

A Review of *Liturgical Theology: The Church as Worshiping Community*

Author Simon Chan writes his book out of a serious concern that evangelicals have suffered a loss of truth and the ability to think theologically, with significant effects on the church. Evangelical services are largely focused on how a person feels rather than on the objective truth of Christ as Savior. The idea of church as simply the gathering of people with common beliefs, instead of “perichoretic union with the triune God” has led to entertainment and therapy sessions and failure to *critically* engage modern culture. Chan calls us back to an adequate ecclesiology, rooted in the church’s ontology or identity. He insists that since “to be the church is to be the worshiping community,” we need to return to a strong liturgical practice to be a healthy church. This review will start with the first four chapters on foundations and then cover the last three on practices.

Chan sets up Chapter 1 by posing the question of whether the church is an instrument to accomplish God’s purpose in creation or an expression of God’s ultimate purpose itself. The answer is clearly the latter, which implies an ontological view of the church as opposed to a functional one. The author points to Eph. 1:4 to say that God chose the church before creation. Thus, creation was for the purpose of building the church, not the church for fixing creation. The church is a “divine humanity” because of its Head, Christ. Because of this, the church has its being as: 1) the people of God, 2) the body of Christ, and 3) the temple of the Holy Spirit.

First, the church is the people of God, together with Israel (Rom. 9:1-5; 11:1-2). Israel was elected simply for God’s sake and their own; their primary purpose was not to bring redemption to a fallen creation. It is into this Israel that we the church have been grafted into. Like OT Israel, the author sees the church as composed of the “true and faithful remnant” and unbelievers – up until the final day. In view of Eph. 1:4 and the sovereign work of God in election, this view has weight, but practically we don’t know which unbelievers will be saved in the future, so it seems best to think of the church in its present form – consisting of all current believers.

Second, as the body of Christ, the church is a communion of members. The head and the members together make up the “total Christ,” and the church is the embodied Christ for the world. As Augustine said, “you are yourselves what you receive” (in participating in the Eucharist). Of course, we are still separate from Christ although we have His identity. An important corollary of being Christ’s body is that *tradition* should be seen as a collective memory of Jesus Christ in the church, in the process of our being built together by His Spirit (Eph. 2:22).

Third, the church is the temple of the Holy Spirit; it began at Pentecost and continues to the consummation. The Spirit is the one who links the church to its Head, who leads it into the future kingdom, and who dynamically guides it, being the subjective embodiment of Christ in it. The Spirit is a foretaste, a guarantee, of the things to come in the new creation. Thus, through the Spirit's work, the church is endowed with a strong tension between the "already" and the "not yet." This tension must not be resolved because it is crucial to the church's mission, the mission of the Spirit in the church. Our mission is to feed on Christ and *be* the body of Christ, available to the world, to the praise of God's glory. Many evangelicals' view of mission (including mine in the past) has had a strong individual focus, but here the mission suggests more of a communal approach as the *body* reaches out and unbelievers are drawn into it.

In Chapter 2, Chan argues that we need a sound theology of worship consistent with the church's ontology, not one that serves other purposes such as relevance, popularity, or felt needs. The church is called by God's Word to be His people, and so its liturgy or common response must be seen as: 1) a core identity, 2) "primary theology," and 3) intimately and only connected with God's glory. First, liturgy or worship of God is what distinguishes the church from the world. It is an emphatic protest against the world's pride and despair. Even as a Christian, I resonate with this idea; when I am discouraged and focused on my problems, there is no more potent an antidote for my despair than worship (Ps. 42:5). Second, worship makes or realizes the church as God's people, Christ's body. God's grace is put on display through worship as we are formed "bodily" and transformed christologically. Finally, worship is also God's action in the church, through Christ. This idea is rooted in trinitarian worship, that "the Father is the origin and goal of our worship, the Son is the One who reveals the Father and the mediator between God and humankind; the Holy Spirit is the power by whom Christ lifts up fallen humanity and leads them to the Father." Our part is to both assemble and engage in liturgical worship.

Liturgy as "primary theology" is developed in juxtaposition to doctrine as "secondary theology." In other words, the "rule of praying" is the "rule of belief" (Prosper of Aquitaine). Although the "rule of belief" also influences the "rule of praying," this direction is not as strong. Liturgy precipitates God's change in our lives while doctrine seeks to explain the primary experience. For example the effects of liturgy can be seen in early Christians' worship of Jesus, which led to later christological doctrine. However, doctrine led directly to equality of the three

persons of the Godhead in the Nicene Creed. The most important point overall is that worship and belief cannot be separated.

