

Key Words In Lutheran Liturgical Worship

[This is an adapted version of an address given at the WELS Christian Worship seminar at Calvary Lutheran Church, Thiensville, WI, on July 15, 1994. Charles Cortright is a professor at Northwestern College, Watertown, WI.]

Charles L. Cortright

For many of us the study of language and its meaning has been a large part of our education and is a large part of our work. As we gather for this seminar on worship in our Lutheran Church, I would like to focus briefly with you on what is meant by the phrase "Lutheran liturgical worship," and what it means to appreciate such worship.

Please note that I say "appreciate," which is not synonymous in every instance with "like." Appreciation involves awareness and sensitivity towards its subject; it involves recognition of values that have established themselves over time. Appreciation transcends the sometimes narrow confines of our individual tastes. Unfortunately, it happens all too often that people assess the worship practice of the church on the subjective basis of their likes and dislikes with little appreciation for the heritage they have received as Lutherans. But the corporate worship of the church ought not be determined by whim and fad, but upon solid, scripturally-consonant, confessionally consistent principles and practices. So we look briefly at the key words "Lutheran," "liturgical," and "worship" with an eye to being renewed once again in our appreciation of such worship.

I. Worship

Our first task is to understand what we mean by "worship." Most often we use this word to label the corporate activity of a congregation, but we must remember that corporate worship flows from that worship which encompasses the entire life of the believer: "Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Cor 10:31). Thus, our Lutheran Confessions (particularly the Augustana and the Formula of Concord) profess on the basis of Scripture that the true worship of God is essentially faith in Christ. If our lives are not rooted and grounded in this faith, then any corporate worship we do becomes a form of hypocrisy. Remember the Lord's indictment of Israel's worship because of hypocrisy: "I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies....Away with the noise of your songs!" (Amos 5:21ff). And so also that of our Lord Jesus: "They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men" (Mt 15:9).

When the Holy Spirit gathers believers together into the Church, he also gathers them as the body of Christ in the outward activity we call worship. It is interesting that we often refer to the corporate worship of the Body as the "service." But whose service? and for whom? Lutherans use the word "service" in English as a clipped form of the German *Gottesdienst*, "Divine Service."

"Divine Service" does NOT refer to a worship service that is sublime in its language, or aesthetically beautiful in its celebration, or emotionally moving in its effect ("How was the service?" "Oh, it was simply 'divine!'"). Indeed, such criteria belong to the Reformed concept of worship with its emphasis on the feelings, emotions, needs, etc. of people. Yes, we Lutherans certainly do hope that corporate worship among our people is moving; and we should place a high premium on the competency and grace of the celebrant, preacher, and musician, but these things do not constitute the substance and worth of our worship. Nor is "Divine Service" to be thought of as service rendered to God as something that is owed, a duty exacted by a demanding God, or worse, as something which is meritorious before God. Such is the Roman concept with its emphasis on law works and sacrifice. Yes, we do owe God our heartfelt adoration—this is a First Article truth to us—but that is not the essential aspect of the Divine Service either.

Divine Service is rather that service which God graciously gives to us. Lutheran worship is focused on the Means of Grace, on the blessed gospel proclamation in Word and sacrament that comes to us from the holy Trinity. God speaks to us his words of absolution and comfort; he reminds us of the blessed covenant of grace

granted through holy baptism; he feeds us with the precious body and blood of Jesus Christ in the Lord's Supper. God comes to us and serves us (!), and only afterward comes our response. So we characterize our worship properly as theocentric as opposed to a focus on ourselves, and as evangelical as opposed to a focus on the performance of certain functions or law duties.

II. Liturgical

We modify our understanding of corporate worship with the description, "liturgical." What does that mean for our worship? "Liturgical" does not mean simply "having a liturgy," or following a certain so-called "order of service." Many Protestant sects that eschew the characterization "liturgical" nonetheless follow a regular pattern or order in their worship. Nor does simply utilizing a form of the historic liturgy necessarily mean one is liturgical.

Lutherans usually understand liturgical worship in terms of following the historic liturgy of the western Church, but liturgical worship especially emphasizes the ecclesiastical year with its cycle of seasons and celebrations. And it needs to be said in this regard that the church year is greater than a mere rehearsal of the life of Christ as we move around the cycle—Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Passion Week, Easter, etc. The liturgical celebration of the church year is more than the rehearsal of history and more than "sanctified nostalgia"; it is walking with Christ via the liturgy: celebrating his grace, sharing in his sorrows, exulting in his victory by means of the rich rites, practices, and propers of the liturgy.

