

Luther and the Liturgy

[Western Wisconsin District Pastor-Teacher Conference :
Northwestern College : Watertown, WI : June 6, 1983]

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I preface my essay on Luther and the liturgy with a disclaimer: I am not an authority on the liturgy. Over the years I have not made a serious study of the liturgy. It is a layman, not one of the cognoscenti, not a liturgiologist, who is presenting this paper. But perhaps, as a modest scientific reviewer once said in introducing his criticism of a work dealing with modern physics: "While the non-expert in the field must take both the mathematics or the experimental results on authority, he may perhaps be allowed an opinion on the logic of the subject."¹ I shall be satisfied to be allowed some opinions on the logic, the rationale, of the subject of Luther and the liturgy.

While I am a non-expert, this does not place me into the same class with Martin Luther, who was not a liturgy scholar. His liturgical influence is all the more remarkable, since he was not an authority on the subject and was not primarily interested in the forms of worship, nor was he anxious to reconstruct the liturgy. In his introduction to Volume 53 of the American Edition of *Luther's Works*, Ulrich S. Leupold writes:

Luther's liturgical writings occupy an uncertain and controversial place in his literary work. Compared with the bulk of his exegetical, homiletical, and polemical output, they form an insignificant fraction. All of them are very short. The longest, the *German Mass*, contains forty-seven pages in the original. Most of the others run to no more than a couple of pages. And yet few of his writings became as influential and were reprinted as often as the liturgical orders published under his name. They passed into the church orders of the Reformation and became normative for Lutheran on worship (with several changes) up to the present time.²

My subject is Luther and the liturgy. Liturgy is formal, ordered worship; it is the body of rites prescribed for public worship.

Scripture gives us the dimensions of our liturgy, as cited by Friedrich Lochner in his *Hauptgottesdienst*.

In all places where I record my name I will come unto thee, and I will bless thee.
Ex. 20:24.

Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all ye lands. Serve the Lord with gladness:
come before his presence with singing. Enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and
into his courts with praise: be thankful unto him and bless his name. Ps. 100:1.2.4.

For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst
of them. Mt. 18:20.

I beseech you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. Rom. 12:1.

By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name. But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased. Heb. 13:15.16.

Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come. 1 Cor. 16:2.

In his *Hauptgottesdienst* Lochner sums up these Scripture directives for the liturgy, the public divine service (*Gottesdienst*) of the congregation:

It is the public manifestation (activity) of divine love that offers and blesses, and of human love that receives and responds. God serves man when he offers Himself again and again to man with His salvation and comes to him in blessing with Word and Sacrament; and man serves God when he does homage to Him by accepting, in faith, the salvation offered in Word and Sacrament, and responds to divine love in prayer, thanksgiving, and praise as he offers himself and employs the gifts of body and soul bestowed on him, to the glory of God and the welfare of his neighbor.³

God's mercy and blessing descend to His people in Word and Sacrament (*beneficium*); their prayer, praise, and thanksgiving ascend to Him (*sacrificium*). Luther puts the matter thus "with naive directness": "These are the two priestly offices, viz., to hear God speak and to speak to God who hears us. Through the benediction, through the sermon and the distribution of the Holy Sacrament, God comes down to us and talks with me; there I listen to him and again I go up to him and speak in the ears of God who hears my prayer."⁴

In his Torgau sermon (1544) Luther declared the nature and aim of worship to be: "That we assemble together at one time and place, that we hear God's Word and lay before God our own needs and those of other groups, and that we lift to heaven strong, earnest prayer, and together celebrate and praise God's blessing with thanksgiving."

The only liturgy Luther knew in his pre-Reformation years was, of course, the Roman liturgy, the Roman Mass. Countless times he had participated in it as a worshiper or celebrated it as a priest. The stages were so familiar: the Initium Missae Solemnis as the priest and his ministrant approach the foot of the altar; the Confiteor consecrating the priest and his ministrant for celebrating the Mass as they confess their sins to each other and absolve each other; the Introitus; the Kyrie; the Gloria in Excelsis; the Collect(s); the Epistle; the Gradual; the Gospel; the Nicene Creed; the Offertory prayer offering up the Host to God; the Secreta (the secret prayers); the Preface (Dominus Vobiscum to the Sanctus); the Canon of the Mass, with its prayer for the church and for specific individuals, its commemoration of the departed saints (apostles and martyrs), prayers for a gracious acceptance and consecration of the Offering about to be made, recital of the Words of Institution, the Oblation Offering, prayers for the dead who are to be benefited by the offering of the Mass; then the Preparation for Communion (Paternoster to Pax Domini); the Fraction (the ceremonial breaking of the host into three parts to symbolize the

suffering and death of Christ); the commixture (the placing of a small portion of the Host in the chalice to symbolize the reunion of our Lord's body and spirit at the Resurrection); the Prayers Before Communion (Agnus Dei and several collects); the Distribution; the Communion Prayer; the Post-communion Collect and the *Ite, Missa Est*; the Concluding Prayer; the Benediction; the Last Gospel (John 1:1-14). Elaborate ceremonial—genuflections, osculations, the use of lights, incense, etc.—accompanies the reading of the text by the priest.

