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THE CURIOUS DEATH OF EVANGELICAL LITURGICAL WORSHIP?

By Julian Hardyman

We had a nice week in Brittany for the first half of our family holiday a few Augusts ago. But the place was rather like Britain —Devon in a beret or Cornwall with baguettes. I was expecting to find differences but had to look hard to see past all the similarities.

I have often had similar feelings after playing truant from my own (Baptist) church and visiting conservative evangelical Anglican churches. Familiar services: the same songs either in words or style; more or less the same Bible versions; similar sorts of sermon (a bit shorter perhaps and more to the point). The surprise is the relative absence of liturgy. One had none at all, not even the Lord's Prayer, (which I habitually include when I am leading). Some have a brief home-made confession. In the charismatic Anglican churches I visit it is the same story: they are pretty much liturgy-free zones.

Historically this is a startling and monumental change. Although the Baptists (and other Nonconformists) and the evangelical Anglicans were 90% agreed theologically, for hundreds of years you could never have mistaken one service for another. In one, Cranmer's sinewy prose dominated. In the other, the homespun piety of the minister shaped the congregation's encounter with God in prayer.

It was far more than a difference in preference, but one of deeply held principle. Part of the glue which was thought to hold the Church of England together was the *Book of Common Prayer*, used in every parish throughout the land, ensuring some sort of uniformity of practice – and thus conformity with a shared theology. In theory at least. There was a fear of lower standards, theologically and linguistically; of slipshod, dull, interminable, repetitive, unbalanced, and even unsound prayers. Surely no one who has been in evangelical prayer meetings or Baptist services can argue that these fears were completely unfounded. Liturgy was also more inclusive, allowing the whole congregation to speak to God simultaneously.

From the non-conformist side, liturgical conformity was anathema: nonconformist identity was based on *not* saying the same words as everyone else in church, particularly when some of those words seemed theologically debatable. Beyond a kind of liturgical localism lay a further objection: the fear that liturgy quenched the Spirit. Bunyan and others argued that extempore prayer was the highest and truest kind. It is harder to express personal feeling through a polished liturgical prayer and for some people that expression of feeling is paramount.

My sympathies lie with the non-conformists in the historic debates. But I don't find their arguments so persuasive as to make me eschew liturgy. There is much to be said for it. Exposure even to the rather low-fat milk of the Alternative Service Book has left me appreciative of many of those prayers and responses. I haven't encountered much resistance when we have used the Lord's Prayer, the General Confession, or the Apostles Creed at Eden, and they contribute to the texture of our services.

I am not aware of any great debate about the curious incident of the disappearing liturgy. I wonder whether my rather limited sampling represents a wider trend. If so, does it represent a wider loss which is happening without anyone noticing?

May there not be some advantages in a liturgical service in helping some Christians in their worship

or in reaching out to those who aren't yet Christians? Perhaps liturgy enables connections with those who have a neglected church background? It might appeal to the more linguistically sensitive who appreciate words that have been written in advance and with care. It might suit those who prefer the familiar to the ever-changing (like CS Lewis).

It doesn't much matter for me personally. There are only so many Sundays when I can sneak off for a bit of liturgical prayer, like a schoolboy nipping behind the bike sheds for an illicit cigarette. And I like my own church services, anyway.

But I can't help wondering if the trend towards non-liturgical homogeneity in conservative Anglican evangelical worship might mean that some missional adaptivity is being lost. And that might have some serious consequences.

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