

COVENANT MEMORIAL

A Fresh Perspective on Real Presence

Essay No 9

Recovering Liturgy in Evangelical Churches: Form, Freedom and Faithfulness

1. The Question of Form

In many low-church evangelical settings, the word *liturgy* provokes unease¹. It is associated with dead ritual, imposed structure, sacerdotalism, or a loss of immediacy. Worship, it is assumed, should be spontaneous in order to be sincere.

Yet this assumption often rests upon a false contrast. Congregations that reject “formal liturgy” nevertheless follow a recognisable pattern: gathering, praise, prayer, Scripture, sermon, response, dismissal. Even flexible services repeat a sequence week by week. Informality is not the absence of liturgy; it is simply unwritten liturgy or is simply called “The Running Order”.

The theological question is therefore not whether churches possess a liturgy, but whether the pattern shaping their worship is intentional, doctrinally coherent, and consciously ordered around the gospel.

2. Scriptural Pattern and Ordered Worship

The suspicion that structure quenches the Spirit is difficult to sustain in light of Scripture itself. Israel’s worship was richly patterned: the Temple service followed prescribed forms; covenant renewal ceremonies were structured; the Psalter itself frequently follows discernible movements of summons, confession, proclamation and praise.

¹ On the other hand, more and more church leaders today are experimenting with various forms of liturgy, especially in their celebration of The Lord’s Supper, or Communion. The overall objective of this presentation is not to persuade people of the need for a full-scale adoption of formal liturgy, including those suggested in Essay No 10. Rather, it is to promote awareness of the existing liturgical forms present in most Evangelical church services and to encourage these to be shaped and developed in the best way possible to enrich the celebration of The Lord’s Supper.

The synagogue liturgy inherited this shape: readings from the Law and the Prophets, exposition, prayer (cf. Luke 4.16–21; Acts 13.15). The earliest Christian gatherings developed a recognisable order of Word and Table. Justin Martyr describes a pattern of readings, exhortation, prayers, kiss of peace and Eucharistic thanksgiving (*First Apology* 65–67). The rhythm is not chaotic but deliberate.

The New Testament contains no detailed order of service, yet it assumes coherence rather than improvisation (1 Cor. 14.26–33). Order is not opposed to spiritual vitality; it may indeed be the condition of it. In no way does this contradict what is commonly called, “the leading of the Spirit.”

3. The Eucharist and the Necessity of Form

If the Eucharist is understood as covenant memorial — an act in which the Church remembers before God and participates in Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice — then liturgical shape cannot be incidental.

Communion detached from confession weakens seriousness about sin. Communion without proclamation severs sacrament from gospel. Communion without shared confession of faith individualises what is intrinsically corporate.

Historic Christian liturgies instinctively embedded the Table within a theological progression: proclamation of Scripture, confession and assurance, peace, thanksgiving, institution, intercession and mission. The Reformers, far from rejecting such order, largely retained it. The Book of Common Prayer preserves this evangelical logic: repentance, absolution, creed, prayers, consecration, reception. Calvin likewise maintained structured patterns in Geneva, insisting that Christ’s gifts be received with reverence and faith (cf. *Institutes* IV.xvii).

Form, therefore, does not compete with evangelical conviction or Spirit-led approaches. It protects both. It ensures that the Supper remains proclamation (“you proclaim the Lord’s death”, 1 Cor. 11.26), participation (“a sharing in the body of Christ”, 1 Cor. 10.16), and covenant renewal rather than private devotion.

4. Freedom and Formation

A frequent objection claims that structured prayer undermines authenticity. Yet spontaneity often reflects prevailing cultural habits more than spiritual depth. It privileges the articulate and the confident. It can quietly centre worship around personality rather than proclamation.

Form, by contrast, enables participation across differences of temperament and maturity. Shared confession gives words to those unable to find them. Repeated doxology engraves truth upon the imagination. What begins as corporate discipline becomes personal conviction.

Augustine observed that Christian worship shapes love itself; what the Church repeatedly praises, she learns to desire (*Confessions* X). Liturgy, then, is not the enemy of sincerity but a school of it. Faith is formed through embodied repetition.

5. Liturgy as Corporate Catechesis

Over time, a coherent liturgical pattern teaches the gospel more steadily than episodic instruction. The shape of worship rehearses the drama of redemption:

- God summons.
- The people praise.
- Sin is confessed.
- Grace is declared.
- Faith is confessed.
- Peace is shared.
- Thanksgiving is offered.
- Christ's saving act is remembered.
- The people are fed.
- The church is sent.

This rhythmic enactment forms theological reflex. It resists fragmentation and reinforces doctrinal continuity. In an age characterised by rapid ecclesial flux and personality-driven ministry, such stability carries pastoral weight.

Liturgy thus becomes not antiquarian inheritance but ecclesial wisdom: the accumulated discernment of how best to rehearse the gospel in gathered life.

6. Gradual Recovery Without Displacement

The introduction of intentional liturgical shape in evangelical contexts need not be abrupt or alien. Scripture-saturated responses, corporate confession, seasonal use of the Creed, and carefully framed Eucharistic prayers can be integrated gradually and transparently.

Clarity of purpose is essential. Form must serve the gospel and never obscure it. When Christ remains central and grace unmistakable, congregations tend not to resist depth; they resist obscurity or imposition.

Where confidence grows slowly, liturgical recovery becomes perceived not as transformation into something unfamiliar, but as maturation within an evangelical identity.

7. The Long-Term Fruit

Where worship is intentionally shaped around Scripture, confession, thanksgiving and sacramental participation, several fruits typically emerge:

- doctrinal literacy increases;
- the Lord's Supper acquires renewed seriousness;
- congregational unity transcends individual preference;
- leadership transitions cause less theological instability;
- intergenerational continuity strengthens.

Such developments do not derive from aesthetic preference but from theological coherence. The Church becomes recognisably formed by the gospel she proclaims.

8. Conclusion: Form as Fidelity

The recovery of liturgical consciousness within evangelical churches is not a retreat into ceremonialism nor a capitulation to nostalgia. It is a recognition that form transmits faith.

If Christ has entrusted His Church with Word and Sacrament — with covenant remembrance and communal confession — then worship requires an architecture capable of bearing that weight.

None of this requires slavish adherence and does not preclude variety in liturgy. There is also a place within liturgy for spontaneity, the exercise of spiritual gifts and response to the immediate promptings of the Holy Spirit. Flexibility is always easier when form is already established. The church gathering has something to be flexible with.

Liturgy, rightly understood, is not constraint but fidelity: the disciplined ordering of praise so that remembrance is steady, presence is recognised, faith is confessed and thanksgiving is sustained. Within such form, neither charismatic spontaneity nor evangelical conviction need diminish. It may instead deepen both, becoming at once historically rooted and spiritually alive.