Finally, true worship is intimately and only connected with God's glory. It is never something we initiate or do for God. It is never meant for any other purposes than His glory. Worship is a response to God's total character: His holiness and love, His transcendence and immanence. Thus, liturgy or orders of worship must reflect *all* these qualities, e.g., not just celebration or reflection. Worship is an encounter with and sharing in the life of the triune God, of praying and loving in the Spirit. I like the author's analogy of children's play: worship is aimless, yet full of meaning. Of course, it has byproducts, which are humility, gratitude, and cooperation.

As worshiping community, the church needs concrete expression – liturgy. The two basic elements of liturgy are Word and sacrament (see Acts 2:42); these are the topic of Chapter 3. The relationship between Word and sacrament is inseparable. With sermon only, the church forgets the Kingdom has already drawn near; with Eucharist only, the church forgets that the world still exists. The sacrament derives meaning from the Word, and the Word is fulfilled by sacrament, while both are centered on Christ, the “primordial sacrament.” Other ways to see this relationship are participation (sacrament) and reflection (Word), revelation (Word) and response (sacrament), and preparation (Word) and fulfillment (sacrament). Proclamation of the Word leads to faith, and faith to the effectual receiving of and feasting on Christ in the Eucharist. While the Word is priority and should come first, it must have a Eucharistic focus.

The Eucharist actualizes both communion and sacrifice. First, it is unique among other sacraments because it symbolizes Christ giving wholly of *Himself* to the *whole* church. Through it, we are made His body (by the Spirit) and have *communion* with Christ and other members. Salvation is not just a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, but involves insertion into a body animated by the Spirit of Christ. We are “branches of the true vine (John 15:1-8) and stones in a building (Eph. 2:20-22).” Second, the Eucharist becomes *sacrifice* through our offering of the “firstfruits of creation” and giving to care for the poor, in thankfulness to God. Through it, the church also offers itself up as a holy and living sacrifice, in response to Christ's. Thus, the Eucharist provides a context for ministry to one another.

Liturgy also has an eschatological orientation. The Word focuses on proclaiming the gospel until Christ comes while the Eucharist focuses on what is already possible since we have received

the firstfruits of new creation in God's Spirit. The vertical movement of the Eucharist – its focus on a past event and eternal reality – is still set within the natural cycles of time, highlighting the tension of being in the world and yet citizens of heaven (Phil. 3:20-21). This tension is also seen in early Christians' designation of Sunday (the day of Christ's resurrection and the "eighth day") as the first day of the week and the weekly worship cycle.

Finally, liturgy has a missiological orientation. The assembling of the *church* on Sunday (a day in the time of the *world*) to break bread (emphasizing the coming *kingdom*) keeps the eschatological tension necessary for being God's true hope to the world. As the church, we have one foot in the world and the other in the kingdom; when we come together, we "journey to heaven" and then back to this world. God's goal from the beginning was the church, and the church shows God's intent to the world. By being separated, the church gives true hope to the world.

In Chapter 4, Chan briefly discusses traditional and new ecclesiologies. Traditional ecclesiologies are known as "blueprint ecclesiologies" because they focused on the invisible, spiritual reality of the church. However, they likely hindered the church from its earthly tasks of pastoral care and witness to the world. New ecclesiologies are more concrete, focused on practices and relevance. While they still include the role and work of the Holy Spirit, their concrete focus naturally raises the question of how to determine which practices are good and which are not. This question is not easily answered since each local church community is diverse; hence the answer depends on the culture and people's understanding.

The author believes the best way to objectively define good practices is to hold the Word and sacrament as essential and to assess other practices in light of the essential ones. This judgment is based again on liturgy as primary theology. The value of the secondary practices depends on how closely linked they are to the essential ones, and on Christian beliefs or secondary theology. Their value also depends on people's understanding of the practices and intentions in appropriating them. Therefore, there is a need to teach the meaning of the practices. The secondary practices must be developed in light of the fact that liturgy forms us not through our own conscious efforts but by the work of the Holy Spirit. Our formation is a "mystery of grace," yet practice is also necessary.

Chan moves in Chapter 5 to begin discussing practices more specifically, starting with the catechumenate. Here, the author again issues a call to evangelicals to come back to more of a pattern set by the ancient church. Culture and technology, together with postmodernism, have

eroded people's sense of true identity and the big picture of life. Even in today's churches, consumerism and technology revolution have become entangled with the purposes of mission, social responsibility, and worship. In the ancient church, the catechumenate prepared individuals for incorporation into the community of the church – a radical change of mindset. Successful completion led to baptism and then the Eucharist. While pre-Constantine Christians were already converted when beginning the process, many after 313 had ulterior motives for converting, and the process was for them a means of conversion.

