

THE RETURN TO RITUAL: SHOULD FREE GRACE CHURCHES ADOPT ASH WEDNESDAY, LENT, AND OTHER EMERGENT CHURCH PRACTICES?

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I. INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS HAPPENING TODAY?

*U.S. News and World Report*¹ and *Christianity Today* (CT)² not long ago ran cover stories about Evangelicals adopting historic church rituals. *Christianity Today* introduced its feature article with the cover-page declaration, “Lost Secrets of the Ancient Church: How Evangelicals started looking back to move forward.” CT senior managing editor Mark Galli wrote, “You might say a number of CT editors have a vested interest in this issue’s cover story. David Neff, Ted Olsen, Tim Morgan, and I have been doing the ancient-future thing for many years, at Episcopal and/or Anglican parishes.” The U.S. News article title was “A Return to Tradition: A New Interest in Old Ways Takes Root in Catholicism and Many Other Faiths.”

¹Jay Tolson, “A Return to Tradition,” *U.S. News and World Report* (December 13, 2007). <http://www.usnews.com/articles/news/national/2007/12/13/a-return-to-tradition.html> (accessed March 15, 2010).

²Chris Armstrong, “The Future Lies in the Past,” *Christianity Today* (February 2008). <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/february/22.22.html> (accessed March 13, 2010).

The same article featured the congregation of Trinity Fellowship Church in Richardson, Texas and introduces the church in this way:

An independent, nondenominational church of some 600 members, Trinity Fellowship is not the only evangelical congregation that is offering a weekly Eucharist, saying the Nicene or Apostles' creeds, reading the early Church Fathers, or doing other things that seem downright Roman Catholic or at least high Episcopalian. Daniel Wallace, a Professor of New Testament Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary, which trains pastors for interdenominational or nondenominational churches, says there is a growing appetite for something more than "worship that is a glorified Bible class in some ways."

Carl Anderson, the senior pastor of Trinity Fellowship Church, is quoted in the article:

"Seven or eight years ago, there was a sense of disconnectedness and loneliness in our church life," he says. The entrepreneurial model adopted by so many evangelical churches, with its emphasis on seeker-friendly nontraditional services and programs, had been successful in helping Trinity build its congregation, Anderson explains. But it was less successful in holding on to church members and deepening their faith or their ties with fellow congregants. Searching for more rootedness, Anderson sought to reconnect with the historical church...Not surprisingly, that move was threatening to church members who strongly identify with the Reformation and the Protestant rejection of Catholic practices, including most liturgy. But Anderson and others tried to emphasize the power of liturgy to direct worship toward God and "not be all about me," he says. Anderson also stressed how liturgy "is about us—and not just this church but the connection with other Christians." Adopting the weekly Eucharist, saying the Nicene Creed every two or three weeks, following the church calendar, Trinity reshaped its worship practices in ways that drove some congregants away. But Anderson remains committed, arguing that traditional

practices will help evangelical churches grow beyond the dependence on “celebrity-status pastors.”

The Washington Post picked up on the return to ritual among Evangelicals in a March 8, 2008 story:³

Evangelicals observing Lent? Fasting and giving up chocolate and favorite pastimes like watching TV during the 40 days before Easter are practices many Evangelical Protestants have long rejected as too Catholic and unbiblical. But Lent – a time of inner cleansing and reflection upon Jesus Christ’s sufferings before his resurrection – is one of many ancient church practices being embraced by an increasing number of Evangelicals...This increasing connection with Christianity’s classical traditions goes beyond Lent. Some evangelical churches offer confession and weekly communion. They distribute ashes on Ash Wednesday and light Advent calendars at Christmastime...First Baptist Church of the City of Washington D.C. follows the liturgical calendar observed by Catholic churches. It lights candles at Advent, and observes Epiphany Sunday and the remainder of the traditional cycle of liturgical celebrations. “We find that following the seasons of the Christian year adds a lot of richness to our experience of worship,” said the Rev. James Somerville, the church’s pastor, adding: “We wouldn’t want the Catholics to get all the good stuff.”

