

The Practice of Convergence

Introduction

Convergence theology is essentially a trinitarian theology that the church actively pursues in the liturgy. When the church faithfully practices the liturgy, it is also practicing a trinitarian theology which includes both the evangelical and charismatic dimensions. This means that if we isolate the evangelical or charismatic form of worship, we are not practicing a trinitarian theology. Trinitarian worship stands in contrast to these two inadequate forms of worship that are quite pervasive in the contemporary church. Evangelical worship tends to be Christomonistic, as seen in traditional evangelical churches. Its roots are in the 19th C evangelicalism and pietism, especially the late 19th C Holiness movement and early 20th C Pentecostalism. The central focus is on the individual experience of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We see this in the gospel songs of the late 19th Century.

Modern charismatic worship has continuities with evangelical worship. Its emphasis on individual experiences of salvation is a carryover from the evangelical-pietist tradition. But it has an added dimension which gives it a pneumatomonistic focus: the gifts of the Spirit, especially the more supernatural kind. Two chief characteristics of evangelical-charismatic worship are subjectivity and individualism. Christian experience is often reduced to “what God means *to me*.”

Liturgical worship, by contrast, is trinitarian and is characterized by two features:

1. Objectivity: Our adoration of God focuses *first and foremost* on proclaiming objectively *who He is*, namely, the triune God. I stress “first and foremost” because it is not the only kind of praise. There is a place for a more subjective response, as we shall see, but our adoration must first and foremost focus on God not ourselves. We need to know who God is first, before we can talk about what He is to me.
2. Corporateness: It focuses on the whole church’s proclamation of the praise of the triune God.

Gloria in excelsis Deo could be used to exemplify liturgical praise. It is an ideal praise song. As noted in the previous talk, it highlights the relations of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It objectively proclaims who God is. In honoring the Son, who he is, is first proclaimed: “Lord Jesus Christ, only Son of the Father, Lord God, Lamb of

God...” Only then, does the church pray: “Have mercy on us”; “receive our prayers.” The Gloria expresses the praise of God by the whole church. There is no “I” or “me” in the doxology; it is always “we” and “us.”

In light of the nature of praise, we must highlight a problem of “Blended Worship” as it is currently undertaken in many churches today. It usually involves transferring the “charismatic” style *and* content of worship into one segment of the liturgy. But that does not make it a “blended” liturgical service. This is because much of the contemporary worship does not operate on a trinitarian paradigm. It lacks both objectivity and corporateness. The songs arise (mostly unconsciously) from an evangelical-charismatic paradigm and not from the trinitarian paradigm. This is a serious defect in most of the compositions coming out of evangelical-charismatic music publishers.

If convergence is to be actualized and the movement is to mature, convergence churches must take up the challenge to produce song-writers and musicians who understand the liturgical (that is, trinitarian) structure of worship. To borrow from the contemporary evangelical-charismatic world of worship is not going to advance convergence. David cannot fight in Saul’s armor! Good songs are those that are composed *for* the liturgy. The liturgy must determine the form and content of our songs. But what often happens in so-called blended worship is that the liturgy is made to fit into a christomonistic or pneumatomonistic paradigm of worship.

Liturgical worship does not mean that there is no place for the subjective, since there is a place in various parts of the liturgy for both corporate and personal response, such as:

- The Offering
- The response to the Word
- The response to the invitation to the Supper: The Roman missal makes the response personal: “Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed.”
- The after communion prayer and song which give thanks for the benefits received at the Supper.

The Mainline Protestant Liturgy

But there is good liturgy and bad liturgy. Mainline Protestant liturgy is an example of failed liturgy. I believe that there are two main reasons for this failure.

One reason is that many mainline liturgical churches have only a form of the liturgy but no real Trinitarian content. The Trinitarian faith has been diluted and undermined because theology has been replaced by ideology. A form of the liturgy without Trinitarian content is simply bad liturgy.