Common to most substantial catechisms (Luther's catechism, the Reformed Heidelberg Catechism, the Catechism of the Catholic Church) are the Apostle's Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer. The Apostle's Creed is memorized and recited, both individually and corporately in worship. It expresses the faith of the church. The Ten Commandments are focused on for different reasons. According to Luther, they are for restraint of evil and conviction of sin. However, Chan points out that they are also a concrete expression of gratitude by the redeemed, a path of life and a sign of God's gracious covenant with Israel. The Lord's Prayer is memorized and recited like the Apostle's Creed. It is a summary of the church's prayer as it focuses people away from self toward Christ. Baptism and confirmation are the "final break" from the world, one's flesh, and the devil. Baptism represents a drowning (death and burial) of the entire sinful self and rising to new life in Christ. It is also a "cosmic claim" that God's power has vanquished the enemy. Confirmation, the anointing and laying on of hands, is a link to and recognizes Spiritual baptism.

While I appreciate the intentionality and meaning of catechisms, I am still wary of their dangers. The formality, performance, and examination required in the process of the catechism can tend to push people into thinking that salvation is by works, not faith alone, even though this is exactly contrary to what they are learning. There is no mediator for us except Jesus Christ alone, who can usher us into the presence of the Father, by the Spirit. If a catechism is to be truly effective, it must be presented in grace and with this thought well considered.

Chapter 6 gives a more detailed description of the components of Sunday liturgy and their meaning. Here, Chan emphasizes that liturgy *can* combine both form and the freedom of the Spirit. He points out that many charismatic services are not truly spontaneous anyway but rather "planned spontaneity." The core components of Sunday liturgy are Entrance, Proclamation of the Word,

Eucharist, and Dismissal. In the Entrance, there is a greeting and call to worship, adoration, confession, and absolution. I have often debated in my own mind whether adoration should follow confession or vice versa, and here the author gives some insight: Ps. 23:3-4 provides a basis for the former while Isa. 6 supports the latter. Thus, either approach is Biblical if done in faith.

The Proclamation of the Word begins with the reading of Scripture (OT, Psalm, Epistle, and Gospel). The reading is based on a calendar and is communal in nature, with responses from the congregation when appropriate. The sermon is a “Spirit-inspired speech” and is derived from the reading – not the other way around. The proclamation is itself the Word of God. It is the gospel of Jesus Christ, tied to the whole of Scripture, and interpreted both literally *and* allegorically. It builds a bridge between the event of salvation (past), continuing sanctification (present), and the coming kingdom (future). Following this is the Apostle’s or Nicene Creed. Prayers of the people are then offered up through a spokesperson for 1) the church’s needs, 2) the local community, and 3) the authorities and salvation of the world.

The Eucharist begins with the offertory of bread, wine, and collections, which symbolize by extension the offering of one’s whole life to God. The Great Thanksgiving is then prayed, which moves through a number of different sections. It is addressed to the Father, recalls His works, and asks Him to send His Spirit on the church and the offertory gifts. The Lord’s Prayer is prayed, then the bread is broken and an invitation is given. The invitation includes both a warning and an emphasis on coming trusting in God’s grace, not works. Finally, through eating and drinking members experience the Eucharistic presence of Jesus actualized through the Spirit. The liturgy ends with the Dismissal – a benediction and then a sending forth into the world. Chan encourages evangelicals to adopt and enter into this liturgy, but not before they have reflected on the meaning behind it.

Chan concludes in Chapter 7 by encouraging active participation in liturgy. This exhortation is based on seeing liturgy as divine action working through human action. Active participation is affected by people’s understanding, attitude, and discipline. Therefore, liturgy should be adapted to the congregation’s needs, comprehension, interior preparation, and gifts. There is also freedom for a variety of expressions within the liturgy’s framework while keeping its stability. Both leaders and people need to participate, i.e. it is a dialectic model of worship, not a “rock-concert model.” Acclamations, responses, psalmody, antiphons, canticles, movements/gestures, and silence are all suggested as opportunities for participation. Through a steady diet of liturgy through the rhythms of

time (daily prayers, Sunday, the Christian calendar) and an immersion in its language and symbols, Chan believes Christians can participate in true worship in a way that evokes “awe, delight, truthfulness, and hope.”

In conclusion, when I was just beginning my undergraduate education, I remember being troubled by several thoughts in what for me was a “crisis of faith.” One of my issues was the church of Christ worldwide, and how it seemed like there were so many different denominations with different doctrines and practices. After reading this book, I am refreshed with the perspective that God is indeed slowly unifying His church over time as He builds and prepares it through His Spirit for the second coming of Christ. There is a corporate history of the church, in addition to individuals’ salvation history, which God is working out as things not of Him fade away and things from Him work throughout the entire body of Christ.