized. But that fact must not blind us to the greater fact that Calvin never accepted this unnatural divorce without protest. From the very outset, his mind was clear that in the New Testament scheme of things, Word and Sacrament belonged together.

You will realise at once that this is a liturgical principle which the Reformed churches have in practice never accepted. It is a curious fact that while our theology has come from Calvin, our basic liturgical concepts are derived instead from Zwingli. His practice in Zurich, already known to Calvin and abhorred by him, had been to sunder Word and Sacrament completely, transforming the Sunday service into a pure service of the Word, while the Lord's Supper was detached from it into a completely separate quarterly observance. The practice in Zurich doubtless was the reason for the custom in Geneva against which Calvin battled so hard.

It needs to be said also that Calvin's re-action against this scheme was not only expressed in various protests down to the end of his days. It was expressed still further in the very construction of his liturgy. Especially in Strasbourg, Calvin's liturgy was so constructed that while it was possible to terminate it at the end of the service of the Word, such termination left it obviously incomplete. The minister was instructed to go as far as could and then, if there was to be no Lord's Supper, the service broke off rather abruptly. Where Zwingli saw the Sacrament as a kind of

quarterly appendix to the service of the Word, Calvin regarded it the necessary completion of it.

I hardly need point out that in his basic attitude, Calvin was a much more faithful follower of Christian tradition than Zwingli. Although Calvin was certainly no liturgical expert and his acquaintance with liturgical texts beyond the Roman mass was probably very limited, with his uncanny ability to grasp the essentials of any situation, he grasped the essential ground-plan of Christian worship, a service of the Word which finds its completion and its confirmation in the fellowship of the Lord's Table.

A second observation which I should like to make about Calvin's liturgical practice is the importance which it assigned to the Law. Here, as in other places, Calvin's liturgy was but a faithful expression of Calvin's theology. I do not need to discuss at length but simply to point out the historic Reformed emphasis upon law and gospel as compared, for example, with the Lutheran stress upon the Gospel alone. That is well known to all of us. What may not be so well known is the way in which this basic Calvinist interpretation of the faith found its way into the Calvinist liturgical expression of it. The entire first section of Calvin's rite is really centred in the law. This emphasis is a unique feature of Reformed Church worship. I cannot think of any other liturgical tradition which includes it.

I should like further to point out the striking way in which Calvin objectifies the law. I do not know about your customs in South-Africa, but in our usage there is considerable use still made of the law as a stimulus to confession of sin. The usual practice is that somewhere near the beginning of our service, the minister reads the law and then in the light of its demands, leads the congregation in a prayer of confession. But Calvin's practice was just the reverse. The congregation confessed its sins and then the minister read the law, almost as a kind of assurance of pardon and as a spur to gratitude. This is also the historic position of our Heidelberg Catechism where the law is explained under the third heading of „True Thankfulness” and not under the first of ”Man's Misery”.

But in whichever way the law is used (and I think there is something to be said for its use as a stimulus to self-examination and confession) the important point is that Calvin saw it as an element in Christian worship which could not be omitted.

The third aspect of Calvin's liturgical work which I should like to mention is perhaps a little more elusive than the previous two, but a real one nonetheless. I refer to the objectivity of Calvin's entire scheme. Again, I must speak out of my American experience. In our country too much of the revived interest in liturgy has taken the form of psychological impressiveness. We make use of lighting effects, color, and sound in an effort to impress the worshiper with a sense of awe and mystery. If Calvin could have known of these things, I doubt that he would have been in-

terested in them. For Calvin's liturgical bent was not toward subjective psychological impression (of which surely he knew something from the drama of the Mediaeval Mass) but toward objective theological expression. Friederich Heiler, no great friend of Calvin's liturgical work surely, characterizes it as starkly objective expression of the Calvinist credo, "Soli Deo Gloria".

