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Recommended Citation

Schaap, Howard, "Return of Liturgy" (2015). *Faculty Work: Comprehensive List*. Paper 178.
http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/178

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Return of Liturgy

Abstract

"We are first of all not thinkers but worshipers, shaped by liturgical worship practices that literally form us for continued worship and service in the world during the week."

Posting about leaving the church, evangelicalism, liturgy and unity from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/the-return-of-liturgy/>

Keywords

In All Things, church, evangelicalism, liturgy, Anglican, Christian Reformed Church, Episcopalian

Disciplines

Christianity

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

The Return of Liturgy

 [all in allthings.org/the-return-of-liturgy/](https://allthings.org/the-return-of-liturgy/)

Howard Schaap

It started with a New Year's email with the subject line:

"Greetings from Toronto."

After well wishes, the request read:

"I'd love to chat with you about something: is there a convenient time? Thanks, brother. -S."

"S" had been as high-profile a convert as we'd had in Edgerton, Minnesota. He came to our house as a 17-year-old post-Cold War exchange student from one of the former Soviet Republics I'd never heard of, and he was baptized in the spring of our senior year of high school. Now, after graduating from [Dordt College](#), [Institute for Christian Studies](#), and law school, he was leaving the church in which he was baptized, the [CRC](#)—not leaving The Church, just moving over to another denomination—but I could tell by his emails that he feared I might think of it as a sort of, well, defection.

To be clear, I did not think of the move as a defection (as many people seem to feel considering blogs both [serious](#) and [funny](#) that chart similar "moves"). In fact, it makes perfect sense to me; I have no reservations as to S's move—I don't even consider it a "move"; rather, I feel it's the logical growth of faith for his life. Of course, in saying that I seem to be saying that my best friend grew out of the Christian Reformed Church and, more generally, out of Reformed Evangelical Protestantism, the way one grows out of, say, pants. More on this in a minute.

S's move wouldn't be a big deal except it seems to be a trend. A Facebook search produced the links above plus pages more, including an article on [Evangelical self-loathing](#) but not yet including Evangelical it-girl [Rachel Held Evans](#)' own [move to Anglicanism](#), the details of which are forthcoming in a book. Sure, I've only measured this "trend" anecdotally and have little sense of how long it may have been going on. Personally, the first time I stepped into an Anglican church—Episcopalian, since it was this side of the border—was in college: ironically, the campus pastor's son who was my roommate had given up praise songs for Lent, and then forever, and had found an Episcopal church that he loved for the liturgy and theology.

Fast-forward seventeen years.

I recently completed an MFA from Seattle Pacific University, which bore an unmistakable mark of, let's say, the liturgical. In fact, everywhere one turns today people are using that word "liturgy." It's in the blog I linked to above and it's in my friend's email after I asked him about the "move." "Liturgy" is a popular word thanks in part to Jamie Smith's [Desiring the Kingdom](#), and when I asked S about the move he acknowledge a hefty debt to Smith. In short, S likes the idea that we are first of all not thinkers but worshipers, shaped by liturgical worship practices that literally form us for continued worship and service in the world during the week. *"Liturgy/worship cannot be confined to what happens to one hour on Sunday morning,"* he writes. *"In . . . embracing our Christian vocation as disciples of the Messiah Jesus, the life we must work out with fear and trembling in the particular circumstances of our lives is the liturgical work."*

Liturgy—conscious and intent liturgy—seems to be the primary drawing card for my friend. *"What Anglicanism contributes to this, for me, is encapsulated in Eucharistic liturgy,"* he writes. *"Perhaps it is a*

matter of emphasis: participating in an Anglican liturgy is hearing the prayers of the saints reverberate through the idiom of ancient Christian prayers, glimpsing the multi-coloured stained glass depictions of the saints' lives, gathering around the sacred elements and other aspects customary in any Christian church. It is just this liturgy feels central, and it is certainly embodied in the vision of the Book of Common Prayer (which is 95% Scripture put to prayer) – an institution that continues to unite the 70 million strong world-wide communion.”

Yes, I hear Smith's *Desiring the Kingdom* in S's email, plus Abraham Kuyper or Herman Dooyewerd. And a larger sense of history, a stronger communion of the saints. He anticipates my suggestion: *“You'll naturally wonder what's so Anglican about this; all this vocation, all-life embracing vision surely sounds Reformed. I certainly think so.”*

What tends to be lacking in Reformed liturgy for my friend is largely, it seems, bodily. I suggest to him, as a colleague suggested to me recently, that Reformed worship is rhetorical, that it depends strongly on the word—perhaps the word as prior to both the image and the ritual. His response: *“Ever since Calvin lost the argument to Zwingli about weekly Lord's Supper celebrations, our strain of the Reformed tradition has privileged what your colleague may mean by the rhetorical emphasis on the discursive proclamation (which is of course a hallmark of our Reformed tradition and hence the tendency to intellectualize and rationalize the faith).”*

Ironically, then, S's move is consciously *away from* intellectualism—if by “intellectualism” we mean something heady and clinical—though a lot of intellectuals seem to be making it.

