

Liturgical Worship and Evangelism

[PT 341. Theology and Practice of Evangelism]

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At the crossroads of evangelism and worship there stands a lonely soul. He is the church-shopper. He is unevangelized; he has not heard the good news of Jesus Christ. He has heard of Jesus, but he has an itch to know more. Perhaps a crisis in his life has piqued thought about weighty spiritual matters. Perhaps during casual conversation with someone he found himself at a loss when asked his opinion about life after death. Perhaps he feels that he ought to lead a more disciplined and structured lifestyle and is looking for guidance. Perhaps someone invited him to come. Whatever the reason, he comes through the church doors on Sunday morning. What awaits him?

Orthodox Lutheran pastors in the United States must face that question. The reality of the church-shopper cannot be avoided. "Whether we like it or not, when the unevangelized think of Christianity, they think of church—the building on the corner. The unevangelized *will come* to our churches. What will we do?"¹ When people are curious about Christianity, most will not seek out a pastor and request a brief synopsis of the essence of the Christian religion. They will instead come to church, i.e., to public worship. This tendency may be unfortunate, but its existence cannot (at least in this country in this time) be denied. Therefore, the role of worship in evangelism takes on special significance.

For us Lutherans, the relationship of worship and evangelism has an added dimension. Lutherans are thoughtful when considering how they worship. To be sure, we enjoy the freedom that the gospel gives, but at the same time we are always mindful of St. Paul's inspired reminder, "Everything is permissible for me—but not everything is beneficial" (I Corinthians 6:12). We take into account as well the lessons of history. This is crucial, since "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9). This hindsight leads us to consider the heritage we have been given: liturgical worship. Is liturgical worship a hindrance to evangelism? Many today, even in Lutheran circles, maintain that it is. This writer, however, believes that it is not. In the next several pages there follows a look at what is really at issue in the question of whether to keep or toss liturgical Lutheran worship. Then, from a more practical standpoint, we will consider some of the elements of traditional Lutheran worship that are overlooked or even maligned for their impact on evangelism. As we strive to preserve what has been handed down to us and at the same time reach out to share it with others, we will come to realize that there is much at stake.

The gospel in liturgical worship

What is liturgical worship? Liturgical worship is "a worship style that retains the core of the historic Christian liturgy, employs the church year, and emphasizes the Sacrament."² Let's briefly take a closer look at these three foundational elements.

¹ Aaron L. Christie. "Lutheran Liturgy and Evangelism" Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary essay file.

² *Christian Worship: Manual*, (Milwaukee: NPH 1993) p 112.

The core of the historic Christian liturgy

The historic rite of western Christendom includes several simple canticles, or liturgical songs. The five main songs are as follows:

- ◆ Lord, Have Mercy (*Kyrie*)
The spirit of the tax collector in Jesus' parable (Matthew 18:13) finds musical expression in this canticle. Humility and a keen awareness of who we are and who God is form the basis for this prayer. Only through the great mercy of God can sinners approach him in prayer and come into his presence.
- ◆ Glory Be to God on High (Gloria in Excelsis)
This is an expansion on the theme of the angels sung at the birth of the Savior (Luke 2-14). We spell out the identity of the one whom we worship, extolling his being and his doing. We remember that God's greatest glory is his grace.
- ◆ Nicene Creed (*Credo*)
This is, of course, not drawn from Scripture in as direct a way as some of the other canticles, but what more Scripturally rich song could we sing? Once again we remember who God is and what he has done, with special emphasis on the person and work of Christ.
- ◆ Holy, Holy, Holy (*Sanctus*)
The song of the angels sounds out in this canticle (Isaiah 6:3). God's faithful and free grace are extolled ("LORD...") as well as his glorious power ("of hosts/armies"). A unique opportunity is afforded the worshiper: he or she may for a moment join the song of the angels around God's throne!
- ◆ Lamb of God (*Agnus Dei*)
Objective and subjective justification are beautifully and simply woven together here: "O Christ, Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world, have mercy on us." We echo John the Baptist's cry, pointing out the Savior of all, then asking him to apply his saving work to each of us.

Can we escape the gospel here? In any of these songs can we miss the truths of Holy Scripture? And these are not the only parts of the historic liturgy of the western Christian church. There are other canticles which are every bit as Scriptural- These include the *Magnificat*, Mary's song upon the annunciation of the birth of Jesus (usually a morning canticle); the *Benedictus*, Zechariah's song upon the birth of his son John (usually sung in the evening); the *Nunc Dimittis*, Simeon's prayer after seeing the Christchild; the *Te Deum*, a recounting of God's identity and activity (which for much of history had almost a credal status). The same truths are stressed on a regular basis through these elements of the Ordinary, the elements which remain the same from week to week. The point is clear: liturgical worship consistently breathes the Scriptures.

