



Gospel Liturgy: How Church Gatherings Shape Us

Genesis 3 | Jonathan K. Dodson | January 13, 2015

Week by week, we're looking at what it means to be *City Life Church exists to renew cities socially, spiritually, and culturally with the gospel of Jesus*. Last week we looked at the final phrase—the gospel of Jesus—how deep, broad, and grand the gospel is. Big enough to change cities, broad enough to create a diverse community, and deep enough to change us. And yet, even with this great grasp of the gospel, we still drifted from it this week. At times we took God off the stage and took his place: judgment, anger, meanness, impatience, , anxiety, fear. Desires run amuck. What can we do? We need to instruct our desires, to get us back into the gospel drama. This morning we're zooming in on the word "church" in our vision statement. I'd like to show you the formative role Sunday gatherings plays in *instructing desire*. Last week I told you about the Tardis, the multi-dimensional time traveling device. Well, the guy who drives it is Dr Who, and there's a famous line where he says: "We're all stories in the end." This morning lets look at how the church is the gospel story. In the end everyone will see but what I'm concerned about *now*. How do they see you, me us? How are our stories formed?

Secular Liturgy

Rarely would anyone say, "I'm a follower of Amazon.com and I subscribe to their beliefs. I get my *doctrine* from Amazon." But that doesn't mean we aren't shaped by Amazon, by it's beliefs. It's just sneakier. This week I scanned a six page Amazon Brand Usage Guide. Incredibly detailed, it governs call to action, logo usage, phrasing, and more. Amazon is very deliberate. Inspired by James K.A. Smith's work on liturgy, I'd like to propose to you that there are cultural frameworks, liturgies, stories, that radically shape our behaviors. Many of them under the radar. Let's take Amazon.com [This is not an Amazon take down. I love my Prime account.] But why should you shop Amazon? Well, its medium allows you to skip the lines and come to our site where you can avoid making contact with other humans (*efficiency and convenience*). If you don't like the product, you're welcome to return it because we want you to have *total satisfaction*. While you're shopping feel free to populate a Wish List to keep track of things you can't put in your cart right now, but that you can get later (*materialist fantasy*). Also, once you've placed your order you can track your purchase through an app that notifies you where it is and when it is delivered or just through old-fashioned email (*control*). Oh, and if you're a Prime account holder, we'll get it to you in 2 days or walk it over to you in NYC same day within hours (*speed*). How does the structured experience of shopping at Amazon shape us? What beliefs or values are instilled as we passively shop? *Efficiency, convenience, satisfaction, materialism, control, self-importance, and speed, to name a few*. Amazon depends on a liturgy, and in a few clicks we're programmed with the belief that the consumer is in control and very important. Consumerism. There are all kinds of secular liturgies around us, none of them valueless, that shape us, define us with their beliefs...and they never require us to sign a contract or statement of belief. But, we walk from them with their beliefs firmly embedded, influencing how we act. **There is no such thing as a neutral, uninfluenced hour, day, week, or life.** We are creatures of liturgy, shaped by our practices and habits. The question we need to ask is "Which liturgy shapes us most?" Smith describes liturgy as: "*formative pedagogies of*