We see this, for example, in attempts to substitute Father, Son and Holy Spirit with supposedly more inclusive terms, such as Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier. If you look at the new liturgies of the Lutheran, Methodist and Episcopal churches, you will not fail to notice that the “Father” is conspicuously absent. There are serious problems with these substitutions. They imply that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are only descriptions of the roles they play and therefore could be replaced by other functional equivalents. But the term Father is not primarily a function but refers to the person who distinguishes himself from the Son. “Father” is the name of the person who is revealed by and distinguished from the one who identifies himself as the Son. In other words, Father and Son are meant to highlight the fact that the persons of God must be understood first and foremost in their relation to each other and only secondarily in relation to their functions. A person is defined in relation to another person. Father is Father in relation to the Son. God as person can only be explained in relation to God, not in relation to what he does in the world. There are therefore no functional equivalents for the names Father, Son and Holy Spirit since they are “a way of being” of the three persons.¹

You will see what I mean by ideology taking the place of theology if we compare the following two prayers of confession from the United Methodist Church liturgy in 1965 and 1989 respectively:

Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, maker of all things, judge of all men: We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness, which we from time to time most grievously have committed, by thought, word, and deed, against thy divine majesty. We do earnestly repent, and are heartily sorry for these

¹John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church*, ed. Paul McPartlan (London: T. and T. Clark, 2006).

our misdoings; the remembrance of them is grievous to us. Have mercy upon us...² [1965]

Merciful God, we confess that we have not loved you with our whole heart. We have failed to be an obedient church. We have not done your will, we have broken your law, we have rebelled against your love, we have not loved our neighbors, and we have not heard the cry of the needy.³ [1989]

In the 1965 prayer the language of sin and the sense of God's majesty and holiness are quite emphatic, whereas in the 1989 prayer these features are conspicuously muted. The word "sin" does not occur at all; rather, the confession is mainly about failure to obey, hurting a loving God and neglecting "our neighbors" and "the needy." The transcendence and immanence of God in the old prayer ("Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ") is replaced by a picture of God that is decidedly immanent and friendly ("Merciful God").

It is interesting to note that similar sentiments are also found in the contemporary worship of evangelical-charismatic churches. One usually gets the impression that God is intimate and cuddly, always there to meet my needs when I call. There is no sense of the mystery, the awesomeness and the transcendence of God.

If there is to be true convergence in the liturgy, it must be faithful to the Trinitarian revelation (as highlighted in the previous talk).

Failure in liturgical practice

A second reason why convergence has not succeeded is because of a failure in liturgical practice: We should not only have a theologically sound liturgy, we need to ensure that it is *soundly implemented*. A good liturgy could still suffer from bad practice.

What then is good liturgical practice, such that it will bring about the convergence of the evangelical, charismatic and sacramental? I mentioned in the previous talk that we must give full weight to these two facts: that the liturgy is the work of the Spirit *and* the work of the people of God. This is because the Spirit is joined to the church and cannot be separated from the church.

² *Book of Worship for Church and Home* (Nashville, TN: Methodist Publishing House, 1965), p. 17.

³ "Word and Table: Service 1" in the *United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), p. 8.

Synergy

In the Orthodox tradition, this working of the Spirit in the church is expressed by the term synergy.⁴ According to Lossky, synergy “admits of two wills and two operations taking place simultaneously: the priest who consecrates the bread and wine upon the altar invokes the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit effects the eucharistic sacrament; the confessor pronounces the words of absolution, and the transgressions are remitted by the will of God.”⁵ Unlike in the West where grace is seen either as the *cause* of the “meritorious acts” of our free will (Augustine) or the *effect* of free will (Pelagius), in the East, what we do cannot be perceived as some kind of “merit” whether as cause or effect of grace; rather, synergy means that grace and freedom occur “simultaneously.” Synergy “expresses the mystery of the coincidence of grace and human freedom in good works, without recourse to positive and rational terms.”⁶ This refusal to explain rationally the relation of grace and human freedom reflects the “apophatic attitude” characteristic of Orthodoxy.⁷

Synergy must be seen in relation to the distinctively Eastern concept of freedom as part of the *imago Dei*. Freedom is not to be equated with a *superadditum* of grace or an “original righteousness” but is an ontological reality that distinguishes human nature as such. It is, as Nikos Nissiotis puts it, “the essence of the original relationship of love between the Creator and His creature” which “cannot be effaced, because it constitutes the being of man in relation to His Creator.” The *imago Dei* “is the very essence of the creation of man.”⁸ It is what makes a human being human. It is God’s gift from God’s very own nature. Synergy is simply human beings acting freely *as* human beings in *response* to God’s initiative in Christ for their redemption. *Responsibility* is an essential part of human nature before *and* after the Fall. Thus the Western debate between Pelagians and Augustinians over the nature of grace and between Arminians and Calvinists over the extent of human depravity does not come into consideration at all. This Western predilection is also reflected in the question about the nature of the liturgy: whether it is the work of the people or the work of God (*opus*

⁴ For a helpful study of the liturgy as synergy, see Jean Corbon, *Wellspring of Worship*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (New York: Paulist Press, 1988).

