

How Much Liturgy Should a Messianic Group Use
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By Rev. Roy Schwarcz
Midwest Regional Director
Chosen People Ministries

The modern Messianic movement has had to deal with many things in coming to grips with its identity. We all know that if two of our kinsmen are involved in a discussion there will invariably be three or more opinions.

Some of the struggles that I wrestled with in the early seventies as a Jewish Believer dealt with three primary areas. The charismatic movement, the rabbinical emphasis, and the alienation of gentile Christians. These issues were divisive and confusing.

Since then time has eased some of the stridency that polarized differing views. We all are growing and maturing and realize that as we lift up our Messiah men are drawn to Him. When our eyes are firmly fixed on Him we all are better able to accomplish the work that He has set before us.

I am glad for the opportunity to address the issue of liturgy in the Messianic Congregation. I have been a full time worker in the ministry since 1976 working with Chosen People Ministries. In the ensuing years I have had the opportunity to have a part in the founding of three Messianic Congregations. Two of these, The Olive Tree and The Vineyard Congregations in the Chicago area are now independent. The Olive Tree of Toronto is on the road to independence. Presently I am involved with Galen Banashak in starting "Light of Israel Fellowship" in association with Moody Memorial Church in downtown Chicago. I have also had a major role in the formation of the Fellowship of Messianic Congregations. These associations have given me some experience with regard to the role of liturgy in the Messianic Congregation.

Liturgy has been defined as the official, public worship of a religious body, conducted according to a standard form of order. In considering the Scriptures there seems to be four essential elements to proper worship of God. Sacrifice, Prayer, Praise, and Instruction.

The first example we see in Scripture of worship is found in Genesis chapter four:

"In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD." "But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast." Genesis 4:3-5

According to our definition of liturgy it appears that the Liturgy of Abel was acceptable but Cain's was not. As time unfolded God revealed to his "called out ones" the proper or acceptable form of worship.

"Take with you seven of every kind of clean animal, a male and its mate, and two of every kind of unclean animal, a male and its mate," -- Genesis 7:2
"Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it." "The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: "Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done." -- Genesis 8:20-21

As we consider the preponderance of Scriptures related to worship in the Tenach we see that the essential element present in all acceptable worship to God is sacrifice. From the beginning to the end of Jewish Biblical history, sacrifice was understood to be a necessary prerequisite for acceptable prayer, praise, and worship.

Today in the Jewish community from Reformed to Orthodox this clearly Biblical approach is minimized, trivialized or mocked. As Messianic Jews we understand that this is directly related to the destruction of the Temple. Contemporary Jewish worship and liturgy can be traced to the Babylonian captivity when our fathers were sent to captivity for their idolatrous ways. Without a Temple and without sacrifice an alternative system was necessary to worship God.

The prophets of the first Temple period often spoke out against sacrificial ritual:

"I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies." "Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them." "Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps." "But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!" "Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings forty years in the desert, O house of Israel?" "You have lifted up the shrine of your king, the pedestal of your idols, the star of your god -- which you made for yourselves." "Therefore I will send you into exile beyond Damascus," says the LORD, whose name is God Almighty." Amos 5:21-27

"For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings." Hosea 6:6

With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. Micah 6:6-8

"The multitude of your sacrifices-- what are they to me?" says the LORD. "I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before me, who has

asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations-- I cannot bear your evil assemblies. Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow. Isaiah 1:11-17

"What do I care about incense from Sheba or sweet calamus from a distant land? Your burnt offerings are not acceptable; your sacrifices do not please me.""
Jeremiah 6:20

"This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Go ahead, add your burnt offerings to your other sacrifices and eat the meat yourselves! For when I brought your forefathers out of Egypt and spoke to them, I did not just give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices, Jeremiah 7:21-22

In these passages we learn of God's desire of His people to demonstrate righteous and just behavior along with obedience instead of the liturgy of sacrifice. It was therefore assumed by most Jewish scholarship and talmudic teaching that the prophets, and through them God, condemned sacrifice. This thought is absurd in the light of Isaiah 1:15 which also condemns prayer.

"When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood;"

No one holds that the prophets rejected prayer. No, what was rejected was prayer without morality. So too sacrificial worship without a proper attitude was unacceptable to God.

When we consider a Jewish liturgy that is Messianic we need to include a clear concept of sacrifice. Biblical worship includes additional elements as well.

The Rabbinic movement began in the Babylonian captivity with the establishment of houses of prayer or Synagogues. They were places where godly men could gather to learn the Scriptures and the ways of the Lord. The teachers or Rabbis gained the heart of the people ministering in a pastoral way. When the captivity ended and the Temple was rebuilt those that returned to the land continued to be fed spiritually through the Synagogue and the Rabbis. The Temple and the sacrifices captured the mind and the obedience of the people but their daily spiritual feeding came from the Rabbis and the Synagogue.