The implication for evangelism is simple: if the gospel is the power of God to convert unbelievers, and liturgical worship is full of the gospel, then liturgical worship is good for evangelism.

The church year

Liturgical worship is committed to the proclamation of Jesus Christ. Rather than have the theme of each Sunday be dictated by subjective standards (though a pastor making a wise and timely decision about changing a theme is beneficial), liturgical worship lets itself be guided by the life and work of Jesus Christ. For roughly six months of the year, the Gospel lesson appointed for the day forms the thematic basis for the Sunday service. This achieves an excellent balance between continuity and variety. The life of Christ is reviewed each year. Make no mistake—he is the main character here. And yet, the emphasis is slightly different each week. Each Sunday I have the opportunity to see how this Jesus touches another facet of my life. Through the varied readings, prayers and songs the uniqueness of the Holy Scriptures and of Christianity are explored. Through the sermon based on one of the lessons or in accord with the daily theme, the various parts of the faith are proclaimed, clarified and solidified.³

If we consistently employ the church year, that means that the gospel will be preached every time a visitor comes to our worship. Note this well: I don't wish to imply that there is no other way to preach the gospel consistently, but the church year provides a sturdy, Christ-centered backbone.

Emphasis on the Sacrament

The sacrament of Holy Communion is a central part of liturgical worship. Sadly, for much of the history of Lutheranism, this has not been the case. When Pietism began to run rampant through Lutheranism, the Lord's Supper took a hit. The sacraments were de-emphasized in favor of more tantalizing and subjective elements which people considered more spiritual. This attitude lingered for many years, and only relatively recently did Lutherans take up the struggle to reclaim the sacramental emphasis of their forefathers.

Why is Communion so important? Through the means of Word and Sacrament God is pleased to work. Through these means he touches people's souls, and after he touches them, they are not the same. Lutherans recognize the power of the means of grace—the gospel of Jesus Christ as it finds expression in the Word and in the sacraments. Through the Lord's Supper God touches the lips and the hearts of his people to give them an intensely personal assurance that the body and blood were given for them, and that therefore all their sins are forgiven.

We can perhaps nuance the definition of liturgical worship given above. We had said previously that Lutheran liturgical worship "emphasizes the Sacrament." Couldn't we say that it emphasizes the sacraments (plural)? Baptism is a powerful means by which Almighty God turns a heathen heart around. Through water and the Word, he washes away sin and guilt and imparts his Spirit. Is there a more significant event in the life of a Christian than his baptism?⁴

³ Cf. Prof. James Tiefel, in his Junior class worship notes (his liturgics course available from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary student bookstore), describes evangelism as "proclamation, clarification and invitation."

⁴ See also Larry Peters' essay, "Lutheran Worship and Church Growth", an essay presented to the LC-MS Commission on Worship. In it he notes perceptively that Baptism is the way Lutherans express their whole spiritual identity (we are redeemed children of God, and God made us such through Baptism), and he draws a connection between this and Evangelicals' use of the testimonial in worship.

It should be noted here that in a sense the sacraments do not touch the unevangelized as they visit worship. At least, they don't touch them in the way they touch Christians. An unevangelized visitor will not receive the body and blood of Jesus, but he or she will hear the words of institution and the gospel-rich prayers and canticles in the rite of the Holy Communion. He or she will see God's people kneeling reverently and meditating silently about this momentous event. The visitor will see the quiet miracle of baptism and hear about the blessed effects of it. The gospel of Jesus will come through, and the Holy Spirit will work.

Fundamentals of worship

"Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship" (Romans 12:1). St. Paul's exhortation to the Romans summarizes the basic pattern of liturgical worship quite succinctly. In short, the pattern is this: God acts, people respond to his action. Luther termed it *beneficium* and *sacrificium*. A beneficent God is merciful to us, and in response to that mercy we sacrifice to him, offering up our whole selves and whole lives to serve him.