I shall be having something more to say about this presently. Meanwhile let us hurry on to still a fourth aspect of Calvin's liturgy, the way in which he strove to preserve the essential corporate and congregational character of the act of worship. Priestliness in any form was not congenial to his mind or spirit. That we all know and take for granted. But do we realize the full implications of that liturgically speaking? It involves, as we all should agree, a liturgy composed in the vernacular tongue, in the language spoken and understood by the people. But it also involves, as Calvin did not hesitate to affirm, a liturgy in words familiar to the people by long usage.

Anyone who thinks of Reformed Church worship in the pietist-rationalist way in which we usually consider it must be shocked to discover what a small place is left in Calvin's service for free prayer. Just before the reading and preaching of the Word Calvin suggests a form of prayer for the illumination of the Holy Spirit, but also says that at this point the minister may pray for any particular need of the congregation. But that is the only exception. Otherwise, the prayers in John Calvin's liturgy are as fixed and inflexible as those in the Roman mass itself. I am not now asking you to approve or to disapprove of this. I am simply asking you to note that it is so and to see why it had to be so. Fixed prayers of this kind are Calvin's expression of the priesthood of all believers in which he so firmly believed. To leave the worshipping congregation at the mercy of the free inspiration of the minister is both to rob it of its function in the ministry of prayer and intercession and to make the minister a priest standing between God and His people. For John Calvin he is not a priest, but simply a mouthpiece, voicing the united prayers of God's people. And from that logic there is no escape but a fixed form of prayer in which God's people can participate.

I should like to conclude this lecture now by showing you how any Reformed recovery of the liturgy cannot fail to take account of these points which I have mentioned. But before I do that, let me here insert just a word or two to point out that uniformity in worship has never been a desideratum in the Reformed churches. Using certain liturgical principles in common, our Reformed family of churches has always worked out its liturgical expressions, each in its own way. There is an unmistakably family likeness in the liturgy of the Dutch and the French and the Hungarian and the Scottish Reformed churches. But there are also many variations of local importance. And that, I think, is as it should be. There can, in our thinking, be no one Reformed Church liturgy any more than can be one

Reformed Church confession of faith. A false uniformity has never interested us.

I make that observation because in the current revival of liturgical interest in the Reformed Church, I cannot think of a single Reformed communion which has been content simply to translate and to reprint either the Strassbourg or the Genevan formularies of Calvin and let it go at that. In many instances, indeed, very few of the *ipsissima verba* of the rites of Calvin have been preserved, and those often with considerable modification. The new *Dienstboek* of the Hervormed Kerk in the Netherlands, the liturgical revisions of the Reformed Churches in France and Geneva, and, if I may include it in such distinguished company, the projected Liturgy of our Reformed Church in America — all contain liturgical materials which have been newly composed to meet current needs or which have been borrowed from other liturgical traditions. A comparison of these new Reformed liturgies at the point of the Sunday morning service will reveal many differences between them in terms of language. But I think that the same comparison will reveal a strong family likeness resulting from a faithful adherence to the liturgical principles of Calvin. And that family likeness with local variations seems to me the historic Reformed way of liturgical development.

Let me mention first of all the one characteristic of Reformed liturgies which lies in an obvious realm. It is the matter of making a place for the Law in the worship of the Reformed congregation. In each and every instance, the Law, Confession of sin, and assurance of pardon form the first section in a Reformed liturgy. This addition to the larger tradition of Christian worship is one which is peculiarly ours. To illustrate the principle which I have briefly outlined, I notice that in many modern instances Calvin's use of the Law followed by confession is often reversed and confession follows the Law. I notice also that Calvin's invariable usage of the Decalogue to express the Law is often varied by the use of our Lord's Summary of the Law, or the new commandment, or even by certain statements from the Epistles of S. Paul. Such variations I consider as quite legitimate, so long as the fundamental Reformed principle that the Law must find expression in Christian worship be observed.