The Rabbinical schools flourished while the ministry of the Temple suffered or prospered based on the political climate of the day. The priests, following the Maccabean revolt slowly left their pious, Hassidic mentality and compromised with worldly powers to solidify their political position. When Herod came to power in 47 BC the Temple and the Sadducees were looked upon by the people as part of a corrupt political system. The Rabbis, while careful not to subvert the law of the sacrifices, taught that the priests were heretical in their theology. The Sadducees were composed largely of the wealthier elements of the population; priests, merchants, and aristocrats. Their theology was worldly and dismissed the supernatural. They denied the resurrection, angels, and the immortality of the soul. Matthew 22:23 - Acts 23:8.

By the time of Jesus the Synagogues were widespread and characteristic of Jewish community life. It is reported that just before the destruction of the second Temple in 70 A.D. by Titus, that there were some four hundred synagogues in Jerusalem itself.

This is remarkable considering that this was in the very city of the Temple. The Synagogue service, by definition excluded the sacrifices. They sought to impart knowledge of Jewish religious life by the secondary elements of the Temple service. The services included reading and singing of the Psalms and other portions of the Scriptures. It also included oral instruction which approximated what we now call a sermon. Late in the first century after the Messiah, the Rabbi Gamaliel II set forth the order of worship that has been the basis of synagogue practice to this day. Psalms, the Shema, the Shemoneh Esreh and the regular reading from the Torah and frequent readings from the Haftorah. The three essential elements of Jewish Liturgy became Praise, Prayer and Instruction.

It is crucial for us to keep in mind that there is a direct correlation to the success of the Synagogue movement to the ability of the people to understand and partake of the liturgy. The roots of this can be seen in the revival of the spiritual life of our people under the leadership of Ezra:

"all the people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel. So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law. Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiiah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Mishaël, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam. Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was

standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. The Levites--Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah--instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read. Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is sacred to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law. Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength." The Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for this is a sacred day. Do not grieve." Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them. Nehemiah 8:1-12

The key to this revival were the elements of praise, prayer, and a clear understanding of what was being said and taught. Liturgy without these elements lead to the very things that the prophets warned against. Religion that is not coupled with understanding.

Be stunned and amazed, blind yourselves and be sightless; be drunk, but not from wine, stagger, but not from beer. The LORD has brought over you a deep sleep: He has sealed your eyes (the prophets); he has covered your heads (the seers). For you this whole vision is nothing but words sealed in a scroll. And if you give the scroll to someone who can read, and say to him, "Read this, please," he will answer, "I can't; it is sealed." Or if you give the scroll to someone who cannot read, and say, "Read this, please," he will answer, "I don't know how to read." The Lord says: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men. Therefore once more I will astound

these people with wonder upon wonder; the wisdom of the wise will perish, the intelligence of the intelligent will vanish." Isaiah 29:9-14

Isaiah is addressing those who were involved in liturgy but did not understand what was being said or spiritually unaware of the meaning of their actions.

When Jesus came he confounded both the Sadducees and the Pharisees, with regard to their liturgical formulas. This is best seen in His dialogue with the Samaritan women in John 4:

Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth." -- John 4:20-24

Liturgy that is understood is fundamental to worship in spirit and truth. Sacrifice, Praise, Prayer, and teaching of the Scriptures. All of these elements must be presented in a way that is clearly understood by all who attend our congregations. This leads us to consider those who attend our congregations.

It has been my observation that the Jewish group most responsive to the Gospel are mixed married couples. They need to have a liturgy that ministers to Jew and Gentile. A liturgy that draws them near to the meaning of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. A liturgy that fosters praise, prayer and understanding of God's Word. These are families who have a keen desire to see their children raised as Jewish-Christians.

This type of participation means that our liturgy must have Biblically Jewish elements that have meaning and application to their personal lives and the day to day world they live in.

Our liturgy must include elements that are familiar and comfortable for our Jewish people. Whatever elements of the traditional Jewish liturgy we choose, they should be understood by Jew and Gentile. We need to be careful not to make our worship so traditional that we turn away Jewish people. Many of us became alienated from the Jewish community by a liturgy that led us to a reverence of tradition rather than to genuine worship of the God of Israel.

My greatest concern with regard to an orthodox rabbinical type of liturgy in the Messianic movement is that it can create the same problems that many of us encountered in our Synagogues growing up. A religious system not connected to the real world in which we live. We are called to be in the world but not of the world. We are called to be a new people made up of Jew and Gentile. Transmitters of The Light that can draw men to the Savior of the world. If our worship lacks clarity the message we are called to share will lack clarity as well.

In conclusion our worship should contain the elements of Sacrifice, Prayer, Praise, and Instruction. We have the liberty in our Messiah to include those aspects in a way we are comfortable with. It is my prayer that our approach might always include expressions that are drawing men and women, boys and girls, Jews and Gentiles to our loving Messiah. It is through His Spirit that our liturgy is pleasing to our God and King.