

Liturgy, Structure and Life

are the worship wars over? Is this the verdict, as one recent publication would have it? “Out: Organs, bulletins, and choirs. In: Spoken amens, raising hands during worship, and using projection equipment for song lyrics and sermon notes.”¹

Applause during worship is up significantly too, the article points out, citing a rigorous study of congregational worship trends from 1998-2012.

Casual has become commonplace. If the average congregation is fortunate enough to have a well-attended service, chances are it’s a “family” affair led by a band with a string of praise choruses substituting for a well-ordered liturgy.

But as Carl Schalk has said so eloquently and so often, the song of the church cannot thrive without the discipline of the liturgy. As we tell and re-tell the story of salvation through the church year and its cycle of readings, it is the liturgy—the living tradition of communal praise, proclamation, and prayer—that determines what music we use. It is the duty and delight of the church musician, Schalk says, to allow one’s decisions, large and small, to be guided by opportunities presented by the forms and cycles of liturgical worship.² “It is the liturgy that must discipline our choices and ultimately determine use and suitability.”³

From a broader perspective, faithful liturgical worship

grounded in scripture breathes life into the body of Christ. These texts “speak to us not just of ourselves and our history, but of grace, of God’s action, of a new thing not yet imagined,” Gordon Lathrop writes.⁴

Stepping back still further, we are able to see how the church itself brings structure to our proclamation and experience of God’s grace and the expression of the hope that is ours in Christ’s resurrection. Four decades ago in his little book *In the Fullness of Faith*, Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar addressed the need for structure not only in worship but in the church at large. Struggling to answer the question “Who are you?”, he writes that Christ’s ambassadors “cannot take refuge in some anonymous ‘radiation,’ leaving the answer to Christ and the Holy Spirit. The witnesses must produce their papers; they themselves must be able to substantiate their faith and their mission.” We look to the New Testament for the documentary evidence of our faith and our commission, he says, but the church in which these ambassadors serve must also bear form and architecture. “It is the pure radiation of Christ into the world, and, in order to radiate, it must also be a structure....The Church is first and foremost the radiation of the redemption (far beyond all structure), and in order to be this radiation it has structure.”⁵



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In many ways both American church and culture are in panic mode. Worship attendance continues its calamitous slide, while standards of decorum in politics have been shattered as certain communities cheer. But the church sees the new heaven and the new earth and must not let go of that vision. Musicians and pastors alike, let us be fearless in our embrace of the discipline of the liturgy, the structure of worship, and the good order of Christ’s holy church. ■

1 “The Waning of the Worship Wars,” *Christianity Today*, January 6, 2016.

2 *Luther on Music: Paradigms of Praise*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1988, 25.

3 “The Church Musician as Steward of the Mysteries,” *Grace Upon Grace: Institute of Liturgical Studies, Occasional Papers 9* (1996), 64.

4 *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993, 18.

5 Accessed online; this excerpt appears in the chapter “Church: Mission and Structure.”