



You expect me to go through the motions of worship?

Sunday Bible Study
10:05am • December 27, 2020



I Need An Answer

“You expect me to go through the motions of worship?”

Introduction

Jesus stood up to read the Scripture at the synagogue in his hometown. He chose a seven-century-old text that dripped with the longing of the prophet Isaiah. He looked for a beautiful, inevitable “some day” called the year of the Lord’s favor. And as Jesus began to expound on these words, the first word he uttered was *today*.

“Today this Scripture is fulfilled.”

Nicodemus was afraid and confused. His fear had to do with the people he ran with and what they would think of him now, sneaking off under the cover of darkness just to look into the face of the Rabbi from Galilee. His confusion had to do with the Miracle Worker himself and just exactly how one was to enter this “Kingdom of God” he spoke about. Was it by obedience? By moral effort? By strong decision? How?

“By water and the Spirit,” Jesus told him.

Some three years later came Jesus’ Last Supper. This was the night in which the Old Testament gave way to the New, when the old focal point in God’s household –an altar gruesomely spattered with blood –was replaced with the intimacy and welcome of a table where Jesus served a meal that was himself. He broke the bread and passed it around, labeling it “My body.” And the wine the disciples drank from one cup was “My blood.” To this table we are to bring ourselves again and again and again.

“In remembrance of me,” Jesus said.

Speaking the Word, sprinkling the water, breaking the bread, and passing out the wine –these are the kinds of things Philip Yancy referred to as “Jesus . . . just being Jesus.” This is what makes us rise to our feet for the reading of the gospel like we always have, why we lean forward to get quiet to hear the splash of water and to see a baby wake up, why we stand in line for our bit of bread and wine, the “I have so loved you” we can taste and touch. We’ve done these things from the beginning, and we will do them to the end.

We are, after all, the church . . . just being the church.

(Please read Luke 4:14-21; John 3:1-21; and Luke 22:19-22) (Mark Paustian, *More Prepared to Answer* p.156-157)

Merely Repeating?

List some of the rituals or habits of Christian life that found their way into your home and into your house of worship. Identify ways in which these might at times lose some of their meaning or significance.

The Scriptures mention that after the Passover meal on Maundy Thursday Jesus and his disciples sang a hymn. This would very likely have been the traditional chanting of the Hallel Psalms (115-118). This would have ended with *“Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever.”* When have you used this prayer?

Consider what was running through Jesus’ mind that night. What has sometimes run through your mind when using this prayer?

If we are not seeing meaning in our prayers or other religious rituals, where does the real dullness lie?

Back to Grace

Every good ritual in the church is designed to bring us back home to one place:

_____.

List some reasons why the grace of God never gets old:

The Lutheran Liturgy

Historically, the Lutheran liturgy is the liturgy of the Church, that is the Holy Christian Church. The first Lutheran worshippers did not set out to destroy the worship of the historical church before them, but to reform it by only holding onto what is good and right. Why is that important?

What did they use as a basis for determining what practices should be maintained and what should be discarded?

The Parts of the Liturgy

Identify which parts of the service we “remove our shoes” because we recognize the place where we are standing is holy ground, the presence of our God.

Identify which parts of the historic liturgy put the focus on the Word of God instead of on us.

Explain how the gift of music should be used in worship. What danger is there if someone focuses merely on the musical style and says, “I’m not getting anything out of worship.”?

Ancient is Relevant

There are many ancient parts of the liturgy which connect us to believers who worshipped before us for centuries. We have evidence of their use even back to the second and third centuries. Identify what the following are by their ancient Latin titles. Describe why they are still relevant even today.

Kyrie

Sanctus

Gloria

Agnus Dei

Credo

Nunc Dimittis

What powerful testimony is given when the Church echoes the same prayers throughout the centuries?

Explain why Paul could boast as a Jew: *“...the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption to sonship; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises.” (Romans 9:4)* But what was most important after they received all these things?

What worship habits existed for God’s people in the Old Testament? Can you name the three major religious festivals?

What purposes did these festivals serve?