The emphasis on the worldwide connection of the church in S's writing is palpable, and indeed that's a perfect segue into his second point, which he dubbed *“Ecumenicity and call to unity.”*

“I've come to realize the centrality of the Lord's command to unity,” he expounds. *“We must be one, as Jesus prays in the high priestly prayer of John 14-17. Concerns about whether this is possible on this side of [postlapsarian](#) reality aside, our Reformed tradition exemplifies the tendency of the Protestant DNA to, well, protest, divide and separate. This is not healthy Christian behaviour. We all recognize this. What I think is interesting about Anglicanism is its attempt to hold the center through avowed diversity.”*

The Anglican Church itself, he insists, is being tested on that issue of unity: *“Mind you, this center is being stress-tested just now with issues like same-sex marriage. The Episcopal Church in the U.S. is proposing to amend the canons (church law) to allow for same-sex marriage; the Anglican Church of Canada will debate this same issue in 2016. As you know, this issue and the tremendous shift underway culturally to accept gay relationships (e.g., the U.S. Supreme Court is expected to legalize same-sex marriage across the state boundaries, even though some 37 states already recognize same-sex marriages) is highly divisive in the church, and there is the whole Global North and Global South dimension to this tension in Anglicanism.”*

This seems to be the real heart of the matter for S: in Anglicanism, S finds the tent of unity is raised higher and wider, bringing in more conversations under that tent.

“My point,” he summarizes, *“is simply that there is a commitment of a kind alien to more mainline Protestantism to maintain Christian unity and work at the ecumenical cross-roads. This is very important (also to me)!”*

Finally, there's the matter of “distinctiveness” for S. As in, he's revisiting the Reformed emphasis on the word. *“Anglicanism seems to have bequeathed a tradition (or, traditions) of relating to the polity and larger world that is quite distinct from the flavour of Dutch Reformed Christianity into which I was engrafted,”* he writes. *“Our particular version of the Reformed faith is anti-establishment; this began with the Secessionist*

movement in the Netherlands and crossed-over the Atlantic. Hence, some of the peculiarly 'distinctive' postures . . . toward world/society have been inexorably shaped by this anti-establishment posture."

That we "protesteth too much" in Reformed Christianity might be an oversimplification; rather, the issue seems to be both that we protesteth too wholesale, too categorically, and that we protesteth some things not enough, and not specifically enough.

S expounds: *"What am I driving at: our (Christian) – whether of Catholic, Orthodox, Reformed, Anglican, Anabaptist, etc. variety – engagement with modernity must be, I believe, necessarily piecemeal and judiciously selective. There is much to be affirmed and celebrated; there is also much that demands a more critical posture. We must be careful about sifting out the wheat from the chaff. Modernity and the secular age (as Charles Taylor calls it) is just too complex and comprised of a heterogeneous moral/normative sources/fragments to be simply adopted or rejected. So, on this score, Anglicanism seems to me a better 'platform' or tradition from which to do the sifting."*

Part of what interests me is my own reaction to all of this. It's a shrug of the shoulders, something between the resignation of, "Bummer; we could've used him; oh well, he's probably right," and the sense that, as I said at the outset, there's been no move. When I, a child of the Nineties, look at today's students, I can't imagine the lines of Protestantism's past remaining: we seem headed toward blurred lines, toward more unity. Even writing the word "denomination" above, it struck me as an outmoded word.

Then again, I look around and wonder about Reformed identity—I wonder if our identity isn't bleeding away. From chapel and worship trends, we seem to be trending evangelical. Meanwhile, some Reformed churches continue the retreat into fundamentalism. Others turn toward a type of Calvinism that isn't really very Kuyperian. And this trend, toward liturgy.

Out of these trends, I myself do find the liturgical direction somewhat interesting—in the expansiveness of symbolism, in the way liturgical prayer might grant me the freedom to not know what to pray myself. Then, too, the intellectual tradition seems a direction I might point the agnostic intellectuals in my family—though I think they would be too self-conscious about the liturgy. In some respects it's easier to bow your heart than your body; then again, that seems to be one of the points of liturgy.

But I myself won't pursue this interest. The reason is at least two-fold. First, my wife and I have chosen our church for placed-based and loyalty reasons. Second, I can't imagine my father in a liturgical service. I still have significant questions about how class and education enter into the liturgical trend.

But in all this apparent change, S hopes most of all for greater unity. *"Let me end this long-winded response,"* he writes, *"with the following (perhaps seeming) contradiction: I continue to think of myself as thoroughly Reformational (in the Kuyper-Dooyeweerd-Dordt-ICS line) and intend to continue to draw on this (surely one of the richest) heritage to inform my understanding and life from within the larger Anglican umbrella. In fact, as I learn more about Anglicanism (I am taking a history of Anglican theology course this term) I see a great deal of synergy to be had from interweaving the two traditions."*

If departures such as S's are a trend, what do they mean? And what should we do about them? At the end of an article like this, it feels like a gimmick to resort to Faulkner's old saw about history—that it's never dead, that it's not even past—but that's what this feels like to me, like the Reformation. In Reformed Christianity, we continue to value words like "distinctive," continue to see ourselves as positioned, somewhat smartly perhaps, between the pietism and, well, evangelicalism of Evangelicals on one hand and the liturgy and scholasticism of Anglicanism and Catholicism on the other. S's move reminds me again that this "positioning" is anything but over or ideal—we haven't arrived. In this light, S's departure and others like it are a kind of wake-up call.

But when you trust a brother like I do S, there's a larger possibility, too. If nothing else, S's move makes me look in the mirror once again and wonder why it is I do what I do, why it is I worship as I do. That self-reflection makes me at once surer of my fellowship choices and surer that S's move is also exactly the right thing. With S, I paradoxically hope that moves like his can lead to greater unity, can make more room for conversations under the bigger tent of unity in Christ. Perhaps we're coming to a point where we can look across the spectrum of Christians and understand the need for liturgy in some, for three-point sermons in others, and for praise song piety in others still. With the continued difficulty of having conversations in the public square, perhaps more conversations may happen in the Church, under the big tent of unity in Christ, which may lead to greater cross-pollination and then to more flowering and fruit-bearing in Christ's name.

It's with just such a prayer as this that I say:

"S, Godspeed, my brother, and may this move be a harbinger of the unity to come for us all."