Luther loved the Mass. James Manz writes in *The Lutheran Witness*:

The Mass, said Cardinal Newman, “is a great action, the greatest action that can be on earth.” The chaste and haunting melodies of the Gregorian chant, the gorgeous ceremonial and vestments, the lights and incense, the beauty of the altar itself—this is the setting of what has been called “the great prayer” of mankind and “the miracle of the Mass.” Luther loved its solemnity and beauty. He retained as much of the Mass as Scripture would allow.⁵

Schwiebert echoes the same appreciation: “Luther, like others, was impressed by its sheer artistry, for he had an esthetic soul, and he hesitated to discard all this beauty when he transformed the Roman Mass into the Lutheran Communion.”⁶

Luther hesitated, but he had no choice if he did not want to compromise the truth of the Gospel he had discovered and to jeopardize the central doctrine of justification by faith. In his pamphlet *Concerning the Order of Public Worship*, 1523, Luther identified three compelling reasons for reforming the Roman Mass:

Three serious abuses have crept into the service. First, God's Word has been silenced, and only reading and singing remain in the churches. This is the worst abuse. Second, when God's Word had been silenced such a host of un-Christian fables and lies, in legends, hymns, and sermons were introduced that it is horrible to see. Third, such divine service was performed as a work whereby God's grace and salvation might be won. As a result, faith disappeared ...⁷

Legends of the saints enjoyed equal rank with the Bible in the calendar of pericopes, and even the reading of Scripture had become a work of merit.

Another important reason for reforming the Roman Mass was its hierarchical character. The Mass was priestly rather than congregational. In the Mass the congregation was passive; the priest acted for the people. The doctrine of the universal priesthood was neglected in Rome's liturgical life and activities.

Added impetus for reform resulted from the growing liturgical confusion among Protestants. Prior Kantz of Nordlingen in southern Germany prepared a revision of the Mass. Karlstad attempted radical changes in Wittenberg. New orders of worship appeared in Basel. Many priests omitted objectionable parts of the Canon and substituted evangelical prayers. “Confusion and uncertainty reigned everywhere. Demands upon Luther to outline a program became insistent.”⁸

In December 1523 Luther responded with his *Formula Missae et Communionis*. In this liturgical writing Luther carried out his fundamental principle and intent, as expressed in the following section of the *Formula Missae*: “We ... assert: It is not now nor has ever been our intention to abolish the liturgical service of God [*cultus dei*] completely, but rather to purify the

one that is now in use from the wretched accretions which corrupt it and to point out an evangelical use.”⁹

Luther Reed provides a good summary of the *Formula Missae*.

In this pamphlet, after stating his purpose to “purify that which is in use,” Luther sketches the historical development of the Mass and mentions the portions which are good and cannot be censured. Then he turns to the objectionable part and denounces the Canon, “that mangled and abominable thing,” the “sacerdotal monopoly” of the Mass, and states, “We will prove all things and hold fast that which is good.”

In discussing the order of the Service, he approves the Introits for the Lord’s Day, and the festivals of Easter, Pentecost, and Christmas. He does not object to other festivals based upon Scripture but proposes that festivals of saints not so mentioned be abolished. He approves the Kyrie; the Gloria in Excelsis; the Collect (“provided it be godly, as those appointed for Sundays usually are”); the Epistle; the Gradual (though suggesting that those which exceed two verses might well “be sung at home”); the Gospel (with the usual ceremonies); the Nicene Creed; the sermon (at this point, or, if preferred, before the Introit); the Preface; Words of Institution (recited aloud); the Sanctus and Hosanna; the Elevation (“on account of the weak”); the Lord’s Prayer; the Pax and its response; administration; Agnus Dei, or communion hymn sung by the choir; Collect, the Benedicamus, and the Aaronic benediction.

Then follow sixteen paragraphs on such matters as Christian liberty, vestments (permitted if pomp and luxury be absent), participation of the people, examination for communion, communion in both kinds, vernacular hymns, and Matins and Vespers.¹⁰

With one stroke Luther cut away the priestly propitiation that had transformed the Sacrament into the Roman Mass, perverted a gift of God into an act of man, a gift of grace into a work of merit. Gone was the Canon of the Mass with its “divine,” “truly propitiatory” sacrifice accomplished by the priest as he “immolated in an unbloody manner the same Christ who once offered Himself in a bloody manner on the altar of the cross,” not only for the living on earth but also for the dead in purgatory. Gone was the “*suscipe hanc oblationem*,” gone was the “*confiteor*” of the priest preparing himself to be worthy of offering Christ to God as a sacrifice for sin. What remained was only the gift of the Lamb of God who once and for all atoned for human sin on Calvary’s cross.

What he wrote in the *Smalcald Articles* in 1536 he had committed himself to thirteen years before when in his *Formula Missae* he cleansed the Mass of its work sacrifice:

The Mass in the papacy must be regarded as the greatest and most horrible abomination because it directly and powerfully conflicts with this chief article [justification by faith], and yet above and before all other popish idolatries it has been the chief and most specious. For it has been held that this sacrifice or work of the Mass, even though it be rendered by a wicked scoundrel, frees men from sins, both in this life and in purgatory, while only the Lamb of God shall and must do this ...¹¹

In his *Formula Missae* Luther had essentially introduced the later Communion service. He was not satisfied, however, with the *Formula Missae*, since it still excluded the people from the service. Luther's ideal was realized three years later when the Roman Mass was rendered into German, with the Gregorian music changed in measure and accent to fit the German words. (The only German parts in the *Formula Missae* had been the sermon and a few hymns.) The *Deutsche Messe* was published in 1526.