“The liturgy is boring. It is boring the same way that a drop of water makes its way over days and years to form a permanent channel. It is boring the same way that a well-rehearsed song can remain clear in your mind and on your lips even while facing stage fright. It bores into the heart and soul a prayer, a confession, and a spiritual song. It leaves something to turn to in our most desperate hours of need. It gives an outlet for our most joyful moments of praise. It impresses worship on the minds of infants and remains on the minds of the elderly once they might begin to lose the abilities of their once sharp minds. The Christian liturgy is not dull, it uses the sword of the Spirit to pierce body and soul and goes into the deepest places of the heart. Something is bored in by the liturgy which the soul invites back once it begins. I’ll take that kind of boring. It digs a well for life-giving waters. And I can draw from that well all day long all my life.” -[10]

Spontaneous Worship?

Some might argue, “But I want something organic, authentic, and genuine.” **Discuss:** Is there anything about a written vow, prayer, ritual, or song which renders it less authentic to all who use it?

List some “non-spontaneous” customs which are worth “authentically” repeating in your life.

“Does doing the same thing twice with a birthday cake make it less meaningful to the child who celebrates their birthday each year, or does it impress something year after year? Does singing an anthem after an Olympic gold win make it less emotional and meaningful or does it add to the importance of the occasion? Does folding the flag and sounding taps become mundane for the military family who grieves? Does a graduation ceremony with gowns become silly for the person who has worked years finish their goal? Does a judge’s robe send a message or cause you to dismiss his words? Does smashing a bottle to commission a ship lack emotion when that ship will carry your livelihood? What about our worship life and its ongoing rituals? Don’t they hold even greater meaning? One small candle, one folded hand, one recited prayer from memory might be meaningless to some, but it is profound for those who grieve, who rejoice, and who call on the name of their living God.”-tjb

“He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the *Sabbath day* he went into the *synagogue*, as was his custom.” (Lk 4:16)

What about having random readings, prayers, songs?

Spontaneous worship is not wrong. However, when controversy on worship practices arose, Paul gave the following instruction in 1 Corinthians 14.

“God is not a God of disorder but of peace—as in all the congregations of the Lord’s people... Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached? ³⁷ If anyone thinks they are a prophet or otherwise gifted by the Spirit, let them acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord’s command. ³⁸ But if anyone ignores this, they will themselves be ignored. ³⁹ Therefore, my brothers and sisters, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. ⁴⁰ But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.”

Identify what is timeless and universal about these words:

Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.
For my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and the glory of your people Israel.” (Luke 2:29-32)

Text, not Tune

The church has always used music. What are some of the blessings of maintaining a centuries-old tune or melody in worship?

However, what dangers are there in insisting on certain tunes or styles of music for worship?

Sacraments

What two sacred acts are set apart from all other rituals which Christians perform? Describe what sets them apart.

Evaluate: “To be very clear then, here is why I go to church. I go to exhale my confession of sin, to expel my punctured conceit. I breath out my hopes-tunred-prayers, my songs of praise, my offerings of faith, my “I believe in God the Father Almighty ... and in Jesus Christ his only Son . . .” And when my pastor turns toward me, toward us, I inhale the Word from God and God’s breathtaking worldview, and I breathe in deeply his timeless declaration of pardon, his guidance, his “This is my body ... by blood ... poured out for you” his benediction. -Mark Paustian, *More Prepared to Answer*

How might some worship rituals be manipulative instead of truly spiritually reviving?

“Perhaps what makes these forms of worship seem like ‘empty ritual’ to some people is actually that fact that they are not emotionally manipulative. . . which is rather the beauty of it. God’s forgiveness has an invaluable objective quality – it’s true whether we feel it or not. ...faith doesn’t rest on the shifting sands of our own religious feelings... we rest on the objective promises of God himself.” -Mppt p. 161

Emotions Follow

You can encourage and invite people to express their emotions in various culture contexts, (clapping, standing, kneeling etc.) But why can’t you mandate an emotional response to everyone joining in worship?

What unforced emotions come from our proper response to law and gospel?

I rejoiced with those who said to me, “Let us go to the house of the LORD.” -Ps 122:1.

Concluding thought

[Mark Paustian records how his family was released, excused, from meals during his childhood with the prayer, “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good” Often they’d all be gone from the table in a flash after that prayer concluded without a thought.]

I imagine the day I will bury a parent. We will gather for a meal when it's all over, and we’ll almost certainly pray, “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good...”

And we’ll mean it. God is good. We’re released by these words in a way nothing else can ever release us.

“His love endures forever.” -Mark Paustin, “More Prepared to Answer”