In that connection, and perhaps somewhat tangentially, we should stress how false the notion is which some advance that theological conservatism is best expressed (and preserved) by liturgical minimalization, that is, by ignoring the seasonal emphases of the church year and scorning the rubrics of the liturgy. Proponents of this notion sometimes like to recall a romanticized version of the "primitive simplicity" of the early church's worship, citing it as the paradigm of "true worship." Limitations of time do not permit us to look more closely at this notion now; a corrective to this point of view may be found in the first chapters of the *Manual to Christian Worship*.

But by the same token and for the sake of balance (since we are already on this tangent), equal care needs to be taken lest emphasizing the form and practice of the liturgy becomes an end in itself. The liturgy is rightly treasured as a time-tested vehicle for celebration, but it is only a vehicle. The proclamation of the gospel through the means of grace is the substance of the Divine Service. If liturgical minimalization is wrongly conceived of as a hallmark of orthodoxy, liturgical maximizing can lead to the sad state of affairs in which form obscures orthodox content altogether!

To return to our main point, in the Lutheran Church worship practice that is determined to be liturgical traditionally conceives of itself in terms of a form of the Common Service of the Western Church. It celebrates the Divine Service of the Lord through Word and sacrament in accord with the church year and by means of the order and rubrics of the "holy mass" (CA, Art. 23) as developed in history under the Lord of the Church. And it does so in accord with the meaning of the third key word before us, that of "Lutheran."

III. Lutheran

Calling our worship "Lutheran," of course, is not meant by us as merely a label, or simply to distinguish our liturgy from that of other traditions (e.g., Lutheran vs Anglican). We use the designation to mark our worship as being consonant with the Confessions of the Lutheran Church.

In this connection the name Lutheran as applied to the liturgy first denotes a tradition that is free under the gospel. As mentioned earlier, the Lutheran Confessions carefully distinguish the true worship of God—faith in Christ—from the man-made forms of the liturgy (FC, ThD, Art X, 8). Thus, "the congregation of God of every place and every time has, according to its circumstances, the good right, power, and authority to change, to diminish, and to increase them [i.e., liturgical ceremonies]...as...may be regarded most profitable, most beneficial, and best for preserving good order, Christian discipline, and the edification of the Church" (FC,

ThD, Art X, 9). Lutheran worship is worship undertaken in this gospel freedom. In Lutheran liturgies there is no sense of a "divinely ordained" form of worship as in Orthodox or Roman liturgies. Confessional Lutheranism, in fact, will always strenuously oppose any such notion as being contrary to our freedom in Christ. But having declared and affirmed that freedom, it is interesting to note the example of the Lutheran Confessions with respect to the liturgical heritage which the Lutheran Church holds in common with the Western Church. Indeed, the Augsburg Confession points to the retention of the customary ceremonies of the western mass—purified of Roman dress—as evidence against the charge of sectarianism (CA, Concl). Martin Luther founded no church of his own; by God's providential grace, he sought to reform the one he loved. As a result, the Lutheran Confessions uphold everywhere the understanding that the Lutheran Church is the purified "Church Catholic" (CA, Art 24, Concl; Ap, Art 24) and points to her liturgy as *prima facie* evidence of this.

A contemporary understanding of what it means to be Lutheran in terms of the liturgy, then, assiduously affirms the freedom that is ours under the gospel on the one hand. On the other, Lutheran liturgical understanding regards highly the liturgical heritage of catholic Christianity, in its freedom adapting it as necessary to the changing exigencies of history and culture, but treasuring and conserving it with all deliberateness for its time-proven utility and for the continuity it visibly proclaims with the Church catholic of ages past. To borrow a phrase from Charles Porterfield Krauth, the continuity of the Lutheran liturgy is one of the most visible aspects of the grace given the "conservative Reformation."

So, what is Lutheran in liturgical worship? I believe it is precisely the dynamic of this tension: freedom that seeks to celebrate the Divine Service meaningfully, culturally, and relevantly in the context of the liturgical heritage of the historic liturgy. It is this dynamic that has produced the significant and distinctly Lutheran alterations and additions to the liturgy such as hymns, the corporate confession, and the like, all the while preserving the rich, time-proven order of the service: Kyrie, Service of the Word, Preface, etc. for the celebration of the ecclesiastical year. Speaking of Lutheran liturgical worship in terms of a "dynamic tension" leads us to view the practice of the liturgy as one that demands an on-going investment of our time, understanding, awareness, and sensitivity. In a word, it means *appreciating* it!

May our praise in our Lutheran liturgical worship remain a fit response to the One who has served us and continues to bless us through Word and sacrament in Christ Jesus.