

With this essay the Institute continues a series of posts it initiated in the fall of 2016, with contributions from members of the Company of Teachers designed to relate the Reformed tradition to current events. Feel free to reproduce these pieces and cite them as you see fit.

Ugly Delicious

John Lee

Ugly Delicious is an eight-episode food show produced by chef David Chang for Netflix. If you, like me, enjoy watching food shows as much as eating food, this series is worth your time and attention. The basic premise for the show is that the sort of food that many of us (especially from immigrant background) find delicious is sometimes unappealing to the eyes and other senses. It's the sort of food that won't appear on a fine dining menu. The look of the food, its texture, or the aroma of the food can be off-putting to the uninitiated (think, kimchi, as an example). In a word, the food that many immigrant folks enjoy can be: weird.

Of course this short essay for the Company Line is not about food. Food – the ugly delicious variety—is my metaphor for the immigrant communities of faith in our nation. Political correctness would prevent most of us from associating – at least publicly – any notion of “ugly” with *any* community of faith. But I want to risk being politically incorrect to say something that many of us think privately to ourselves or share with only close friends or family. What might we think or what might we let slip in our conversation with friends? How about: “Have you been to their church? Their worship service is two hours long!” “When it came to prayer, *all of them* prayed really loud – *all at the same time!*” “I think I heard someone pray in tongues at that church.” And so forth.

Now some forms of “ugliness” can be ugly in a morally serious way, such as when words or actions of immigrant church members betray an unloving or anti-Christian attitude. In such cases, there is no excuse for this type of ugliness. Immigrant churches do not, somehow, enjoy a special dispensation from almighty God to behave badly. Sin is transcultural. Repentance is universal. Forgiveness, thank God, is available to all.

The type of “ugliness” I have in mind, rather, is of the *culturally different kind*. The way the sermon is preached, the way people pray, the way people move (e.g., kneeling, raising hands). All the ways the church gathered to worship God are *different from what we are used to*. Because prayer, music, sermon, etc. are so important to how we engage God in worship, we are prone to connect radical differences in prayer, music, and sermon, etc. with a mental category, call that category “alien” or “strange” or “ugly.” This is our reactive, liturgical baseline, for many of us.

How might we overcome this reactive hurdle? Just like trying a new, immigrant food for yourself, give it a try! Walk into that Korean restaurant and order that soondju-jjigae (mild, I suggest), order that something that looks interesting on the other table. You might hate it. But you might enjoy it. The point is to give it a go and see whether you might surprise yourself. Just as our palate expands only by trying different foods, our palate for experiencing God expands through different ways. Here, the expansion of our experience of God is not limited to immigrant churches. Try out a silent retreat, try out an Ignatian spiritual exercise, go visit and pray at a Korean prayer mountain, try fasting and praying for a day, try contemporary worship. Go on an overseas mission trip. Make friends with a Pentecostal. Taste and see.