⁵ *Mystical Theology*, p. 187.

⁶ *Mystical Theology*, pp. 196-97.

⁷ *Mystical Theology*, p. 239.

⁸ Nikos A. Nissiotis, “The Importance of the Doctrine of the Trinity for Church Life and Theology” in *The Orthodox Ethos*, ed. A. J. Philippou (Oxford: Holywell Press, 1964), p. 49.

Dei). If the liturgy is a synergy, then it is both truly the work of the people and truly the work of God. It is the work of God in and through the work of the people.

In practical terms, synergy means that we need to be fully involved in the “work of the people of God,” realizing that in that very act, the Holy Spirit is equally at work “to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Phil 2:12). The action of the Spirit does not make us *less* active.

Active participation

Thus, the only appropriate stance to take on the part of worshippers is what the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy calls “active participation” (§ 30).⁹ Active participation requires the whole community of the faithful *collectively* but also *each member* to be personally engaged. This is repeatedly stressed in various post-Vatican II documents, such as *Redemptionis Sacramentum* (§36-42) and *Sacramentum Caritatis*. The latter speaks of “the personal conditions required for fruitful participation on the part of individuals” (§55 cf. §63).¹⁰ The document *Redemptionis Sacramentum* states:

...the participation of the lay faithful too in the Eucharist and in the other celebrations of the Church’s rites cannot be equated with mere presence, and still less with a passive one, but is rather to be regarded as a true exercise of faith and of the baptismal dignity (§ 37).

The document calls for flexibility, variety, creativity in the celebration of the liturgy so that participants could readily identify with the liturgy. Also, the needs and context of the participants must be taken into consideration.

...ample flexibility is given for appropriate creativity aimed at allowing each celebration to be adapted to the needs of the participants, to their comprehension, their interior preparation and their gifts, according to the established liturgical norms. In the songs, the melodies, the choice of prayers and readings, the giving

⁹ Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 30.

¹⁰ http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20040423_redemptionis-sacramentum_en.html

<http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20070222_sacramentum-caritatis_en.html#top>

of the homily, the preparation of the prayer of the faithful, the occasional explanatory remarks, and the decoration of the Church building according to the various seasons, there is ample possibility for introducing into each celebration a certain variety by which the riches of the liturgical tradition will also be more clearly evident, and so, in keeping with pastoral requirements, the celebration will be carefully imbued with those particular features that will foster the recollection of the participants. Still, it should be remembered that the power of the liturgical celebrations *does not consist in frequently altering the rites*, but in probing more deeply the word of God and the mystery being celebrated (§ 39).

What we see in the above instruction is that the liturgy is more than a set of words to be recited. It is more like a drama. If the liturgy is to elicit “active participation” it should create a total environment that engages the worshippers in all their physical and spiritual senses. In a church building where there are practically no decorations except a cross, a pulpit and a big Bible, what does the *sursum corda* convey: “Lift up your hearts—we lift them up to the Lord?” In that threadbare environment it is difficult to imagine how we “lift up” even if there is a theology of spiritual ascension to heaven as taught by Calvin. There is a world of difference, however, when the *sursum corda* is recited in a church surrounded by icons of Christ and the saints as we have in an Orthodox church. The doctrine of saints’ ascension to the heaven, into the presence of Christ and the saints, takes on a new meaning.

Perhaps the most important quality to inculcate in the liturgy is a deep sense of awe, as the following makes clear. The church must seek

to instill anew in all of Christ’s faithful that sense of deep wonder before the greatness of the mystery of faith that is the Eucharist, in whose celebration the Church is forever passing from what is obsolete into newness of life: “*in novitatem a vetustate*”. For in the celebration of the Eucharist, as in the whole Christian life which draws its power from it and leads toward it, the Church, after the manner of Saint Thomas the Apostle, prostrates herself in adoration before the Lord who was crucified, suffered and died, was buried and arose, and perpetually exclaims to him who is clothed in the fullness of his divine splendour: “My Lord and my God!” (§ 40).

Active participation is also enhanced by other forms of spiritual exercises outside the liturgical celebration.

For encouraging, promoting and nourishing this interior understanding of liturgical participation, the continuous and widespread celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours, the use of the sacramentals and exercises of Christian popular piety are extremely helpful (§ 41).

In other words, active participation does not happen in isolation. Personal spiritual preparation is necessary for someone to become fully engaged in the public liturgy. In this regard, the evangelical and charismatic devotional practices can be a significant contribution. The evangelical discipline of “Quiet Time” and the charismatic exercise of glossolalia and other forms of intensive prayer could become a vital part of preparation for the liturgy.

