



Tradition, Liturgy, and the Visitor*

PAUL WESTERMEYER

Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

I. TRADITION

The words tradition and liturgy are often used with at best a murky sense of what they actually mean. So let me begin by making clear how I use these terms.

I understand tradition to be something that is handed over, imparted, passed on, from past generations to present and future generations. It has to do with the lore of a people—their customs, practices, learning, knowledge, ways of perceiving. At points of closure and disjuncture in human history, such as now, traditions come under attack. We live at a point of tremendous upheaval. It may be a period of ferment, not unlike the reformation, when things crack and give way to something new.

Traditions have teeth, however. They are not easily dislodged and often contain more than may be superficially apparent. Sometimes, when attacked, what had seemed dormant in a tradition suddenly comes to life with new vigor. I take it that is what we are experiencing. We are being forced to grapple with core issues at the moment. Ancillary issues spin all around the center and sometimes even obscure it, but we always get forced closer and closer to the center.

II. LITURGY

Liturgy can be used narrowly to refer to the texts of worship services. It can be used broadly to refer to virtually everything that relates to worship. Clarity of

*This essay is a revised version of an address given at the Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Minneapolis, Minnesota, for a Liturgical Fine Arts Festival of the Resurrection on April 24, 1992.

definition may not be possible, beyond something like this: liturgy refers to the discipline or service or “work” Christians do when they gather for worship. This presumes faith and implies *diakonia*, communally if not in each individual present. It refers specifically to the texts communities use and the way those texts take shape when Christians do them publicly.

Two things need to be noted. First, there’s a distinction here between liturgy and ceremonial. Though the two are closely related, I take ceremonial to mean “actions.”

Second, this suggests there is no worshiping assembly that does not employ liturgy. Liturgy implies certain behaviors or habits, and any group that gathers for worship more than once has habits. The question we face is not about the presence or absence of liturgy, though it is often couched as though it were. The question is whether the habits relate to historic patterns or are conceived to be something new.

III. WHAT CHRISTIANS DO

Periods like ours when traditions are under attack drive people behind the immediately preceding generations to fundamental moments when basic decisions were made. For some that means going back to confessional and liturgical revivals of the nineteenth century, for some to Wesley and the eighteenth century, for some to the reformation and one of its streams, for some to a pre-reformation position like Gothic or Romanesque architecture, for some to a pre-Constantinian time like the early church fathers or the New Testament. Each of these positions proceeds from a vision of the future. Reference is made to the past because that's all one ever has to work from. Out of all this comes a welter of different positions, generated by the turbulence of our period. We can easily lose the forest for the trees.

Instead of arguing from one particular point—though I confess to having what I perceive to be New Testament and Lutheran biases, with considerable interest in other periods and points of view as well—I propose to ask a more global question: What have Christians done in their worship, specifically their Sunday morning gatherings? This is a risky question, but I think it can be answered. They have done word and supper. They have gathered around pulpit and table—around the font also for initiations, but pulpit and table for ongoing sustenance.

One can find all sorts of exceptions: that some Catholics have tended to omit the word; that some Protestants have tended to omit the supper; that Zwingli, Anabaptists, and Quakers don't quite fit; and that some pretty skewed practices have crept in, like making the sacrament so holy in the Middle Ages that people were afraid to receive it.

But, from the New Testament to Justin Martyr, to Hippolytus, to the eastern liturgies of James and Basil and Chrysostom, to the western mass, to Augustine and North Africa, to Luther and Cranmer and Calvin and Wesley and even Alexander Campbell of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)—word and supper have been central. Even when the practice of these communities has lost

touch with its own sources and basic insights or when widely divergent theologies have been at work, word and supper have hovered over them.

Can one be more specific than that? What are the elements of word and supper? The contemporary Lutheran version is not far from the mainstream. If one does a Schenkerian analysis of it, its core is quite simple and looks like this.