Irving Bible Church, an independent Bible church in the Dallas area, now observes the liturgical calendar, follows the lectionary, and encourages congregants during the worship service to light candles to represent prayers or answers to prayers.⁴ I found posted at visualworshiper.com pictures of one of their Ash Wednesday services.⁵

³Jacqueline L. Salmon, “Feeling Renewed By Ancient Traditions,” *Washington Post* (March 8, 2008), B09.

⁴Several of the 2008 issues of *Chatter*, IBC’s monthly publication for its congregants, contain articles explaining its adoption of these practices and rituals.

⁵Camron Ware, <http://www.visualworshiper.com/gallery.html> (accessed March 15, 2010).

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

All of this is not entirely new. The reformers rejected much of the ritual and theology of the Roman Catholic Church. In the centuries following the Reformation there have been various movements to bring back liturgy in various denominations. For example, in the Anglican Church the role of ritual became a subject of great debate in the nineteenth century between High Church and Low Church movements. Some High Church arguments are that elements of Catholic ritual gives liturgical expression to a belief in the Real Presence and reinforces the centrality of the Eucharist in worship; enables worshipers to use all their senses in worship; and is the most effective form of worship for cultures that are highly visual. Some Low Church arguments are that ritualism encourages idolatry in that worshipers tend to focus their worship on ritual objects; downgrades the significance of preaching and biblical exposition; uses excessive elaborations in worship that cannot be justified on the basis of the descriptions of worship in the NT; and the concept of the Real Presence encourages an idolatrous attitude to the Eucharist.⁶ In 1976 a group of Evangelical leaders met to discuss ways in which the Evangelical tradition could adopt historic Christian rituals and practices. The group, led by Robert Webber and including Thomas Howard, Peter Gilquist, and others, issued a document called the Chicago Call in the spring of 1978, which appealed to Evangelicals to recover the theology and practices of the ancient church.

We believe that today Evangelicals are hindered from achieving full maturity by a reduction of the historic faith. There is, therefore, a pressing need to reflect upon the substance of the biblical and historic faith and to recover the fullness of this heritage.⁷

Christianity Today published the text in full, and the editorial page cautiously commended it. A movement began

⁶James Whisenant, *A Fragile Unity: Anti-Ritualism and the Division of Anglican Evangelicalism in the Nineteenth Century* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 2003).

⁷"The Chicago Call," Wheaton College, <http://www.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/GUIDES/033.htm> (accessed March 15, 2010).

which some described as “the convergence of streams,” a coming together of the three major streams of Christianity, the Evangelical, the Charismatic, and the Liturgical-Sacramental.⁸ New denominations actually formed based on “the convergence of streams,” the Charismatic Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Episcopal Church, and others. The “journey” into historic Christianity did not stop for many. They continued on and found their way into the Roman Catholic Church,⁹ the Eastern Orthodox Church, or Anglicanism, while others are, as it is called, simply “swimming the Tiber” (the main watercourse of the city of Rome). Webber continued further work on convergence until his death in April 2007. Howard eventually converted to Roman Catholicism and Gilquist was ordained a priest in the Antiochian Orthodox Church.

In 2006 Webber and others issued *A Call to an Ancient Evangelical Future*, which focused on issues in the emergent and postmodern discussions. Concerning the Church’s worship it says, “Therefore, we call Evangelicals to recover the historic substance of worship of Word and table and to attend to the Christian year, which marks time according to God’s saving acts.”¹⁰

Webber divided evangelicalism since 1950 into three phases, each dominated by a different paradigm: traditional (1950–1975), pragmatic (1975–2000), and younger (2000–).¹¹ Chris Armstrong in the February 2008 CT issue explained:

Traditionals focus on doctrine—or as Webber grumps, on “being right.” They pour their resources into Bible studies, Sunday school curricula,

⁸The Evangelical stream emphasized the authority, inspiration, and personal study of the Bible and called for a personal relationship with Jesus. The Charismatic stream stressed “life in the Spirit” and expressive forms of praise and worship. The Liturgical-Sacramental stream underscored the importance of ancient liturgies and weekly observance of the Eucharist.