The personal responsibility and attitude of the participant is again highlighted in another post-Vatican II document *Sacramentum Caritatis*:

Active participation in the eucharistic liturgy can hardly be expected if one approaches it superficially, without an examination of his or her life. This *inner disposition* can be fostered, for example, by recollection and silence for at least a few moments before the beginning of the liturgy, by fasting and, when necessary, by sacramental confession. A heart reconciled to God makes genuine participation possible. The faithful need to be reminded that there can be no *actuosa participatio* in the sacred mysteries without an accompanying effort to participate actively in the life of the Church as a whole, including a missionary commitment to bring Christ’s love into the life of society (§ 55).

Proper understanding of the liturgy is a critical prerequisite. People can participate fully when they understand what is going on in the liturgy. Liturgical education especially in the Catechumenate is very vital.

Synod of Bishops asked that the faithful be helped to make their interior dispositions correspond to their gestures and words. Otherwise, however carefully planned and executed our liturgies may be, they would risk falling into a certain

ritualism. Hence the need to provide an education in eucharistic faith capable of enabling the faithful to live personally what they celebrate. Given the vital importance of this personal and conscious *participatio*, what methods of formation are needed? The Synod Fathers unanimously indicated, in this regard, a mystagogical approach to catechesis, which would lead the faithful to understand more deeply the mysteries being celebrated. (*Sacramentum Caritatis* § 64).

The weakest link in the chain of active participation is probably in the area of catechetical instruction. In my book *Liturgical Theology*, I have shown how the RCIA tries to link each step of the whole initiation process to the liturgical celebration. The lessons on the Creed, the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer are not just lessons on doctrine, ethics and spirituality, but are all linked to worship. This is one of the most important lessons that we need to learn from Catholicism. Too often our instructions, even sermons, exist as indoctrination classes, divorced from worship. We need to make more conscious effort to link instructions to the life of worship.

The celebrant must play his part in fostering active participation by celebrating the liturgy well.

In particular, given the close relationship between the *ars celebrandi* and an *actuosa participatio*, it must first be said that “the best catechesis on the Eucharist is the Eucharist itself, celebrated well” (*Sacramentum Caritatis*, § 64).

Our common prayers are not mere texts to be recited—which is what often happens in many liturgical churches; rather, they are more like scripts of a drama to be acted out. And they can only be acted out effectively if they are first indwelled by the celebrant. If those leading the liturgical celebration do not do it well, it is no great surprise that the congregation is not greatly enthused!

Personal active participation, however, does not mean that one engages the liturgy with a view to discovering what might be most beneficial for *my* own spiritual formation. Rather, as a member of the Body of Christ who has been incorporated into the Body by baptism, one places oneself in the corporate life of the church *for* the church. Active participation, then, is the actualizing or manifesting of our baptismal

faith.¹¹ One cooperates with others to carry out the “work of the people of God.” The liturgy is not *my* work alone but the work of the whole people of God. When we play our part well in the drama, no matter how small the part may be, we enter into the world of that drama. We become part of the reality that the drama enacts. We are carried along by the words, movements and events. We are, in John Wesley’s phrase “lost in wonder.” This is what it means to “indwell” the liturgy. My own feelings are not the primary consideration, but it does not mean that the liturgy has no effects on me. As Jardine Grisbrooke puts it, the liturgy “cuts grooves in the mind,” such that one begins to engage the liturgy contemplatively and let the liturgy take a firm hold of one’s life.¹² In good liturgical engagement, one is in a state of active passivity. “Active passivity” is another way of saying that one so indwells the script that it begins, as it were, to act itself out through us, taking us along with it. In the end, without looking for it, we are indeed edified, built up as a member of the body of Christ.

Active participation, therefore, is not necessarily to be found in the activism that is often associated with the lively “contemporary” service. There is a close parallel between active participation in the liturgy and the teaching on prayer in the mystical tradition of the church. The life of prayer, as St. Teresa of Avila has taught us, begins with active, vocal prayer and meditation, and progresses to contemplative, more passive forms.¹³ The same could be said about active participation in the liturgy. The “contemporary” service often captures one’s initial attention, but over time one discovers that the constant stirring of emotions may actually prevent one from entering into a deeper level of active participation in the liturgy—the level of active passivity.