Schwiebert writes, "The *Deutsche Messe* was regarded by Luther as a kind of colorful Sunday dress for those not yet strong enough in the faith. In time he hoped to dispense with the outward glitter and display of vestments, incense, candles, etc., and to provide more mature congregations with simple preaching, prayers, and hymn singing."¹²

In form the *Deutsche Messe* was very similar to the *Formula Missae*. The service began with a selection from one of the Psalms, followed by the Kyrie Eleison, Collect, and Epistle—all chanted. The congregation and the choir then sang some hymn suitable to the period of the church year. After the Gospel, which was also chanted, the congregation sang the confession in German. Then came the sermon, the high point in the service. The Communion service, which followed the sermon, was begun with a sermonet on [paraphrase of] the Lord's Prayer and the words of institution, reminding the communicants of the seriousness of the Holy Supper. The host and the wine were still elevated. Men partook of Communion first. While part of the congregation was receiving Communion, the remainder sang an appropriate Communion hymn. At the close of the Communion a hymn written by Luther for this service, "The German Sanctus" [Isaiah, Mighty Seer] was sung, followed by the customary collects, and, later, the customary blessing.

The outstanding features of the *Deutsche Messe* were the use of German throughout and its emphasis on congregational hymns. Every part of the service was in the vernacular except the Kyrie. The Introit, Gradual, Creed, and Sanctus were translated into German verse and sung as congregational hymns. The Preface was omitted, and the Lord's Prayer was placed before the Verba and expanded into a paraphrase. "The Lutheran church as a whole approved certain features of Luther's German Mass, particularly the principle of a vernacular service, the historic outline of worship, congregational hymns, and active congregational participation in the service."¹³ With occasional exceptions, however, the church finally rejected many other features. But in the *Deutsche Messe* Luther had taken another large step to disassociate the Lutheran liturgy from the Roman Mass, and had confirmed the reestablishment of the Gospel and its chief article, justification by faith.

In his summary of the *Deutsche Messe* Schwiebert stated that the sermon was the high point in the service. Even if he may have been referring to the pre-Communion service, he was reflecting Luther's concern for the preaching of the Word. In his pamphlet *Concerning the Order of Public Worship*, 1523, Luther declared, "A Christian congregation should never gather together without the preaching of God's Word and prayer, no matter how briefly."¹⁴ In that same pamphlet he underscored this principle:

This is the sum of the matter: Let everything be done so that the Word may have free course than the prattling and rattling that has been the rule up to now. We can spare everything except the Word. Again we profit by nothing as much as by the Word. For the whole Scripture shows that the Word should have free course among Christians. And in Luke 10, Christ himself says, "One thing is needful,"

i.e., that Mary sit at the feet of Jesus and hear his word daily. This is the best part to choose and it shall not be taken away forever. It is an eternal Word. Everything else must pass away, no matter how much care and trouble it may give Martha. God help us achieve this. Amen.¹⁵

To Luther, as Vilmos Vajta points out, supplying this Word meant more than reading lessons from the Bible. “To him ‘using Scripture’ was not tantamount to ‘reading Scripture.’ But it implied the preaching of the Word by which the redemption facts of the Bible could be applied to the congregation.”¹⁶ “Long chapters were faithfully read from the lectern [in the Roman Mass]; but without aid from the pulpit, people failed to find the Word in the words.”¹⁷

Scripture taught Luther the vital importance of the oral proclamation of the Word. (“The pulpit stands between the lectern and the pew.”¹⁸) “Preach the gospel to every creature” (Mk. 16:15). “It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe” (1 Cor. 1:21). “Preach the word” (2 Tim. 4:2). *khruçate to euaggelion* is the directive of Scripture to our future pastors at the Seminary. It is prominently inscribed above the chancel of the Seminary chapel.

Melanchthon, in his *Apology*, says of preaching, “For of all acts of worship that is the greatest, most holy, most necessary, and highest, which God has required as the highest in the First and the Second Commandment, namely, to preach the Word of God. Now if this worship is omitted, how can there be knowledge of God, the doctrine of Christ, or the Gospel?”¹⁹ “There is nothing that so attaches people to the church as good preaching.”²⁰

The sermon should never be diminished, either in dimension or in prominence. A prolonged or even a “rich” liturgy can endanger the priority of the sermon. “Fussy ceremonialism,” says Reed, “though grounded in love of the Liturgy and appreciations of dignity, reverence, and beauty, externalizes worship and, by excessive emphasis upon visible detail, absorbs strength which should be devoted to larger affairs.”²¹ J. Pelikan considers Luther’s greatest single contribution to liturgy and worship to be “his recovery of the role of the sermon in the service.”²² If the sermon is perceived as an add-on, or an interruption in the service, an injustice has been done to the sermon. Luther made it a high point in the service; so should we.

The restoration of the Word in Luther’s reformation of the Roman Mass is also evident in his revision of the Rite of the Sacrament. To solve the problem of the offensive sacrificial language in the Roman Canon of the time, he discarded the entire prayer and left only the bare words of Scripture, even to the point of connecting the Words of Institution to the Preface, with the Sanctus following. Such “terseness” accorded with his statement in his *Deutsche Messe*:

It seems to me that it would accord with [the institution of] the Lord’s Supper to administer the sacrament immediately after the consecration of the bread, before the cup is blessed ... Meanwhile, the German Sanctus or the hymn, “Let God Be Blest,” or the hymn of John Huss, “Jesus Christ, Our God and Savior,” could be sung. Then shall the cup be blessed and administered, while the remainder of these hymns are sung, or the German Agnus Dei.²³

In his *Sermon von dem Neuen Testament* (1520) he had already contrasted the words of institution with the prayers of the Mass:

We must detach the mass completely and entirely from the prayers and the gestures, which were added to them by the holy fathers, and separate them as far as heaven is from the earth, so that this mass really remains nothing other than the testament and sacrament comprehended in the words of Christ. We must esteem any additional words over against the words of Christ as we esteem monstrance and corporal over against the host and the sacrament itself, which we regard merely as supplement for the convenient and proper administration of the sacrament.²⁴

“Luther based the real presence on the Word. It is the promise of Christ by which He offers His gifts under bread and wine, for the Word alone has the power of granting heavenly gifts in earthly forms. In this connection Luther referred to Augustine’s ‘*Accedit verbum ad elementum et fit sacramentum*.’ There can be no sacrament apart from the Word.”²⁵

Contrasting the *Deutsche Messe* with the Roman Mass, Peter Brunner observes: “The words of institution, in close association with the Distribution, are now projected above the entire act in a solitary magnitude. Their divine might and majesty no longer tolerate any human words of prayer in their immediate proximity.”²⁶ In the Rite of the Sacrament the Word mattered.