⁹A recent example is Francis Beckwith, President of the Evangelical Theological Society until he resigned under pressure when he converted to Roman Catholicism in the spring of 2007.

¹⁰Robert E. Webber and Philip C. Kenyon, “A Call to an Ancient Evangelical Future,” *Christianity Today* (September 2006). <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/september/11.57.html?start=3> (accessed March 13, 2010).

¹¹Robert E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002).

and apologetics materials. The *pragmatics* “do” church growth, spawning the culturally engaged (and hugely successful) seeker sensitive trend, with full-service megachurches and countless outreach programs. Currently, the *younger Evangelicals* seek a Christianity that is “embodied” and “authentic”—distinctively Christian...

For the younger Evangelicals (Webber’s tag refers to “emerging,” if not Emergent, evangelicalism), traditional churches are too centered on words and propositions. And pragmatic churches are compromising authentic Christianity by tailoring their ministries to the marketplace and pop culture. The younger Evangelicals seek a renewed encounter with a God beyond both doctrinal definitions and super-successful ministry programs.

So what to do? Easy, says this youth movement: Stop endlessly debating and advertising Christianity, and just embody it. Live it faithfully in community with others—especially others beyond the white suburban world of many megachurch ministries. Embrace symbols and sacraments. Dialogue with the “other two” historic confessions: Catholicism and Orthodoxy. Recognize that “the road to the church’s future is through its past.” And break out the candles and incense. Pray using the *lectio divina*. Tap all the riches of Christian tradition you can find.¹²

Leonard Sweet outlines the objectives of worship in the Emerging Community.¹³ The acrostic EPIC delineates that worship should be *experiential*, *participatory*, *image-driven*, and *communal*. Specifically, worship should go from rational to experiential, from representative to participatory, from Word-based to image-driven, from individual to communal. Sweet writes, “Postmoderns don’t want their information straight. They want it laced with experience.”¹⁴ Participatory means creative interaction that involves far more than a sermon and some songs. For example, stations with interac-

¹² Armstrong, “The Future Lies in the Past.”

¹³ Leonard Sweet, “A New Reformation: Re-Creating Worship for a Postmodern World,” in *Worship at the Next Level: Insight from Contemporary Voices*, eds. Tim A. Dearborn and Scott Coil (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004).

¹⁴ Leonard Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims: First Century Passion for the 21st Century World* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 33.

tive elements may be established for participants to move to during a gathering for prayer, journaling, artistic expression, etc. The image-driven emphasis appears through art that might include murals, a variety of lighting and draperies, paintings, sacred images projected on screens. Community can be encouraged by decentralizing worship with many participating in their own way, emphasizing storytelling, stressing service and social transformation (worship can simply be participating together in a service project).

III. SOME PRACTICES AND RITUALS

Let's consider several commonly adopted practices and rituals from "historic Christianity" in many evangelical churches today.

A. ASH WEDNESDAY

When I was a student at Virginia Tech, I observed some students emerging from the campus chapel on a Wednesday afternoon in February with a grayish sign of the cross on their foreheads. They were Catholic students who had just observed a ritual that was part of Ash Wednesday.

Ash Wednesday is a time of repentance that marks the beginning of Lent. Ashes were sometimes used in the Bible to express repentance. For example Job says to God in Job 42:6, "I repent in dust and ashes" (see also Num 19:9; Matt 11:21). The observance of Ash Wednesday and the accompanying rituals are not, however, found in the Bible. The first datable liturgy for sprinkling ashes is found in the Romano-Germanic pontifical of 960.¹⁵ At the beginning of the 11th century, Abbot Aelfric notes that the faithful took part in a ceremony on the Wednesday before Lent that included the imposition of ashes. At the end of that century, Pope Urban II called for the general use of ashes on that day which would later come to be called Ash Wednesday.

¹⁵Lawrence E. Mick, "Ash Wednesday: Our Shifting Understanding of Lent," *Catholic Update*, (February 2004). <http://www.americancatholic.org/Newsletters/CU/ac0204.asp> (accessed March 16, 2010).