Only in sacramental theology and liturgical worship are the evangelical and charismatic dimensions of our faith sustainable in the long term. The evangelical and charismatic devotional exercises, as I have noted earlier, could help tremendously in preparing a person to be deeply engaged in the liturgy. On the other hand, it is all too easy for those who grow up with the liturgy to fall into a mindless routine. The Holy Spirit is no longer experienced as one coming from “beyond history” but as a

¹¹ *Redemptionis Sacramentum* 37.

¹² W. Jardine Grisbrooke, “Towards a Liturgical Spirituality,” *Studia Liturgica* 17 (1987): 77-86.

¹³ E.g., in *The Interior Castle*. See my discussion in *Pentecostal Theology and the Christian Spiritual Tradition* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp. 58-60.

domesticated spirit. This is, perhaps, a reason why the church has composed prayers *to* the Holy Spirit. There are, to be sure, not many such prayers. Perhaps the best known is the *Veni Creator Spiritus* (Come, Holy Spirit). Another is the Orthodox prayer at Matins:

O Heavenly King, Comforter, Spirit of Truth, Who art everywhere present and fillest all things, Treasury of good things and Giver of life: Come and dwell in us, and cleanse us of all impurity, and save, our souls, O Good One.

Here is where Pentecostals can make a distinct contribution by a practical pneumatology that creates an expectation of the Holy Spirit's continuing operation in the church in the here and now, as exemplified in one of their popular choruses:

Come, Holy Spirit, I need thee
Come, sweet Spirit, I pray
Come in thy strength and thy power
Come in thy own special way

One may have reasons to question if the song meets the standards of good liturgy, but it at least reminds us that we need a “perpetual Pentecost” (Nikos Nissiotis). In every liturgical gathering we need the presence of the Holy Spirit to invigorate the church, to transform the institution into what Zizioulas calls a “Pentecostal-charismatic event.” Calling upon the Spirit has the effect of jolting us out of our complacency. The Spirit coming from beyond history drives home the point that there is more to the work of the Spirit in the work of the people than just to ensure that the liturgy is carried out in a prim and proper manner.

Perhaps another reason why we need to pray to the Holy Spirit is that such prayer is a reminder that He is a Person, not an impersonal power or force. This needs to be stressed especially in our day and age against two forms of depersonalizing of the Third Person. One form is found among Third Wavers and the Faith Movement where the Holy Spirit is often reduced to a power that could be harnessed and used if only one discovers the correct technique. The other form is found among those who are so obsessed with politically correct language that they would rather call the Holy Spirit an “it” instead of “he” because “he” is deemed to be exclusionary and insulting to women.

Conclusion

Our discussion on the practice of convergence highlights two key points:

One, the key to practicing convergence lies in knowing what it means to be fully active in the liturgy, either as celebrant or as the people of God. Active participation is predicated on the doctrine of synergy: The Holy Spirit is at work, but we must also be working. If we are truly actively engaged in the liturgy, the Holy Spirit will be free to work his sovereign work among the people of God. The liturgy integrates the sacramental, evangelical and charismatic; it does not replace the evangelical and charismatic with the sacramental. It is often bad practice that reduces the liturgy to a lifeless ritual. But if we learn to participate actively, we will begin to actualize the charismatic activity of the Spirit and the saving grace of Jesus Christ. Unbelievers in our midst will say, “Truly God is among you!” (1 Cor 14:25).

Two, the liturgy provides the structure for ordering our personal devotional life, so that personal spirituality is not practiced in isolation from the liturgical life. For many evangelicals and charismatics, public worship is merely an extension of one’s own private prayers. For them corporate worship means doing together what each person could do on their own. But the practice of the liturgy helps us to re-order our spiritual practices to center on our corporate life. It reshapes one’s consciousness to think in terms of the church community as forming one’s basic identity. When I pray (even in the privacy of my home), I am not praying alone but praying with all the saints and heavenly hosts. To focus on our corporate life in Christ is simply to be the Christian that we are meant to be. We are never meant to exist as individual saints. In fact, there is no such thing as an individual saint. *Unus Christianus—nullus Christianus!* (One Christian is no Christian.) We become saintly to the extent that we realize our place as members of the Body of Christ. In the words of Paul, “we are members of one body” (NIV) or more literally in the King James Version, “we are members of one another” (*esmen allēlōn melē*)—that is what we really are! If the liturgical celebration is improved, it could only enhance and not impoverish the evangelical and charismatic dimensions of our Christian life. Convergence is simply living out our life as a church to the glory of God the Father, through the Son and in the Holy Spirit.

May God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, grant us the grace to do so. Amen.