desire that are trying to make us a certain kind of person.” The experience is not unbiased intended to instruct desire in order to produce a certain kind of person. In this case, a loyal customer. Churches also have liturgies, whether they know it or not. I was late to this realization. I grew up in Bible churches, where liturgy was frowned upon in favor of preaching the Word. But even simple services have a liturgy. Call to Worship, Preaching, Response, Benediction. I’ll explain our liturgy a little later, but first, I’d like to show you what’s on the line from *the original secular liturgy* to see what we can learn. Look with me at Genesis 3. In this story of the first humans, Satan sets up Eve. We’re told “the serpent was more crafty than any other beast.” He knows *exactly* what he’s doing when he poses questions to Eve, “[Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’](#)” (3:1). He’s creating doubt, distrust. Notice he didn’t say, “Curse God and die.” His liturgy is subtle, subversive. What’s the goal of the question? *To get God off the stage and Eve centerstage to question his trustworthiness.* It’s a “**call to worship**,” perhaps reason, a *secular* liturgy. To move things along towards his goal, next he says: “[You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil](#)” (3:4-5). Now what’s he doing? He’s trying to form her, to join his beliefs. How does he do it? By appealing to *desire*. “You can be wise, eyes open, nothing will get by you. You can be like God, you can make the call on what’s good and evil. You can be in charge.” He tempts her by appealing to the desire to be wise and in control. Satan does not say, “You should change your doctrinal statement. Become an atheist, a Satanist, but not a theist.” **The devil doesn’t really want heretics; he wants narcissists.** He knows that if he can get us to worship our preferences, our opinions, our ways, then he won’t have to do the difficult religious work of changing our doctrine. He’s just as happy to have narcissistic *Christians*. If his first move is a call to worship, his second move was **preaching a false gospel**—you can be wise, like God, in charge, in control without him. Next is the **response** to his preaching, his word: “[So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate.](#)” An alternative practice, changed behavior, as she clicks her mouse, sinks her teeth into the juicy fruit, nectar trickling down her chin. And all of sudden her beliefs about God change. God is a killjoy (he doesn’t want her to be wise or enjoy the fruit). God is legalist (as she said, he doesn’t want me to “touch the tree” which he didn’t say.). Receiving Satan’s call to worship and believing his false gospel, being shaped by his story/liturgy, she is for the first time aware of *lack*: “[Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked](#)” (3:7). Void of clothing, how did they know, why did it matter, they changed liturgies, put Self on centerstage, by believing a false gospel. So they sew their own clothes, to cover up their lack, to fill their void. The final piece in Satan’s liturgy is his **benediction or sending**. He sends them out of Eden *empty-handed*. It’s a heartbreaking story, a powerful liturgy, that radically alters humanity—our beliefs, our practices, our fundamental desire. The original secular liturgy has had thousands of iterations as we move passively through life falling prey to all kinds of human aggrandizing practices. The goal? Turn away from God. **Do you see the power of liturgy? How important it is for us to instruct desire so as to not be mastered by desire?** To have a counter liturgy that forms you around Christ? What’s your weekly, daily liturgy?

Gospel Liturgy

The Bible offers a counter liturgy in its grand drama of creation, fall, redemption, new creation plotline but it also contains liturgical elements: prayers, songs, stories, sermons, letters, doxologies. Jesus first sermon in Luke 4 took place in a synagogue liturgy. The interesting thing about these elements is that they are mostly written in the context of communal worship not private Bible study. The church is not a loose collection of spiritually minded individuals; it is a community, the people of God gathered around the person of Christ. Do you know why the church has gathered on Sunday since the first century? Sunday is the third day after Jesus death, the day of his resurrection. Sunday gatherings are the *original gospel liturgy* to form humanity around Christ. So you see, Sundays aren't about religious duty; they're weekly liturgy, a way to begin your week with a call to worship, to send us into the week, not empty-handed but chock full of good news, to reflect the character of Christ, love the church, and seek the good of the city in all we do. You've probably seen through the Myth of Sunday morning neutrality. Sleeping in isn't neutral, going to brunch isn't neutral. Those things can be good, but you're formed by them. Why else is there gradual drift from community & corporate worship when you continually replace Sundays and City Group with something else? You've fallen for a secular liturgy, believed a false gospel that life is a story about you. You're in control, wise like God, and don't have to go to church. But by now its gotta be clear it's not about duty; its about desperation and delight. Peter Kreeft, "You think religion is a crutch? What, you didn't know you have a limp?" The consumer liturgy tells us we're fine, in control, and pay to get what we want. This creeps into the church. Give your resources (financially, service, showing up) and get what you want: how Kids ministry is run, preferences on preaching, desires for community should all be met with accuracy, speed, and convenience. The church isn't Amazon; it isn't a business; it's the manifold wisdom of God to put the gospel on display, to show off the riches of God's grace to narcissistic sinners, to showcase Jesus not your preferences. How are you fighting against consumerism, individualism? What does your daily, weekly gospel liturgy look like? As we wrap things up, I'd like to show you how our Sunday liturgy works to help you participate actively in gospel formation. **Call to Worship.** This isn't a spiritual way of saying thanks for coming or welcome, though we are glad you're here. It is a collective recognition that we were all summoned here by God to listen to him, talk to him, respond to him, sing to him, *worship him*. It's also not a "Call to Judge" the preacher or people, though you should certainly weigh our words and reflect on our practice. The call to worship is God-centered. It's meant to rivet our attention to his greatness, which has a way of snapping the self-centered/consumer liturgy of the week to reorient us around the gladdening glory of God. Now, if you're not sure what you believe, or are spiritually curious we want you to have all the space you need to work through questions, doubts, concerns. **But, you should also know that any way you slice it Christianity ends in worship,** devotion to God not to Self, and when God is the object of our worship he dignifies every aspect of our humanity. Like the London Eye/ferris wheel has to have its axel *at the center* for people to enjoy the ride, humanity has to have God *at the center* in order to truly flourish. **Gospel Preaching.** Preaching is not a TED talk where I put together some points to impart some cultural insight or word of wisdom. Preaching is an act of standing between two worlds, the world of Scripture and the world of culture, and the goal of the preach is to communicate the uniqueness of Christ and the claims of the gospel into your cultural life. It is not a Bible study focusing exclusively on doctrine. Idont