One of the great recoveries in this connection has been the usage of some form of assurance of pardon. Even in Calvin's Geneva the use of such a form had begun to be questioned and in a short time an exaggerated fear of sacerdotalism, seconded by the usual trends of rationalism and pietism led to its complete disuse. But no one can study Calvin's liturgy without also becoming aware of Calvin's theory of the ministry. And without going into the matter in detail, I should like to say that Calvin's theory of the ministry took seriously the power of the keys in an evangelical, though certainly not in a sacerdotal sense. Indeed, there is evidence that Calvin thought of this weekly act of Law, confession, and pardon by the congregation as an evangelical substitute for the Roman Catholic

Sacrament of Penance. However, that may be, it is still true that law, confession, and pardon, wherever they are found (even in the English Book of Common Prayer), are an indication of a Calvinistic liturgical influence. Their disappearance from the usage of so many Reformed churches is something which we owe it to our tradition to remedy.

I rather regret that I must deal with the next point merely as a sub-heading under a lecture topic instead of as an entire lecture itself. The Reformed recovery of the Liturgy has, after almost four centuries, once again taken seriously Calvin's contention that Word and Sacrament are to be joined together in one act of Christian worship. I do not mean that I know of a single Reformed congregation in which this ideal has been recognized, although there may very well be such. I do mean that all of our Reformed liturgical essays of the moment take full account of the fact that Word and Sacrament together form the ground-plan of Christian worship. No Reformed Churchman can any longer think of the Lord's Supper as a quarterly appendix to the service of the Word. He must think of it as the normal and necessary complement to the service of the Word.

A study of Calvin's rite makes this very clear. It existed quite simply in three sections; the first, law, confession, and pardon; the second, the reading of preaching of the Word; the third, the service of prayer and Sacrament. When there was to be no celebration of the Lord's Supper, the same order of events was continued and the service of prayer went as far in thanksgiving and intercession as circumstances would permit before breaking off with the benediction. It was Calvin's hope that in time to come the incompleteness of such a service would become so apparent that later Reformed generations would be able to accomplish what he had not and bring the liturgy to its completion with the Holy Supper every Lord's Day. The later generations have been able to do no such thing we know only too well. But at least later generations have the possibility of walking in the direction which Calvin intended instead of in a contrary direction.

And to my knowledge, all of the recent developments in Liturgical study in the Reformed Church have done just that. I mentioned earlier how the revival of the Calvinistic assurance of pardon had reopened the whole question of the doctrine of the ministry. I ask you now to consider how the study of Calvin's concept of the Sunday service has re-opened the whole question of the doctrine of the Lord's Supper. To be sure, we have had this doctrine embedded in our confessions for centuries. But in America, at least, the popular Reformed conception of the Eucharist has been frankly and openly Zwinglian. That very doctrine of the Lord's Supper which Calvin once characterizes as profane has been embraced by the large majority of our ministers and people. In recent years, however, New Testament studies, liturgical scholarship, and ecumenical discussion have all brought us to the same point — a new awareness that we in the Reformed Church have a historic position on the Lord's Supper to which we ourselves have paid very little attention. And since Calvin's views on

the Holy Supper came into being as an attempted mediation between the extremes of Luther and Zwingli, it is still possible that the Reformed Churches have a vital role to play today in the vexing sacramental discussions that take place in ecumenical circles.

Let me say in the third place that the new liturgics of the Reformed Churches must always be dogmatically and theologically conscious. No one can read Calvin's rites without realizing that, perhaps to an exaggerated degree, they are confessions of faith. The very didacticism and pedantry of which some complain are evidence of the Calvinistic position that worship cannot be divorced from dogma, that liturgy and confession are twin sisters. It may very well be that Calvin himself did not sufficiently recognize the distinction between the language of devotion and the language of dogma. But in his insistence upon their essential unity, he certainly had hold of matters by the right stick.

