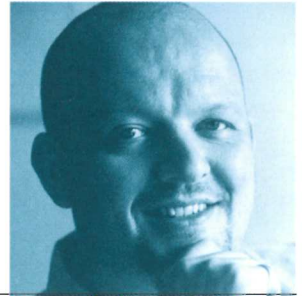


THE REDISCOVERY OF RITUAL IN THE EMERGING CHURCH

JASON CLARK



Jason Clark spent eight years as an investment adviser and is now a full-time pastor of the church he and his wife planted (www.vineyardchurch.org). He holds a theology degree, a doctorate (D.Min), and is currently studying for a PhD, in the area of church and culture, in particular how the church can understand and respond to consumer culture. He coordinates Emergent-UK (www.emergent-uk.org) and writes a well-known blog, www.jasonclark.ws

I CAME TO THE CHRISTIAN FAITH WITH A DRAMATIC CONVERSION EXPERIENCE AT THE AGE OF 17. My family was non-Christian, and I had little connection to Church other than school Christmas services at our town centre's main church.

The Baptist Church I became a member of was so life giving and wonderful. Yet I quickly picked up the bias and antipathy towards liturgy that existed in the broader evangelical circles I had entered. At its most simplistic the argument against liturgy was a reduction of liturgy to 'religious', and religion is the enemy of 'authentic relationship with God'.

I progressed from a Baptist Church to involvement in, and the helping of planting churches that were even 'lower' in their ecclesiology, with casual dress, meetings in schools and pubs and modern music. The notion of liturgical practices, something I had never even experienced with my non-Church background, receded even further into the distance, as something that was at best an irrelevance, and at worst, decidedly unhelpful.

Yet here I am ten years later after the planting of the church that I still lead, using daily prayers, common worship, observing the Church calendar, and planning our Eucharist services for 2008. I have found these activities utterly life giving, revitalising to my own faith, and key to the evangelistic growth and spiritual formation of my formally 'low-church' community.

Just over a year ago I was sharing some of these experiences with a worship leader from a large Anglican Church, who was shocked that I was using something so 'religious'. The incongruity of that conversation, the Anglican concerned for the low-church minister's use of liturgy, was not lost on me.

So what changed, why should I, and it would seem a great many other low-church evangelicals, be discovering and embracing liturgical rituals in our church practices? I can try to answer that question for myself, and maybe offer some observation from my travels to speak at other churches around the world, and in my research and teaching, that intersects with this phenomenon.

WE ARE ALL LITURGICAL

We are all liturgical, in that we all have formularies for how we organise our lives, around our beliefs and practices.

As I look back at the low-church formulations that I experienced and practiced, they had their own 'informal' liturgies. Doing the same things, at the same time, in

prescribed ways, were just as liturgical as the explicit liturgies of my local Anglican Church.

The way we had worship, prayer times, our code of dress, where we met, the things we did and the things we did not do, could all be assessed as liturgies for our beliefs, and the codifying into concrete media and locations of our practices.

I and many other Christians have been acknowledging that the liturgical and ritual is a part of every kind of Church life. Not only have our churches, however new and 'low' in their orientation contained liturgical rituals, but our increasingly secular, consumer materialistic culture, has been ruthless in its liturgical demands.¹

The pursuit of happiness, the goal of a successful life – defined as retirement by the beach at an early age; of freedom from commitments to anything except ourselves; the centring of life around our happiness – has led us to the observation of the consumer calendar, with its relentless advertising drive, media complicity and demand for obedience from our wallets.

Our weeks are organised around the consumer calendar, with the rise of 'leisure sickness'² as we work hard during the week so we can afford to spend our weekends travelling away to somewhere else and spending money in order 'to be'. Our consumer society can demand total obedience from our relationships, the choices about where we live, and the jobs that we take.

Underneath the thin veneer of consumer freedom, we see the liturgical bondage so many of us are ensnared and captive to. And these liturgies are immensely successful in how they form us into consumers, and disable us from any other form of living. Especially the disabling of any form of living that allows permanent forms of connection to others and our local communities. I betray my suburban location, but here on the edge of London everyone seems to be passing through, living here only so that they can afford to live somewhere better or because it is a convenient base for holiday departures.

Armed with those two revelations – the liturgical nature of all Church structures, and the often hegemonic liturgy of consumer culture – many of us are turning to the recovery of liturgy and ritual to aid us in our desire together to be formed like Christ.