Ashes prepared by burning palm leaves from the previous year's Palm Sunday celebrations are mixed with water or olive oil to form a paste. A priest, minister, or officiating layperson uses this paste to make the sign of the cross on the foreheads of each participant at an Ash Wednesday service. The priest or minister says, while applying the ashes, "Remember, O man, that you are dust, and unto dust you shall return."

Roman Catholics observe Ash Wednesday with fasting, abstinence from meat, and the confession of sins. The Anglican Book of Common Prayer designates Ash Wednesday as a day of fasting. Many Protestant denominations such as Lutherans and Methodists observe Ash Wednesday with a service that focuses on repentance.

B. LENT

Lent is a forty day time of prayer and preparation before Easter. The number forty is connected with several biblical events such as the forty days Moses spent on Mount Sinai with God (Exod 24:18), Elijah spent walking to Mount Horeb (1 Kgs 19:8), Jesus spent in the wilderness being tempted by the devil (Matt 4:1-2).

The season of Lent began in the fourth century as a time of preparation for Christian converts who were to be baptized on Easter eve. The whole Christian community soon was called to observe the Lenten fasts, penitential prayers, practices of self-renunciation, etc., in solidarity with the catechumens and for their own spiritual benefit. Today, many churches that observe Lent focus on it as a time of prayer, penance, repentance, and focus on the need for God's grace that culminates in the celebration of Easter. Some participants abstain from a normal part of their daily routine during Lent to remind themselves of the sacrifice of Christ. It might involve refraining from eating certain favorite foods or from entertainment or, though not abstaining, engaging in service to the less fortunate.

There are several holy days within the season of Lent. Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent. The Sixth Lenten Sunday, Palm Sunday, marks the beginning of Holy Week. Thursday

is known as Maundy Thursday which commemorates the Last Supper. Good Friday follows to remember Jesus' crucifixion and burial.

There is no command or inference in the Bible that institutes the observance of Lent. There are some things taught in the NT that discourages presenting such an observance as normative Christian practice. There are no "Christian Holy Days" (Gal 4:8-10; Col 2:16-17). The "Lord's Day" is the only special day—but there are no prescribed fasts (Rev 1:10; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 6:1-2). We are to be careful of following the traditions of men—human additives to the worship of God in spirit and truth (Matt 15:1-9). Lent is a human tradition without biblical sanction.

C. THE CHURCH YEAR

Following earlier Jewish tradition, some in the historic church have used the seasons as an opportunity for festivals and holy days, "sacred times" to worship God. While Jewish celebration focused around the Exodus from Egypt, the Church year focuses on the life and ministry of Jesus.

The "Christian calendar" is organized around two centers of "sacred time": Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany; and Lent, Holy Week, and Easter, concluding at Pentecost. The rest of the year following Pentecost is known as Ordinary Time. Ordinary Time is used to focus on various aspects of the Christian faith including its mission to the world.

D. THE LECTIONARY

The Lectionary Scriptures are read in a liturgical service. These consist of an OT reading, a reading from the Psalms, an Epistle reading, and a Gospel reading in a three year cycle. It is a structured way to cover the range of biblical revelation on a regular basis. The sermon corresponds in some way to the biblical readings of the day. Some maintain that the reading of the same Scriptures by churches around the world reflects the unity of the church and facilitates a move out of sectarianism to be part of the larger Church.

E. THE EUCHARIST

The word Eucharist conveys the meaning of thanksgiving and grace. Many in the liturgical movement consider the liturgy of the Eucharist to carry the participants into the mysterious presence of Christ with a fresh experience of grace. The Eucharist becomes a means of grace. In a real sense the worshiper receives God's grace by partaking of the elements. It goes beyond being simply a memorial of Jesus accompanied with confession, reflection, and recommitment. It becomes a spiritual encounter that is important for spiritual vitality.¹⁶

F. CANDLES, ICONS, AND PRAYER STATIONS

The liturgical movement and the emergent church want worship to be more than preaching and music. The service of worship should involve all the senses: sight, smell, taste, touch, and hearing; and embrace mystery. Kimball describes a few of the forms of the new style of worship:

...incense and candles to promote a spiritual feeling, crosses scattered liberally around the room, prayer stations and art stations for a creative outlet during the service, pictures of Jesus to keep things Christ-focused, tapestries to add a tabernacle feel to the room, ancient art work projected onto the wall to help set the mood.¹⁷

IV. WHAT'S THE APPEAL?

Why are so many Evangelicals attracted to liturgy?