want to say in one world or aim just at the intellect. It is not an Application hour primarily focusing on “3 Tips for Life.” That aims at the will. The primary problem isn’t that we don’t do the right things (3 tips for living/Will), nor is it primarily that we don’t have the right doctrine (Head). Remember, we are fundamentally creatures of desire, so we need not to just instruct our head or our life, intellect or will, we need to instruct desire, recenter our affections on Christ. This means preaching to the heart, asking the Spirit of God to electrify true gospel, to make it alive to our hearts, energize our desire for him. So don’t come with a consumer posture about sitting, serving, preaching, singing, but with confidence that the same Spirit that enables the preacher enables the listener. Its dynamic, participatory, all an act of collective worship, of instructing desire. **Response.** Our response comes in several forms: communion/confession& assurance/singing. These enables us to individually and corporately respond the gospel and what God is doing in our lives to reflect, repent, rejoice, resolve obedience. As we collectively sing, we act as a collective instrument to express our gratitude, awe, and belief in what God has done for us in Christ through the Spirit. N.T. Wright, suggests that, when we sing, our bodies become echo chambers of the gospel, where the good news reverberates and we collectively affirm that greatness of God and the hope of the Christ together. The final bit is the **Benediction/Sending.** It is not a way of saying goodbye but a **sending of the church into the city with the gospel for work and witness.** Before we move into our response, of communion, I’d like to finish the story we began in Genesis 3. Remember that Adam and Eve had a switch in beliefs, God is great to God is a killjoy or a legalist, all because they were passively shaped by Satan’s liturgy, who sent them out with a sense of lack, empty-handed. But that’s not how the story ends. Like any good parent, God issues a punishment for both Adam and Eve, but then, he does something surprising. He **“makes them garments of skins and clothed them” (3:21).** Why? After all they had sewn garments for themselves from fig leaves. Pretty hip by Austin standards: natural, aromatic, fair trade, eco-friendly. In the ancient world, garments functioned like wallets. Men would press their hems into clay creating a kind of credit card, to indicate wealth and inheritance. Inscriptions tell us that if someone were disinherited they had to “put their garment on the door bolt and depart.” Leave your inheritance and go! What does God say? Put your garment on the door and go! No, he gives them a garment and says come. He’s promises them inheritance, after all they’ve done, the distrust, the rejection, the Self-worship. It reminds me of a line from Dr. Who, when his companion throws away the keys to the Tardis and betrays him. He replies: **“do you think I love you so little that you're betraying me would make a difference?”** Hope shoots through our veins. The love of God in the person of Christ. When the NT tells us to “put on the new man” “clothe ourselves with Christ” it’s telling us Jesus secures our inheritance. Jesus puts us back in the garden. Jesus has secured the big liturgy of the Bible, a day when the whole world will be like Eden again, a grand inheritance for all who hope in Christ. Secular liturgies send us away empty-handed but gospel liturgy sends away with plenty. “We’re all stories in the end,” but Dr. Who continues, “make it a good one.” Will you make your story a good one? For your family? For your church? For the glory of God? How? Make it a true one, shaped by gospel, and it will be a good one !