We are looking for something stabilising and formational, able to overcome the religion of our non-religious culture. I will now try to highlight some of

'most of life is about the faithful living out of the Christian faith in the face of the mundane of everyday shared life'

NOTES

1. I won't offer a diagnosis of consumer culture, consumerism, and secular materialism, in the limited space of this article but will offer further reading in the list of recommended books at the end.
2. 'Sick on Arrival,' http://www.guardian.co.uk/health/story/0,,2138307,00.html#article_continue (accessed Dec 2007).
3. 'Only 1 in 8 People Know the Christmas Story Well,' (2007). www.theosthinktank.co.uk/Only_1_in_8_people_know_the_Christmas_story_well.aspx?ArticleID=1411&PageID=14&RefPageID=5.
4. Walter Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living in a Three-Storeyed Universe* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993).
5. Andrew Walker, *Telling the Story: Gospel, Mission and Culture* (Gospel and Culture (London: SPCK, 1996).
6. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liturgical_year
7. Vincent J Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2003), p. 90.
8. Alain De Botton, *Status Anxiety* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2004).
9. Andrew Walker and Luke Bretherton (eds.), *Remembering Our Future: Explorations in Deep Church* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), p. 241.

► the key elements of this liturgical recovery, of where and how this is taking place.

GOSPEL AMNESIA

The UK is a pluralistic society where Christianity is one story amongst many, and it is largely seen as a discredited story. There is a deep suspicion of anyone with a story that claims to be the correct and true story, and so it would seem we accept that the only true story is the one that we make up for ourselves. It has little remembering of the Christian faith that birthed many of the things that we take for granted, such as healthcare and education. Even the most famous of historical novels are examined without any reference to the Christian faith and environment that inspired them.

It is not only a culture that knows very little of the Christian story, but as Christians we have often forgotten the rich depths of our story.³ Walter Brueggemann is credited to have coined the phrase, 'Gospel Amnesia',⁴ as a description of this process of systematic forgetting, something Andrew Walker has developed in *Telling the Story*.⁵

Despite our forgetting of the Christian story, we are as human beings captivated by stories, whether looking for great stories, in the books we read, and the movies we still go to see in great numbers. But this raises an important question for Christians: In a world and culture that has a plurality of stories, where the Christian story has been forgotten, how do we retell and locate ourselves in the Christian story?

It was this that led me to the Church calendar, where each year is organised and lived in Christian communities around a retelling of the life of Jesus (and the Church).⁶ It offers a way to order our year around a different reality to the consumer calendar. It can be the most wonderful way to retell and relive the Christian story as a community, to locate my life story with that of others in the midst of the Christian story.

IDENTITY

If we delve into the issue of identity a little deeper, we can find people like Vincent Miller, who in his book *Consuming Religion*, describes how there has been a shift 'from a world in which beliefs held believers to one in which believers hold beliefs'.⁷ Miller outlines how consumerism, and in particular commodification, leads us to the situation where we as individuals have become the sole authors of our own identity, through consuming cultural aesthetics. In other words, we understand and form who we are with a pick 'n' mix

approach to all our beliefs and practices, which is often shallow and superficial, based around issues of taste, personal preference and the rubric of what makes us happy. This has a hugely harmful effect on the way we relate to others, with consequences for those of us trying to form church communities. Many of us have been finding that liturgical rituals have been helpful in a variety of ways to respond to this constructively.

Within liturgy there is the invitation to participate, of repeating and enacting something together as community. This challenges us to order our lives around the shared historical beliefs of our faith, rather than the challenge of the world that asks us to choose whatever we want to believe. Liturgy and ritual open up the possibility of reconnecting beliefs to their origin, and the people who held and practiced them, so that we could know and embody them too.

I have found praying the Apostle's Creed with my church community, to be an anchor in the storm of conflicting beliefs around and within me. I am also regularly moved by the experience of reading out loud together of a liturgical prayer or confession, where the voices of individuals, including my own, take on the univocal voice of a community.

THE MUNDANE & ORDINARY

We seem to live in a world that doesn't know how to cope with the ordinary. We try to avoid the ordinary, encouraged to do so by everything from hair products to celebrity hypnotists. Our books and magazines make the inevitable claims of how they can liberate us from the shackles of our mundane lives, how we too can be rich, beautiful and famous celebrities. A successful life would seem to be anything other than ordinary. As Christians we collude with this – our books, songs and sermons often proclaim the ten guaranteed steps to the perfect marriage, prayer life, church, etc.

Yet at a time when so many of us have so much more in terms of prosperity, and more resources available to help us transform our lives, we seem to be as unhappy as never before.⁸

It would seem that much of life is lived in the mundane and ordinary, despite our attempts to escape it. My own church experience has had many attempts at escape, with the search for charismatic highs as the expected normal daily experience of spiritual formation. In a world obsessed with avoiding the ordinary, Christian spirituality is often held captive to that process, where the measure of Christian life is how exciting or,

'the recovery of the liturgical has been ... an opening of the vaults and archives of the Church, to discover the riches it has available to us for our formation as people and churches'

stimulating the Christian life is. Yet I have found that whilst God does bring some 'mountain-top times', most of life is lived in the ordinary, full of daily questions, struggles and difficulties.