A few comments on a “rich” liturgy may be in place. Our church body has traditionally been apprehensive about “high church” tendencies in liturgy. In the 1930s this matter was a common subject for essays and comments. The St. James Society was often faulted for promoting the high church movement in the Synodical Conference. In the minds of most WELS people such a development would bring our synod closer to the Anglican and Roman practice where liturgical performance, not preaching and doctrine, is the soul of Christian worship. The high church movement can’t be comfortable with the principle enunciated by the author of “A Conservative Order of Service and the Liturgical Movement of Our Day”: “The properly constituted Christian order of service is one in which the acts of God for our salvation far overshadow the activities of men in prayer and thanksgiving.”²⁷

Even Luther Reed warns: “If the strongest impression that remains after a service is one of liturgical technique, that service has been a failure. Exaggerated concern for precise and perfect observance of traditional detail cannot satisfy the spiritual hunger of souls seeking God.”²⁸

Where liturgy is emphasized, much is made of “historic values,” “our great inheritance,” our “rich heritage.” Twentieth-century liturgiologists seek to restore, to incarnate the glories of the past. Are they, to a certain extent, endeavoring to resurrect cathedrals? Ulrich Leupold’s sober comments deserve attention:

Historical research is the basis of their proposals and their watchword, restoration. But this whole idea of restoring the sunken glory of ancient ritual is a product of nineteenth-century Romanticism and was as foreign to Luther as to the Romanist theologians of his day. He and the defenders of the Roman mass knew no other liturgical forms from which to start than the ones in actual practice in the sixteenth century. Neither party thought seriously of going back to the orders of early medieval, patristic, or apostolic times. All of Luther’s reforms were simply revisions of the service then in use. He never engaged in liturgical research or reconstruction. That is one of the reasons modern scholars are apt to view with scorn his liturgical competence.²⁹

Luther was a traditionalist in his reform of the liturgy. Gervasius Fischer, in his study, "What Benefits may be Derived from more Emphasis on the Study of Liturgies," quotes Professor J. P. Koehler with approval: "You cannot simply take over such forms of worship from ancient times, when the general conditions, the external forms of worship of the Church, and its means of expression were not the same as ours."³⁰ These strictures are not intended to say that what has been dropped can never be restored. Valuable features of the liturgy have been dropped for the wrong reasons. The point they do make is that we must proceed with caution when we copy the past. We need to keep them in mind as the liturgical movement of our day seeks to revive worship practices of the Early Church.

Is the revival of chanting an illustration of this romantic restoration movement? Lutheran deaconess institutions in Germany and Scandinavia revived the chanting of psalms. Luther Reed approves, of course, but with this reservation: "Whenever it is possible to chant the psalms beautifully and impressively, this should be done. Good reading, however, is to be preferred to poor chanting, and by reason of its corporate and responsive character it, too, may be very impressive."³¹ The day may be past when chanting can be reinstated without giving the impression that the WELS is becoming more high church.

Back to the place of the sermon in the Christian service. To the typical worshiper in the pew the liturgy tends to be repetitious. His participation in it is all too often automatic and mechanical. In most of our congregations little effort is expended to acquaint the worshipers with a variety of liturgical forms and responses. How many sing the Venite, the Te Deum, the Magnificat well? But even if congregations have been trained to participate easily and comfortably in a number of different orders of service, this variety cannot compare with that provided by the sermon from Sunday to Sunday. Psychologically, the sermon has the advantage.

A fundamental consideration in any evaluation of the liturgy must be Luther's concern for the people. Repeatedly, in his *Formula Missae* and his *Deutsche Messe*, he expresses the concern, "Nor did I make any innovations. For I have been hesitant and fearful, partly because of the weak in faith, who cannot suddenly change an old and accustomed order of worship for a new and unusual one."³² "In church we do not want to quench the spirit of the faithful with tedium."³³ "[Take] care lest the people should either be bored by too much repetition of the same or confused by too many changes in the chants and lessons."³⁴ "We should consider the edification of the lay folk more important than our own ideas and opinions."³⁵ "We must make sure that freedom shall be and remain a servant of love and of our fellow-man."³⁶ "We cannot have one do it one way today, and another, another way tomorrow, and let everybody parade his talents and confuse the people so that they can neither learn nor retain anything."³⁷

Such was Luther's conservatism in matters of liturgy. He practically had to be forced to make changes in the Mass. After repeated requests, for example, he responded with the *Deutsche Messe*. He retained all he possibly could of the liturgy to which his people were accustomed. He removed only what was doctrinally wrong, what was subject to misinterpretation, embellishments that tended to "glitter and display," and features that detracted from the Word. Luther and his followers purified and simplified the local Roman services, incorporating new prayers and hymns of evangelical character. Beyond this they did not go. The Anglican reformation of the liturgy, for example, was more radical.