A. SOME ASSERT THAT IT IS A WAY OF MAKING GOD TANGIBLE

Mark Galli explains in a *Christianity Today* article what attracted him to liturgical worship as an Evangelical. He quotes Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger who, before he became

¹⁶ See the chart of the five views of the Eucharist on this website: <http://christianityinview.com/eucharist.html> (accessed March 18, 2010).

¹⁷ Dan Kimball, *Emerging Worship: Creating Worship Gatherings for New Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).

Pope, wrote “The grandeur of the liturgy does not rest upon the fact that it offers an interesting entertainment, but in rendering tangible the Totally Other...” Galli then asks, “How exactly does God render himself tangible in the liturgy?” He answers,

Certainly in the Eucharist itself, in which he makes himself known in the breaking of the bread... Less obviously, God makes himself known through the words and drama of the liturgy.¹⁸

He concludes concerning the Western liturgy followed for centuries:

Why this liturgy? Why this form? Because not only its content but also its shape have ushered people into a transcendent culture where they meet the Trinitarian God and take their first baby steps in his kingdom.¹⁹

B. SOME ASSERT THAT IT IS A WAY OF ENCOUNTERING THE REAL PRESENCE OF CHRIST

Many believers today seek a direct experience of Christ. Through contemplative prayer they seek to encounter the real presence of Christ within themselves. Through a liturgical sign they seek to encounter the real presence of Christ in a physical context. The Bible does not present liturgy or contemplative practices as a means of experiencing a mystical presence of Christ.

V. WHY NOT ADOPT ANCIENT LITURGICAL PRACTICES?

What are some reasons for not returning to the rituals of “historic Christianity”?

¹⁸Mark Galli, “A Deeper Relevance,” *Christianity Today*, (May 2008). <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/may/36.38.html> (accessed March 18, 2010).

¹⁹Ibid.

A. MOST LITURGICAL PRACTICES ARE NOT DERIVED FROM APOSTOLIC TEACHING

The return to liturgy from the “historical church” may be inconsistent with an adherence to the sufficiency of the Bible for the beliefs and practices of the church. Many such practices are not derived from the NT but from later church history. T. A. McMahon aptly comments, “The Ancient-Future search to discover gems from “Classic Christianity” comes up short by a century – the century in which the NT was written.”²⁰

The return to ritual signals a return to man-made traditions. The warnings of Paul in Galatians and Colossians concerning “the basic principles of this world” (*ta stoicheia tou kosmou*) may apply (Gal 4:3, 9; Col 2:8, 16-23). In summarizing his study of this Pauline phrase, Andrew J. Bandstra asks “What are these *stoicheia tou kosmou* from whose slavery the church has been redeemed but which continue to threaten the freedom of the church?”²¹ He believes from his research that they are the principles of law and flesh operating outside of Christ. He concludes:

The contexts in both Galatians and Colossians indicate that when the law functions in the context of the flesh then religious regulations arise that seem to offer redemption but which really bring religious bondage. In Galatians it appears to be kinds of regulations that are thought to give us right standing before God. In Colossians the law and the flesh combine to bring forth regulations that are thought to promise a kind of mystic experience in participating with the angels in their worship of God. In both cases, the *stoicheia tou kosmou* become a kind of “enslaving power” that is “not according to Christ.” It brings religious bondage.²²

From his study of the phrase in Galatians and Colossians, Gary DeLashmutt sees an application to the danger of ritu-

²⁰T. A. McMahon, “Ancient-Future Heresies,” *The Berean Call* (February 28, 2008). <http://www.thebereancall.org/node/6535> (accessed March 18, 2010).