How do we find meaning, and connection in the mundane, in the face of a world that avoids the ordinary at all cost? How do we establish a Christian rhythm to life, in the face of the arrhythmia of our hectic world? For me this leads us back to the Church calendar.

Within the Church calendar, there are three seasons, fasting (Advent & Lent), feasting (Christmas Day & Easter Sunday), and ordinary time (within which some denominations mark time as 'Kingdomtide'), for most of the times in-between. By ordering our lives around the Church calendar, in our worship as communities, we get to place the 24/7 demands of our world within a different reality.

Within the Church calendar we observe the pattern of fasting, reminding us that life is about choosing to have less rather than chasing more, it is this absence that shapes our need for preparation and longing, reorienting ourselves from our own ability to provide to God's. The small number of feast days in the calendar is an immediate counter to the push for everyday to be a day of plenty but also a call to celebrate life where we are, to share what we have with our communities around us.

The overwhelming amount of time in the Church calendar given to that of the ordinary is a reminder that most of life is about the faithful living out of the Christian faith in the face of the mundane of everyday shared life.

Within our weeks, the Church calendar inconveniently interrupts our life by dividing our time into working and a day of Sabbath. This gives us a real day to worship, connect, reflect and be with our communities of faith and families, a day that the consumer calendar has defined to be just another day of ecstatic shopping.

Intentionally ordering our lives, placing our time itself within a liturgical pattern, enables us to confirm and affirm that life is not about 'the business cycle, the need for greater productivity, or the possibilities of technology'.⁹

SPIRITUAL FORMATION

For many Christians spiritual formation has been about information, the learning of facts. Growth as a Christian has been about learning propositional truths, and little

to do with the exploration of the astounding depths of human potential before and with their creator and with each other. The recovery of the liturgical has been for many of us an opening of the vaults and archives of the Church, to discover the riches it has available to us for our formation as people and churches. This liturgical rediscovery has facilitated an explosion of creative arts, of painting, poetry and music. As well as an exploration of the past this has become the means for an encapsulation and rebirth in new media, with the audiovisual becoming the new stained-glass windows of many church communities. The liturgical practices of the Church instead of undermining the life of Christians and their communities have been having the opposite effect.

Many of us are finding that the plurality of our world and culture is met with a Church that is so diverse, so rich, so deep and complex, and provides an invitation to people to locate themselves and their explorations alongside us, and with us. Liturgy and ritual can be the doorway to the living out and forming of our lives around the reality of the universe that is the life of Jesus.

CONCLUSION

Daily prayers take place online, or are downloaded to people's ipods, or sent via text messages to mobiles. The practice of living short-, medium- or long-term with intentionality, in community, with our time not dictated to by the liturgy of consumerism is taking place.

Like so many other Christian communities, mine is developing creative arts, audio visual and liturgical teams who utilise multimedia, music, videos, poetry, readings, drama, to bring the ancient and the future together, to serve and inspire the liturgical life of our community.

For many of us the regular enactment as a community of the Lord's Supper is central to our liturgical rituals, an embodiment of all of the patterns of the Church calendar. It reminds us within our community of the one Jesus, who we are called to become like and order our whole lives after. As we partake in the bread and wine together, we find, like Christians communities past, present and future, that we are rediscovering and re-committing ourselves to partaking and sharing in the life of Christ now and in the age to come. ■

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Brueggemann, W, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living in a Three-Storeyed Universe* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993)
- De Botton, A, *Status Anxiety* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2004)
- Kimball, D, *Emerging Worship: Creating Worship Gatherings for New Generations* (El Cajon, CA/Grand Rapids, MI: EmergentYS/Zondervan, 2004)
- McLaren, BD, *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001)
- Miller, VJ, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2003)
- 'Only 1 in 8 People Know the Christmas Story Well' http://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/Only_1_in_8_people_know_the_Christmas_story_well.aspx?ArticleID=1411&PageID=14&RefPageID=5 (accessed Dec 2007)
- 'Sick on Arrival.' http://www.guardian.co.uk/health/story/0,,2138307,00.html#article_continue (accessed Dec 2007)
- Walker, A, *Telling the Story: Gospel, Mission and Culture* (Gospel and Culture; London: SPCK, 1996)
- Walker, A and Bretherton, L (eds.), *Remembering Our Future: Explorations in Deep Church* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007)
- Webber, R, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999)
- Williams, DH, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1999)