A valid principle of Luther's was that the liturgy is to be accommodated to the parish situation. Here R. C. Caemmerer's remarks are appropos:

In one respect our twentieth century problem is similar to Luther's. We are confronted, as our problem of evangelization of the world comes close home to us, with a vast number of people, a small minority of whom we imagine, for sure, to be Christians. But there is a great difference, which is of importance in the approach to the liturgical problem; the great mass is not liturgically habituated. Our problem is not one of retention of liturgical forms but of introducing them to the individual. Each new worshiper in our church is a liturgical problem. He has been, we trust, grounded in the elemental considerations of the faith. Shall he be launched into a complete worship technique? a traditionally complicated service? There is sense to that, Luther would say, if the newcomer has always known the technique and the service. What would Luther say of a man without liturgical experience? That problem was not one of his.³⁸

That problem may well be one of ours. If the Wisconsin Synod is to grow, especially in the Sun Belt and in other parts of the country where our Wisconsin liturgy is not familiar, we shall be reaching out to families with simpler liturgical backgrounds or without liturgical experience at all. To Southern Baptist culture our worship services are "high church" and "Catholic." Even if we insist that they are not, what matters is that they are *perceived* to be, particularly if we make our liturgical practice more complex. Will our enriched liturgy turn non-Lutherans off? Would not Luther urge us to have regard for the newcomers in our congregations, particularly in congregations outside the Upper Midwest?

A final observation on the liturgy. On January 16, as reported in the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Holy Communion was celebrated in a joint Lutheran-Episcopalian service in the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. Lutheran bishops Crumley, Kohn, and Preus took part. Even though it was not a "full communion" service, an unscriptural fellowshiping took place. Prof. M. Albrecht comments: "We may want to ask how such a service is possible. One will have to admit that there are strong similarities between the two church bodies. The liturgical order of service, the collects, the readings, to a certain extent the hymnody, the choir music, all these could make many a Lutheran feel quite at home in the Episcopal church service."³⁹

This is not the first instance of ecumenism furthered by a common liturgy. Common liturgies tend to make worshipers feel "at home" in each other's churches, even when confessional positions differ. That helps to explain why so many English-speaking young Lutherans in our colonial days left the Lutheran Church and joined the Episcopal Church, whose liturgy Cranmer shaped akin to the Lutheran liturgy he learned to know in Osiander's home. By itself liturgy does not safeguard confession. In real life it may even allow a confessional position to be weakened.

In their *Manual on the Liturgy - Lutheran Book of Worship*, Pfatteicher and Messerli approve the ecumenical role of liturgy. They cite the inter-Lutheran effort to produce a common hymnal for most of U. S. Lutheranism (from which project the LC-MS later withdrew), but they also express their gratification that a

consensus was growing with regard to both the content and the form of worship. Sensing this, a group of pastors from the large Lutheran bodies in the United States came together in 1966 with representatives of the Roman Catholic and Episcopal Churches and one minister of the Evangelical and Reformed Church, for an informal discussion of what might be done to pool the thinking of liturgical

scholars of all denominations. Out of the discussions evolved the Ecumenical Days ...⁴⁰

The *Manual* considers the inter-church liturgical development set in motion in the 1960s as “an important step to Christian unity.” The hope of Lutheran ecumenism is that “English-speaking Christians all over the world have the opportunity to address God in the same words.”⁴⁰ A common liturgy tends to draw Christians together. Occupation with liturgical development and enrichment needs the firm confessional dominance of the Word. Luther established this principle for liturgy and worship.

In the liturgy, Luther insisted, the Word must have free course, for the greatest act of worship is preaching that Word. Even a rich and beautiful liturgy is secondary, in significance, to the proclamation of the Word, nor can it match such proclamation in effectiveness. A fundamental consideration in liturgy must be concern for the edification of the worshiper. Our employment of liturgy must always be consonant with the true and confessional proclamation of the Word. “We can spare everything except the Word.”

Luther and Hymnody

We turn to Luther and his hymns. In his *Deutsche Messe* he expressed his desire for more hymns in the vernacular: “I also wish that we had as many songs as possible in the vernacular which the people could sing during mass.”⁴¹ “... after the exposition and homilies they used to praise God and give thanks for the revealed truth of his words. That is the kind of vernacular songs I should like us to have.”⁴²

There were some German hymns in existence at the time of the Reformation but the Roman church resisted the introduction of these hymns into the service. The clergy and the choir took over the music in the church. The singing of hymns at Luther’s time was permitted only on special occasions and in some minor services.

It was through the efforts of the great Reformer that the lost art of congregational singing was restored and the Christian hymn was again given a place in public worship. While reforming the liturgy and encouraging the participation of people in the service, Luther produced 36 hymns and encouraged others to compose hymns. He became the fountainhead of evangelical hymnody.

In the introduction to his *Cithara Lutheri*, published in 1569, Cyriacus Spangenberg wrote of Luther as hymn-writer:

Of all the mastersingers since the time of the Apostles, Luther is the best and most artful. In his hymns and songs one cannot find an unnecessary word. Everything flows beautifully and artistically, full of spirit and doctrine ... All pious hearts must confess with us that God through Luther and his hymnbook has presented us with something wonderful and most exceptional, wherefore we cannot thank him enough in eternity ...⁴³

Philip Schaff characterized Luther as the “Ambrose of German hymnody,” and adds: “To Luther belongs the extraordinary merit of having given the German people in their own tongue the Bible, the Catechism, and the hymnbook, so that God might speak *directly* to them in His word, and that they might *directly* answer Him in their songs.”⁴⁴

It is not of great import that only three or four of Luther's hymns are held to be original: "We All Believe in One True God"; "Isaiah, Mighty Seer, in Days of Old"; and "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." The stamp of his spirit and genius was also on the songs and hymns he adapted and revised. "In every instance, however, the great Reformer so imbued them with his own fervent faith and militant spirit that they seem to shine with a new luster."⁴⁵

Hoelty-Nickel points out that some of the fourteen hymns Luther supplied for the *Erfurter Enchiridion* in 1524 were translations of Latin Songs: "Come, Holy Ghost, God and Lord"; "Savior of the Nations, Come"; "We Now Implore God the Holy Ghost"; "Now Praise We Christ, the Holy One." Others were extensions of older German translations of Latin Hymns: "All Praise to Thee, Eternal God"; "In the Midst of Earthly Life." He improved or revised German folk songs: "May God Bestow on Us His Grace"; "Christ Lay in Death's Strong Bands." There were songs based on Scripture texts: "That Man a Godly Life Might Live." An example of a freely created hymn was: "Jesus Christ, Our Blessed Savior."⁴⁶

Hoelty-Nickel classifies Luther's 36 church hymns as follows:

... in thirty-two out of thirty-six hymns Luther used material already at hand: first, the Bible, especially the Psalms (12, 14, 67, 124, 128, and 130, which we have in two versions ...), The Ten Commandments (again in one longer and one shorter version), the story of Isaiah's call (Is. 6), the Christmas story (also in two hymns), the story of Simeon, the story of Jesus' baptism, and the Lord's Prayer. In addition, he utilized the resources of the Latin hymns of the medieval church ... He took up the same tone and continued to use it if he found no occasion to change or remove something which was not in harmony with the Gospel as he understood it. Finally, Luther also rewrote and expanded German folk songs, pilgrimage songs, music of the mass, and even a hymn to Mary, converting them into communion hymns, hymns of the church.⁴⁷

Whether his hymns were original, or whether they were revisions or adaptations, they mirror his theology and his character. First of all, they are scriptural. He used the Psalms, the Ten Commandments, the story of Isaiah's call, the Christmas story, the story of Jesus' baptism, the Lord's prayer as texts. Fidelity to Scripture is also the hallmark of the hymns he did not base on a specific text.

"Lord, keep us steadfast in Thy Word," he implores in Hymn 261: "The Word they still shall let remain," he affirms in Hymn 262. Every verse of Hymn 260, "O Lord, Look Down from Heaven, Behold," is either an expression of confidence in the Word, or it is a prayer that the truth of the Word may prevail over all heresy.

Should one expect otherwise? Should the man who reformed the church through the power of the Word mute that Word in his hymns, through which he communicated the Word of the Gospel to his people? Then Luther, the hymnist would be denying Luther, the theologian and the Reformer.

Since his hymns are scriptural, they also exalt Christ, the "*Kern und Stern*" of Scripture as the sinner's Savior and his Lord. "Time and time again," Hoelty-Nickel writes, "he called on patriarchs, kings, prophets, and apostles to witness that in the Church hymnody, if it is genuine church hymnody, none other than Christ Himself, the Word of God, is heard, and that therefore the song of the Church can have no other content than Christ."⁴⁸

Luther's hymns are, therefore, filled with the Gospel of the redemptive work of Christ. They hold the cross and the open tomb of Christ before our eyes and engrave its meaning on our hearts. Let Luther's hymns speak.

Here the true Paschal Lamb we see,
Whom God so freely gave us;
He died on the accursed tree—
So strong His love!—to save us.
See, His blood doth mark our door;
Faith points to it, Death passes o'er,
The night of sin is ended. Hallelujah! Hymn 195

Shine in our hearts, O most precious Light,
That we Jesus Christ may know aright,
Clinging to our Savior, whose blood hath bought us,
Who again to our homeland hath bro't us.
Lord, have mercy! Hymn 231

Help us, Lord Jesus Christ, for we
A Mediator have in Thee.
Our works cannot salvation gain;
They merit but endless pain.
Have mercy, Lord!" Hymn 287

His hymns convey the great theme of the Reformation, the great doctrine of the Gospel, justification by faith. "The message of the sinner's justification by faith without the deeds of the law, by faith alone ... is expressed not only where we expect it, in the hymns sung on the day of repentance or on the feast of Reformation. Luther also laid this message on the lips of the angels in his children's Christmas song and actually thrust it in everywhere as a basic theme."⁴⁹ The word "alone," characteristic of the great doctrine he rediscovered, appears a number of times in his hymnody. "Thy love and grace alone avail." "While worlds on worlds are Thine alone." "Christ alone our souls will feed." "For Thou art Lord of Lords alone."

Luther's hymns are proclamation. In the liturgy he established the proclamation of the Word when he made the sermon an integral and prominent feature of the service. His hymns reflect this emphasis. They "proclaim the wonders God hath done." They are sermons and proclamations rather than poetic effusions and musings. "Dear Christians, One and All Rejoice," is a sermon in verse. In his hymnody Luther the prophet spoke, sometimes as a man to men, a child to children, a German to Germans, but always proclaiming God's truth to all as did his great teacher, the Apostle Paul, who was "all things to all men."

Luther was a man of bold and vigorous faith; we see and feel that faith in his hymns. It is strong, it is often militant. His hymns take the field against error and doubt and unbelief; they champion the cause of Christ and press forward with the Gospel banner. We feel the power of his faith in the battle hymn of the Reformation, the hymn Frederick the Great called "God Almighty's grenadier march." In this magnificent chorale, words and music combine to stir the soul with their power.

A West African missionary, Christaller, relates how he once sang “*Ein feste Burg*,” to his native interpreter. “That man, Luther,” said the African, “must have been a powerful man, one can feel it in his hymns.”⁵⁰

That power is there also in other hymns, although not expressed as dramatically. Note the following hymns:

What harm can sin and death then do?
The true God now abides with you.
Let hell and Satan rage and chafe,
Christ is your Brother—ye are safe. Hymn 103

Defend Thy truth, O God, and stay
This evil generation;
And from the error of its way
Keep Thine own congregation.
The wicked everywhere abound
And would Thy little flock confound;
But Thou are our Salvation. Hymn 260

Blest be the Lord, who foiled their threat
That they could not devour us;
Our souls, like birds, escaped their net,
They could not overpow’r us.
The snare is broken—we are free!
Our help is ever, Lord, in Thee,
Who madest earth and heaven. Hymn 267

The joy of the miraculously saved sinner is in his hymns. When Luther celebrated the mass on All Saints’ Day, he opened the service with the Introit for the day: Rejoice ye all in the Lord. This Introit became his inspiration for his glorious hymn, which sings of the justification of the sinner before God:

Dear Christians, one and all, rejoice,
With exultation springing,
And, with united heart and voice
And holy rapture singing

That “holy, rapture,” that joy of the redeemed child of God rescued from the bondage of sin and the doom of death, appears throughout his verse, even in his hymns that flow from anguish of soul, not in lyrical exultation, but in the assurance of faith that calmly declares “Our help is in the name of the Lord.”

In his brief characterization of liturgy Luther had summed up the response of the people to God’s message in one word, prayer. “Here I listen to him and again I go up to him and speak in the ears of God who hears my prayer.”⁵¹ His Pentecost hymns are prayers: “Come, Holy Ghost, God and Lord”; “We Now Implore God the Holy Ghost.” Except for “A Mighty

Fortress,” his Reformation hymns are prayers: “O Lord, Look Down from Heaven, Behold”; “Lord, Keep us Steadfast in Thy Word”; “If God Had Not Been on our Side.” His *De Profundis* hymn is a prayer “From Depths of Woe.” The last hymn by Luther in *The Lutheran Hymnal* implores, “May God Bestow on Us His Grace.”

When sinners see their lost condition and are convinced that they cannot meet the Law’s demands, they pray for mercy, but they pray with confidence because they also see their salvation and know that it has met the Law’s demands. Luther’s prayer hymns are urgent prayers of the faith of a justified sinner, not of his despair.

Hoelty-Nickel says that Luther’s style might be called “factual.”

Briskly and clearly he expresses his thoughts as in a commandment or decree. Anyone who belongs to the greatest King, as did Luther, and has pledged to carry out his duty, has neither time nor reason to dwell on prefatory or peripheral matters. He goes directly to his goal. It is completely natural that Luther has only short hymns, and in their verses short sentences which often take up only one line, seldom more than two. Luther’s hymnody speaks in the indicative and the imperative with no ifs and buts.⁵²

His hymns might also be called objective, even though the personal element is present in his hymns. The “I” and the “We” frequently appear in them, but they are the personal appropriation of God’s objective truth, not the “I” and “We” of existential feeling after God. Luther’s “I” and “We” express the common bond of humanity, alike under the Law, alike under the curse of sin, alike without salvation and hope, but also alike in the grace of God in Christ. His “I” and “We” are as objective as John 3:16 or the Creed.

In his contribution to a study of “The Musical Heritage of Our Church,” Theo. DeLaney asks in “What Makes It Lutheran?” “Is there something which makes a hymnal and/or service book distinctly Lutheran?” He answers, “First of all, the doctrine set forth in the hymn texts ... should immediately show this to be a Lutheran book.”⁵³ The doctrine is the touchstone.

But doctrine is not highly regarded today. “There seems to be a growing movement,” says DeLaney, “which would rule out doctrine as a factor in Lutheran hymnody, holding that the hymnal should contain only such texts as are doxological (where God is concerned) or speak to the existential needs with which the worshiper must cope in daily life. The attitude seems to find its roots in the desire for ecumenical appeal, a striving for the lowest common theological denominator.”⁵⁴

Contemporary hymn writers, like twentieth century poets, incline more toward the subjective, the unique, the personal, the existential. Modern verse tends to be a private expression. The modern poet writes primarily for himself and for a select group who share his vision and his mode of expression. Innovation and the poetical tour de force call attention to the art, the virtuosity, but strain the communication. The personal experience, and the personal interpretation of the experience take precedence over representation of the common lot of humanity. But Christian worship must be corporate worship, not individualized or personalized.

With church bodies increasingly shifting their concerns from the man-God relationship to the relationship of man to his fellow man, hymnody reflects this orientation from the salvific to the social, from the Bread of Life to bread for the table. The earthly material welfare of society, rather than the eternal destiny of human souls, is the keynote of much of today’s religious verse.

We need to be reminded of the social aspect of our Christian calling on earth. Few hymns in *The Lutheran Hymnal* express much concern for our neighbor's welfare. We could do with more hymns that lay on our hearts our debt of love to our fellow man, but in such hymns the basis must ever be the love of God in Christ, the sinner's response to the grace of God shown him in his spiritual need. Social gospel without Gospel is not only a distortion, but ever a perversion of the duty of the child of God to his fellow man.

Of doxology in modern hymnody we can approve. Praise and thanksgiving to the God of our salvation is ever the joyful response of redeemed children of God in worship. Evermore the church must sing, "We praise Thee, we bless Thee, we worship Thee, we glorify Thee, we give thanks to Thee for Thy great glory." But let such praise ever be in the proclamation of the Great Gloria, "O Lord, the only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ; O Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father, That takest away the sin of the world, have mercy upon us. Thou that sittest at the right hand of the Father, have mercy upon us." Would that we all sang it better.

If the answer to DeLaney's question concerning the hymnal, "What Makes It Lutheran?" is, "It is Luther who makes it Lutheran," then it behooves us as confessional Lutherans to note once more the essential characteristics of Luther's hymnody. Luther's hymns are nothing if they are not scriptural. Their chart and compass are the objective, "propositional" revelation of the Word. The central truth of that authoritative Word is Christ, the Redeemer, and Christ, the Lord. His hymns are songs of the salvation of the lost sinner; they are paeans of praise for the sure mercies of God. They are sure in their proclamation, bold in their faith, firm in their trust, fervent in their prayer, joyful in their hope.

When we select new hymns or review old hymns for our new hymnal, let the spirit of Luther guide us. Then current fads will not displace our precious heritage, private emotion will not replace public doctrine, the Christ for us will not yield to the Christ in us. Then we will not truncate doctrine or interrupt prayer when we edit our classic Lutheran hymns.

Martin J. Naumann states that the "essential characteristics of good hymns are these:

Hymns must be a confession of faith (*justus et peccator*).

Hymns must be a prayer in Christ to God.

Hymns must be a meditation on the Christ of Scripture.⁵⁵

He adds: "Luther's concept of worship was Biblical."⁵⁶ "Our Lutheran worship is *theological*. If it is not theological it isn't worship, and, of course, isn't Lutheran."⁵⁷

Of such a Christian service Luther would have approved, both of its hymns and of its liturgy.

Endnotes

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- ¹ Theodore Graebner, *God and the Cosmos* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns, 1932), p. X
- ² *Luther's Works*, vol. 53, edited by Ulrich S. Leupold (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965), p. XIII
- ³ Friedrich Lochner, *Der Hauptgottesdienst der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche* (St. Louis: CPH, 1895), p. 3
- ⁴ Quoted in Luther D. Reed, *The Lutheran Liturgy* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1947), p. 8
- ⁵ *The Lutheran Witness* (St. Louis: CPH, April 3, 1962), p. 167
- ⁶ E. G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times* (St. Louis: CPH, 1950), p. 665
- ⁷ *Luther's Works*, op. cit., p. 11
- ⁸ Reed, op. cit., p. 71
- ⁹ *Luther's Works*, op. cit., p. 20
- ¹⁰ Reed, op. cit., p. 72
- ¹¹ *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: CPH, 1921), p. 463
- ¹² Schwiebert, op. cit., p. 668
- ¹³ Reed, op. cit., p. 78
- ¹⁴ *Luther's Works*, op. cit., p. 11
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 14
- ¹⁶ Vilmos Vajta, "Martin Luther's Concept of Worship," *The Musical Heritage of the Lutheran Church*, edited by Theodore Hoelty-Nickel (St. Louis: CPH, 1959), vol. V, pp. 22.23
- ¹⁷ Vajta, op. cit., p. 25
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 23
- ¹⁹ *Concordia Triglotta*, op. cit., p. 327
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 401
- ²¹ Reed, op. cit., p. XI
- ²² Jaroslav Pelikan, *Obedient Rebels* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 94
- ²³ *Theologische Quartalschrift* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, Jan. 1937) p. 47
- ²⁴ Reed, op. cit., p. 227
- ²⁵ *Luther's Works*, op. cit., pp. XIV-XV
- ²⁶ *Theologische Quartalschrift*, op. cit., Apr. 1939, p. 101
- ²⁷ Reed, op. cit., p. 395
- ²⁸ *Luther's Works*, op. cit., p. 19
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 24
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 38
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 47
- ³² *Ibid.*, p. 61
- ³³ *Ibid.*, p. 80
- ³⁴ *Concordia Theological Monthly* (St. Louis: CPH, May 1952), p. 334
- ³⁵ *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, Spring 1983), p. 140
- ³⁶ Philip H. Pfatteicher and Carlos R. Messerli, *Manual on the Liturgy—Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979), p. 8
- ³⁷ *Luther's Works*, op. cit., p. 36
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 39
- ³⁹ Quoted by Theo. Hoelty-Nickel in *Luther and Culture* (Decorah: Luther College Press, 1960), p. 162
- ⁴⁰ Quoted by E. E. Ryden, *The Story of Our Hymns* (Rock Island: Augustana, 1930), p. 43
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 51
- ⁴² *Luther and Culture*, op. cit., pp. 173.174
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 173.174
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 175
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 181
- ⁴⁶ Ryden, op. cit., p. 50
- ⁴⁷ Reed, op. cit., p. 8
- ⁴⁸ *Luther and Culture*, op. cit., p. 179
- ⁴⁹ E. Theo DeLaney, "What Makes it Lutheran?" *The Musical Heritage of the Lutheran Church*, edited by Theo. Hoelty-Nickel (St. Louis: CPH, 1970), vol. VII, p. 117.

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 112.113

⁵¹ Martin J. Naumann, "The Character of Lutheran Worship," *The Musical Heritage of the Lutheran Church*, edited by Theo. Hoelty-Nickel, op. cit., vol. V, pp. 35.38

⁵² Martin Naumann, op. cit., p. 35

⁵³ Ibid., p. 38

⁵⁴ *Luther's Works*, op. cit., pp. 81.82

⁵⁵ Quoted by Peter Brunner, *Worship in the Name of Jesus*, (transl. by Martin Bertram), (St. Louis: CPH, 1968), p. 292

⁵⁶ Vajta, op. cit., p. 29

⁵⁷ Brunner, op. cit., p. 292