This pattern seems hard to mess up. Yet we note with sadness and frustration that many do warp it. Medford Jones, a Church Growth specialist, writes, "Worship in dynamic congregations focuses on the presence of God and the living Word." So far so good. He seems to be talking about Luther's *beneficium*. But then he continues:

Love for Jesus and God is focused and praise is an integral part of worship—Worship in dynamic churches encourages those forms of service biblically described as "sacrifices" and "offerings" that are "acceptable to God" (I Pet. 2:5)—The dedicated bodily service of Romans 12:1,2 is stressed.⁵

The correct balance outlined in Romans 12:1 seems to be a little off-kilter. It is. One can clearly see this imbalance when Jones says, "It [worship in dynamic congregations] leads people to serve rather than be served."⁶ What about Matthew 20:28? "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Statements like Jones' make us wonder. Are the majority of current, popular evangelism techniques interested in proclaiming the gospel, the power of God for salvation, or are they more interested in stroking people's *opinio legis* to lure them in? God must always be the initiator of both worship and evangelism. He must be the one to prompt our worship, and he must be the one to convert the unevangelized visitor. When man's action is put ahead of God's, worship and evangelism will suffer.

Lutheran worship is more than just a matter of style. Liturgical worship is the expression of Lutheran theology. And when I say "Lutheran" I mean also "biblical".⁷ When Evangelical Church Growth principles are imposed on Lutheran theology, we ought not expect them to fit hand in glove. Larry Peters writes,

⁵ Medford H. Jones. "Dynamic Churches Come in All Sizes." *Church Growth: The State of the Art*. (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1986) p 137 Ibid. p 137.

⁶ Ibid., p 137.

⁷ As John Schaller once wrote, "Uns ist 'lutherisch' und 'biblisch' identisch."

The liturgy, which communicates the Word and Sacrament, is not merely a style of worship but relates to the substance of what is believed. There has been a tendency among Lutherans involved in Church Growth to avoid Lutheran liturgical forms in an effort to proclaim the Gospel and reach out to more people (especially those from unchurched and non-liturgical backgrounds). This has been justified with the reasoning that reaching people with the Good News is more important than a particular worship style. On the surface, it would be difficult to disagree with that statement. The whole problem lies in the assumption that the worship form is unessential, merely a matter of style or unrelated to the confession of faith. What we need to realize is just how important the worship form is for any church. No matter what denominational or theological perspective, the worship service (and therefore the form) is the primary vehicle of expressing, understanding and celebrating what is believed about God and his people. This is something the Church has affirmed from the earliest of Christian times. "Lex orandi, lex credendi," that is, the pattern of prayer (worship) reflects the pattern of belief (doctrine).⁸

Harold Senkbeil applies the above directly to evangelism, "It's time for a new initiative in worship- People are longing for God. Where are they going to find him? In the shifting sands of their inner life or on the solid rock of his gospel?"⁹ Lutheran worship and Evangelical worship have different sources and different destinations. Lutherans start with the promise of the gospel's power and therefore have as a goal the simple proclamation of the gospel. Evangelicals start with belief in a spark of good in man and have as a goal a decision- Once in a while the two paths may intersect, and a common place can be enjoyed by both sets of travelers, But many Lutheran leaders fear—and legitimately so—that some of their people will jump tracks at one of these intersections, ending up finally at the wrong destination.

Since the gospel works, David Valleskey states and restates his point:

- ...we are convinced that Lutheran liturgical worship,
 - when its strengths are emphasized and its balances maintained,
 - when it is carefully planned and artfully executed by the congregation's leaders and enthusiastically entered by the congregation's members,
 - when it is accompanied by a congregational mindset that opens wide its arms to the visitor at its services,
- has served and can continue to serve as a good tool for congregational outreach with the gospel.¹⁰

Some overlooked benefits for evangelism

If we then keep our liturgical tradition, we must use it well. For excellent, practical advice on doing worship well, see Valleskey's *We Believe- Therefore We Speak*. Here we want to briefly

⁸ Larry Peters. "Lutheran Worship and Church Growth." An essay presented to the LC-MS Commission on Worship

⁹ Harold Senkbeil. Sanctification. (Milwaukee: NPH. 1988) p 182.

¹⁰ David J. Valleskey. *We believe-Therefore We Speak-* (Milwaukee: NPH, 1995) p 204.

consider some benefits of Lutheran liturgical worship that are often overlooked or even maligned because they are considered counterproductive to evangelism efforts. The three elements for consideration are *stability*, *solemnity* and *continuity*.

Stability

American consumerist culture has, in many ways, made evangelism harder. Take the example of advertising in the American market- The American consumer has been imbued with the attitude that says, "If you want me to come, then you come and get me." Advertisers must determine their target demographic group, study its people, design commercials that are appealing, find out which TV shows their group watches and then air their custom-made allurements at the appropriate time. It's a laborious process, but advertisers know that if they don't do it, they won't make the sale. American consumers have grown accustomed to a huge variety of products from which they can choose. And if they are not wooed by one, they know that they will soon be wooed by another. If one TV show doesn't strike their fancy, they have a cable or a dish that provides 138 other options. In such an environment the church finds herself, presenting to people the changeless gospel of a changeless God.

