

MINORITY REPORT

A Word to the Conscience

— Carl Trueman —

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Some years ago I was asked what I thought of those whose teaching undermined the Reformation position on justification by grace through faith. While I have no recollection of this, I am reliably informed that my answer was ‘I despise them; for that doctrine is often the only thing that gives me the strength to get out of bed in the morning.’ If I were asked the same question today, I would not use the term ‘despise’; it is scarcely designed to gain one a hearing with those with whom one disagrees; nor does it set a particularly good example for students who might run off and start using it rather indiscriminately about everyone with whom they disagree, from the local pastor to the chap in the ticket office at the railway station. Rudeness aside, however, the latter half of the statement is as true for me today as it was then. Indeed, if anything it is more so. The older I am, the further I seem to fall short; the more conscious I become of my need of grace.

This increasing awareness has led me to a place where I thought I would never come: I have become more and more enamoured over the years with a modest amount of formal liturgical structure to worship services. Of course, everyone has liturgy, the same as everyone has tradition. The only differences are whether one acknowledges the fact or not, and how formally structured such is. You might go to a service where, to the casual visitor, the whole affair looks like complete anarchy; or you might go to a service where, despite the claims on the noticeboard that the church is Protestant, it is hard to distinguish it in aesthetics and structure from a Roman Catholic service. Different as they might appear to be, both are liturgical, albeit in very different ways.

Now, you can take the man out of British non-Anglican evangelicalism, but you cannot take the British non-Anglican evangelicalism out of the man. Thus, my emigration has not dented my deep-seated suspicion of elaborate prayer books and sophisticated, prescriptive forms. I accept that many of the arguments against formal liturgy which I used to hold—concerning spontaneity, freedom of the Spirit etc.—are by and large most specious; but the deep-seated cultural aversion is still there. Nevertheless, there is one aspect of liturgy which has come over the years to mean much to me: the confession of sin and the assurance of salvation.

At some point prior to the sermon each Sunday in my church, the minister or elder leading the service will read a passage of Scripture designed to expose the moral failure of fallen humanity before God. Then he will lead the congregation in a corporate prayer of confession. Finally, when he closes the prayer, he will read a short passage (often just a verse or two) which speaks of the forgiveness of sins in Christ. The dramatic theological movement of the service at that point is profound: the congregation

goes from being reminded and convicted of their sin, to calling out to God for forgiveness, to being reminded that in Christ God has acted in a startling and decisive way to cast our sin as far away as the east is from the west. We are reminded of the entire gospel, from fall to redemption to consummation, in the space of just a few minutes.

This moment in the church service has come to mean much to me. This is the point where, after a week of failure—of not living up to the standards I set myself, let alone those set for me by my Creator—I am reminded once again that all is well: Christ has dealt with my sin; my failings were placed on his shoulders on the cross; and my heavenly Father has annihilated them there. It is not, of course, that I do not know this Monday to Saturday; it is not that I do not read the gospel every day in my Bible; it is not that I do not confess my sins during the week and look then to Christ. But this is a word from outside, God's work spoken to me by another human being, which lifts my head once again and assures my conscience that I am clean despite the filth I so often choose to wade in. So often I enter church weighted down with care; when I am once again reminded of God's rich forgiveness in Christ, the weight is wonderfully lifted from my shoulders.

So often Christians can tend to think of the church worship service as something *we* do: *we* sing praise to God; *we* respond to the gospel; and *we* rejoice in our Saviour. Further, much discussion in the church focuses on what *we need to be doing* in order for church to be effective. Yet church is, first and foremost, something which God does. It is primarily and in origin an act of his grace, not an act of human response. He calls us out to be his people; he gathers us through his Spirit; he speaks to us through the reading and the preaching of his word. There is far more passivity in worship than we care to imagine, a passivity that is often belied by our concerns to make sure 'everybody is involved.' When the law is read, sins are confessed, and forgiveness declared, we are all involved because we are all included under the words of condemnation and the words of promise and mercy.

Of course, this is not an appeal for some form of mystical quietism. *We* do need to *do* things for and in the service, from the most trivial (someone, for example, needs to make sure the church door is unlocked) to the most serious (singing songs of praise in response to the declaration of the gospel). But, to put a new—and, I think, biblical—twist on the current consumer mentality, I think we need to go to church to expect it to do things for us. Not to provide us with a good social network or a context where the kids can have wholesome friends and stay out of trouble or where I can find the best coffee after a sixty minute worship session; but rather to provide us with the oxygen of our spiritual lives—those words of rebuke that cut down our pride and self-sufficiency, those words of brokenness that allow us to call out to God for his mercy, and that word that comes from outside that assures us that all of our sins have been dealt with in Christ and that we are thus liberated to give ourselves in lives of service to our brethren and to our neighbours because our own debt has been paid.

That word which should be spoken in every church service is still what gives me the energy to get out of bed in the morning. Praise God for the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ.