

Equipping Thoughts for Leaders

Embrace a More Flexible Liturgy as We Phase Back into the New Normal



by Danny Dunn

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Liturgy: A form or formulary according to which public religious worship, especially Christian worship, is conducted.

In the 2,000 years, there have been many liturgical traditions embraced by the church across cultures. These are rich and are often beneficial as believers exercise their faith in various Biblical ways through them. The earliest disciples were Jewish and didn't even regard themselves as being part of something new. They believed, rightly so, that the prophesied Messiah had come and that their faith in Jesus attested to that. They would carry over practices like the observance of the Sabbath and attending to worship at the temple as part of their tradition while adding new components like celebrating the first day of the week. They gathered together centered on Jesus' triumph and broke bread with "glad and generous hearts" (Acts 2:26). It would not be until much later that the focus of worship shifted form towards the death of Jesus.

Additional changes were made in the early "Jewish Ekklesia" as days of repentance and fasting on Mondays and Thursdays, as Jews traditionally held, but shifted to Wednesdays and Fridays (likely remembering of the betrayal and the crucifixion). These

Jewish Christians were encountering a dramatic change to their liturgy, and it forever transformed their community, making it more flexible, unified, and diverse as it embraced the call to the gentile world.

A quick review of church history will find many expressions of worship that, over time, developed into the liturgical worship found in more ancient traditions that follow a beautifully elaborate and static structure. Non-Liturgical worship services can sometimes pride themselves in their unscripted or improvised nature. That is especially common among nondenominational charismatic and Pentecostal churches. That said, these churches have a liturgy of their own and a crisis that interrupts that cadence may reveal how dependent we become on traditions, even relatively new ones.

Four tips for embracing a flexible and biblical liturgy in times of change:

- **Understand what matters most**

Today tribalism is rampant as people divide quickly over a great many important things. A quote often ascribed to Augustine (though there is some debate) is a reliable way to approach how to handle the things that matter most "in essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things charity." The point to make here is that you must understand what the core is, non-negotiables of the Christian faith, and build on those. (John 17:20–23, 1 Cor. 12:12–13, Col. 3:14)

- **Be Biblical in Your Worship**

A sanctified day that is set aside for worship and reflection is a great idea. That said, the Holy hours of 10 am on Sunday, and 7 pm on Wednesday are not the goal. A sanctified life that is filled daily with naturally occurring worship, regardless of activity, is the aim. Biblical worship is continuous, vibrant, and personal but not private. It shows in the way the believer brings in the fruits and witness of the Spirit to each day. (Col 3:23)

- **Focus on House to House**

When typical liturgical worship is interrupted, the faithful can tend to become isolated. Resisting this tendency is key to growth as there is an opportunity for a more personal connection with smaller groups. The large crowd offers anonymity and even an accelerant to a disciple's faith and worship. This is a beautiful experience but can bring an unhealthy dependency if an atmosphere determines whether or not a disciple can experience the presence of God. The critical

antidote to this is to live daily life with people that are also devoted to Jesus and pursuing His presence together. (Matt 18:20)

- **Think Message, not Method**

Biblical preaching of the Gospel will result in a demonstration of the power of God as the clash of two kingdoms occurs. As people encounter the mystery of the Gospel, they do not require dynamic, complicated systems; rather, they need to walk the ancient paths that have been traced by saints for centuries. Keep Jesus and the Gospel at the center and innovate on ancient ways using mobility, technology, and connectivity never dreamed of by the early church. If the Gospel of Jesus is at the center of your message, the method will adapt and have power. (Romans 1:16)

Hold tightly to the essentials but stay open to the unfamiliar in the days ahead

In trials, it is natural for people to long for normalcy, but leaders must help people distinguish between the familiar and the essential. If the church experience centers on an event where fellowship occurs, care is provided, worship is enjoyed, and the Bible is taught; that is wonderful. These are all markers of church life but do not require a building or a band. The building and the band are important parts of "charismatic liturgy" but not needed for the church of Jesus to thrive. As leaders in God's house, there is an opportunity to help people focus on the essentials rather than run to the routine. It is a tremendous chance for growth!

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