There are many, however, who are disenchanted by American consumerist culture. Many people are looking for something that will not pander to them or change in an attempt to suit every whim, This is increasingly so in evangelism. In a January 1998 article in *The Northwestern Lutheran*, Joel Gerlach comments on the flow of new members into the Orthodox Church. He notes that it is stability that makes this body attractive.

... most of the converts to [the Orthodox] church are between the ages of 20 and 40. As the secular world spins out of control, churches that offer a tradition of stability and order will look more and more appealing to people seeking respite from the mayhem. That is the Orthodox attraction. We can offer the same thing-together with a biblically correct understanding of the gospel.¹¹

Of course, this stability ought to be tempered. We must not insist that the traditional liturgical service be done exactly the same way every time. That would not be a beneficial use of our tradition. Heed also the comments of a missionary in Bulgaria, who notes that the Orthodox Church's members are drifting away because the Church will not (or cannot) answer their questions about how Scripture applies to their lives. I do not advocate a dead adherence to forms. Stability tempered with a healthy variety is best.

The lesson to be learned here is this: we don't have to apologize for the fact that we do things the way believers have done them for centuries. Rather, via small comments in sermons, introductions to lessons ("The lesson appointed to be read in Christian churches is..."), and through the practice and preservation of historic hymnody, we can highlight the fact that Christianity is an ancient and changeless truth that can be relied on. We can, in small ways, accentuate the stability we enjoy in a chaotic world. That may be just what someone is longing for. We cannot, of course, add to the power of the gospel, but perhaps someone will stop and listen to our message if they note that it is a strangely steady one.

¹¹ Joel Gerlach. "The Orthodox attraction," *Northwestern Lutheran*, January 1998, p 31.

Solemnity

Prof. Charles Cortright, recalling his days in the parish, recounts the story of talking with a visitor to worship who had come from a Baptist background. Cortright says that he was ready to start apologizing for the formality of worship at his WELS congregation. He was surprised to learn that the visitor was not at all offended by the formality. In fact, the deliberateness and solemnity of worship “gave her a sense that something important was going on here. She wanted to find out more.”¹²

There is something important going on when we worship- God himself is speaking to us!
A
certain sobriety is appropriate. Yet coldness need not be a part of our worship,

Do not think that liturgical worship is cold and hard and funeral-like. Liturgical worship has a warmth that no auditorium of "seekers" could ever duplicate- The warmth of the Lutheran liturgy comes for [sic, "from"?] the good news itself Let no one say that an Evangelical Lutheran cannot be both warm and solemn at the same time!¹³

Let the warmth of the gospel be reflected in the warmth of the presider. When presiding at public worship, let's be serious about the task at hand, but let's remember that we are proclaiming the gospel which can cause the angels in heaven to sing for joy when it turns around a lost soul!

Continuity with the Christian Church

“People are searching for a sense of belonging and an experience of community.”¹⁴ So Larry Peters describes the spirit of American society. We have good news for those who want to belong: all are welcome here! Christendom is a fellowship that spans the globe. We can accentuate this in our worship. For example, we can recite the Apostles' Creed just as millions of other Christians do around the world. Rather than mumbling through the Creed ("Let's say the same thing we say every Sunday... ") we can use it as an opportunity to show the universal nature of the Christian Church. In a German order of service used in our Synod this century, the rubrics provide this introduction to the Creed: “*Lasset uns nun mit der ganzen Christenheit auf Erden unseren allerheiligsten Glauben bekennen.*” "Let us now, with all of Christendom on earth, confess our most holy faith." In a very simple way the pastor has instructed his members about the catholicity of the Christian Church. We have brothers and sisters around the world who believe as we do! That is a sense of belonging.

We have a treasure in liturgical worship. That is because we have a treasure in the gospel of Jesus Christ, the gospel which the liturgy contains. When the unevangelized come through our

¹² Charles Cortright. "No Apology Needed." *Lutheran Leader*, Fall 1997.

¹³ Christie, op. cit. p 9.

¹⁴ Larry Peters, op. cit.

church doors, what awaits them? Let us all answer, "The gospel!" Let us proclaim that as long as we have breath. Let us make use of the outline-the liturgy-that keeps our focus on Christ and on the means he has chosen to reveal himself to us. Let us preach the gospel!

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