For, from a Reformed point of view, the liturgy is nothing but the instrument by which the congregation gives glory to God. And therefore, from a Reformed point of view, every consideration must be given to see that liturgy is a worthy and an adequate instrument of that glory. We have had in our country, and its influence has been felt to a degree in some of our Reformed churches, a school which has played with liturgy as a means of psychological and religious impression with the mind and heart of the individual worshiper as the object of the service. Nothing could be more deeply un-reformed! It is our historic witness that the liturgy is a means of theological and devotional expression, with God's glory as its sole legitimate object. I am not disposed to deny that whoever worship in such a liturgical setting will find transformations resulting within his own life and experience. But these will be all the more significant because they have not been sought for themselves but are the products of an earnest search to express God's glory.

I know that in many Reformed church circles there has been a deep suspicion of the liturgical movement just because of its theological uncertainty. Too many times it has been presented as a kind of militant fussiness about external details and has apparently dismissed theology as a trivial consideration. We still hear such foolish remarks as "If people will only pray together, their formal creeds make very little difference". As if their formal creeds had nothing to do with their prayers! I should certainly suspect liturgies of that kind myself! But when this happens, the task of the Reformed Church is not to withdraw, giving the impression that we have neither liturgical interest or liturgical tradition of our own. Our very definite task and duty is to make our position eminently clear. It was the late Professor van der Leeuw of Holland, I think, who once said that it is impossible to take the little finger of liturgy without having to shake the whole hand of theology. From a Reformed point of view, that is undeniably the truth. And we need to say so!

My last point is that any Reformed recovery of the liturgy must carefully safeguard the corporate character of worship in which the congregation is able to exercise its priesthood. Of course, our psalms and hymns are the most obvious example. In our tradition, praise has always been the office of the congregation. But I wonder whether the same can be said for certain other aspects of our worship, most particularly the office of prayer. In my country, at any rate, the office of prayer has often been the occasion for an exhibit of priestcraft at its worst. For the space of some minutes, the worshiping congregation is completely at the mercy of its minister who prays on their behalf, who stands, quite effectively, between them and God as a mediator. Not only are the words of his prayers so extemporized as to be peculiarly his own, but even the very sequence of ideas is often so tenuous as to be impossible to follow. At one moment thanksgiving for redemption, followed by confession of sin, then a sentence or two of thanksgiving for pardon, a prayer for the church, followed by more confession, etc. With the best will in the world, corporate prayer simply cannot be practiced in such a situation and the congregation is forced to settle back and listen or, more likely, occupy itself with individual devotions.

All genuinely Reformed liturgical recovery, therefore, must involve a recapture of the whole idea of corporate prayer which, if I may say it, is a very different thing from the private devotions of the closet. I know of no modern Reformed liturgy which has adopted Calvin's rather drastic expedient of using the same prayers Sunday after Sunday. But all of them, to my knowledge, try to ensure that, though the words may and should vary, the sequence of ideas should be clear enough to encourage the congregation to exercise its office of prayer. Confession must always be confession; thanksgiving must always be thanksgiving; intercessions should be clearly defined objects. Much use seems to be made here in many quarters of some of the more historic forms of prayer. Reformed church circles have revived the use of such forms as the litany and the bidding prayer which, though current in the day of Bucer and Calvin, had since fallen into complete desuetude. But the form is not the important thing and must wait upon the need of each particular situation. The important thing is that our liturgy be an instrument in which the people of God can exercise their ministry at all points, in prayer as well as in praise.

It is my opinion that we in the Reformed Church, once we have understood ourselves, have a valuable contribution to make in the field of Christian worship. Since we have never made an absolute of any liturgical form, we are not bound to defend any. But we do have a liturgical tradition which clearly recognizes not only the historic unity of Word and Sacrament in Christian worship, but insists also upon the necessity of a theological content in worship as well as the right of God's people to perform their ministry in the act of Christian worship. And in these

respects, I believe, we have not only a heritage to restore to ourselves, but a contribution to make to our fellow-Christians in other traditions.

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