²¹Andrew J. Bandstra, “Rescued from the Basic Principles of This World,” *Theological Forum* (March 1994). <http://www.recweb.org/TF-Mar94-bandstra.html> (accessed March 18, 2010).

²²Ibid.

alism. He defines ritualism “in the sense of making ritual observance a primary focus of the Christian life and means of its expression.”²³ A return to OT type rituals as a means of salvation or spiritual growth is inappropriate for the Christian because those rituals merely foreshadowed the substance or reality which believers now enjoy in the person and work of Christ. A return to ritual does not result in spiritual growth but rather spiritual regression. DeLashmutt concludes, “While New Testament rituals remain a legitimate aspect of Christianity, ritualism as the means of relating to God has been ‘outgrown’ and rejected.”²⁴

B. A LIFE OF FAITH DOES NOT REQUIRE TANGIBLE VISIBILITY

Bob DeWaay sees an analogous situation to the believers addressed in the book of Hebrews who were considering going back to temple Judaism:

The key problem for them was the tangibility of the temple system, and the invisibility of the Christian faith. Just about everything that was offered to them by Christianity was invisible: the High Priest in Heaven, the once for all shed blood, and the throne of grace...All of these are invisible.

But the life of faith does not require tangible visibility: “*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*” (Hebrew 11:1). The Roman Catholic Church has tangibility that is unmatched by the evangelical faith, just as temple Judaism had. Why have faith in the once-for-all shed blood of Christ that is unseen when you can have *real* blood (that of the animals for temple Judaism and the Eucharistic Christ of Catholicism)? Why have the scriptures of the Biblical apostles and prophets who are now in heaven when you can have a real live apostle and his teaching Magisterium who can continue to speak for God? The similarities to the situation described in Hebrews are striking. Why have only the Scriptures...when

²³ Gary DeLashmutt, “Paul’s Use of ‘*Ta Stoicheia Tou Kosmou*’”, Xenos Christian Fellowship <http://www.xenos.org/ministries/crossroads/OnlineJournal/issue5/tastoch.htm> (accessed March 18, 2010).

²⁴ *Ibid.*

the Roman church has everything from icons to relics to cathedrals to holy water and so many other tangible religious articles and experiences?

I urge my fellow Evangelicals to seriously consider the consequences of rejecting sola scriptura as the formal principle of our theology. If my Hebrews analogy is correct, such a rejection is tantamount to apostasy.²⁵

C. A LIFE OF FAITH DOES NOT SEEK TO INDUCE MYSTICAL EXPERIENCES

The new liturgical movement and emergent worship emphasize mysticism and ritualism. Contemplative prayer practices and ritual are used as means of encountering and experiencing a real presence of God within and without. This opens the way for counterfeit spiritual experiences and is contrary to a walk of faith.

VI. CONCLUSION

Two questions to ask of any church practice are:

1. Does the Bible teach the practice as normative for the church?
2. Does the practice conflict with any doctrine or principle taught in the NT?

The church is only bound to observe that which Christ and the apostles commanded as normative. A church can, within the parameters of normative biblical commands and principles, add meaningful cultural elements to its services. But these elements are not to be viewed as a means of receiving grace and experiencing God.

Some liturgical practices fall under the category of doubtful things, but there is nothing inherently evil about them. Believers and churches may choose to include them in a service. But it may not be wise to structure the spiritual life of a

²⁵ Bob DeWaay, "Why Evangelicals Are Returning to Rome," *Critical Issues Commentary* (2008). <http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue105.htm> (accessed March 20, 2010).

church around a liturgical calendar and experiences that are not grounded in the Bible.

There is great desire today in the Evangelical community for a multi-sensory spiritual experience and a mystical encounter with God. But we are to live by faith and not by sight in this age. We are to focus on our mission, not on rituals. Our primary mission is to share the saving message and make disciples. Free Grace churches should continue to ground worship in the Word and to focus on the mission of evangelism and discipleship.