Word Service

Prayer of the Day
Lessons and Psalmody
Sermon
Hymn
Prayers
Peace

Supper

Offering
Great Thanksgiving
Sursum corda/Preface

Sanctus
Eucharistic Prayer/Verba
Lord's Prayer
Communication
Blessing/Dismissal

It is quite possible to add to this. A confessional service may precede the word service or happen at another time. A gathering rite with a hymn, greeting, Kyrie, and Gloria in Excelsis (or "Worthy is Christ") may precede the prayer of the day. The usual lessons Christians have used, when they have not omitted one, are Old Testament, Epistle, and Gospel with intervenient psalmody. The Nicene Creed or, more recently, the Apostles' Creed could follow the hymn of the day. In the supper one could add hymns at the communication, the first being "Lamb of God." A post-communion blessing, canticle, and prayer could follow the communication before the blessing. One could add a dismissal and a final hymn.

Some communities add vestments, ceremonial, ornate architectural or visual designs, incense, and whatever will appeal to all the senses. Other communities value simplicity and the barest minimum of movement with the least possible visual or sensual media. Some communities employ lavish musical resources. Others restrict these. Some make variations, like metrical hymn versions of the Kyrie, Gloria, Creed, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei. For some a service can take more than three hours. For others it can be done in less than thirty minutes. Some communities move things around. But the basic shape of word and supper remains, however complex or simple it may be and however it may be varied.

IV. THE VISITOR

One of the heated topics among us has to do with the visitor, whom we are

page 79

being admonished to welcome. The reminder is a good one, since the source of the admonition is Christ himself. The puzzle is to determine what this admonition means. Does welcoming the visitor mean dismantling everything we have? Does it mean making minor changes or no changes? Which visitors are we talking about? Are they all the same? Does the concern deal mostly with numbers, or is there something else at work here? There is no agreement over these matters and considerable heat. We need to sort out some issues.

The first thing that needs to be noted is an insight especially stressed by Lutherans (though not absent in other traditions). It is this: though our services of worship look like something we do—our speaking, our words, our praise, our prayer, our eating, our movement—in the economy of the gospel everything is turned upside down. In fact our worship is not what we do. It's what God does. In the word, God addresses us. At the table, God in Christ is the host. In our worship, God comes to us as God promises.

Second, this means we are all visitors, all strangers, all sojourners. There is no in and out group here. None of us possesses God or God's word or the body and blood of Christ and gives it to someone else. This is God's word, not ours. This is Christ's banquet, not ours. We are all guests. We receive the grace, love, and adoption God gives. God chooses to give. The giving comes from God's initiative, not ours. We are all the receivers, the guests, the visitors, the adopted.

Third, the question of visitors is nothing new. The church has dealt with this before. That is why the Orthodox call the service of the word the mass of the catechumens and the service of the supper the mass of the faithful. That is why, after the prayers and before the supper, the catechumens were dismissed in the early church. Christians generally have viewed the word service as available to everyone, especially the learners, the visitors, the newcomers. And they have viewed the supper as, to quote one liturgy, “the innermost sanctuary of the whole Christian worship.”¹ This is not surprising, since lessons, sermon, hymn, and prayers are more immediately comprehensible to the visitor than the meal, which is of necessity more complex and richly layered. Table fellowship always gets to the center of a community, and the supper is no exception.

In the eighteenth century, John Wesley made this issue more complex by arguing that the Lord’s Supper is a “converting ordinance” and that Christ himself demonstrated this in giving the elements to the unconverted and commanding them “to do this `in remembrance of` Him.”² Wesley recommended therefore that those without faith go to church and communicate.³

I mention this not to suggest solutions to our ecumenical tangles and confusing practice, but to indicate there are resources in the church’s history to help our

¹*Book of Worship. Approved by the General Synod of the Evangelical and Reformed Church* (St. Louis: Eden Publishing House, 1947); this is dependent on *A Liturgy: or, Order of Christian Worship...of the German Reformed Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: Lindsay & Blakiston, 1858) 193.

²Entry for June 27, 1740, in *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A. M.*, vol. 2, ed. Nehemiah Curnock (London: Epworth Press, 1911) 361.

³*Ibid.*, 330 (entry for Dec. 31, 1739).

discussions and make clear that we are not the first to have thought about these things.

Fourth, there is in all worship a tension between the “esoteric and the modern.”⁴ Some traditions place the emphasis on the esoteric—past words and phrases, past languages and gestures, and dress a culture no longer uses. For these traditions the visitor is required to make adjustments to an unaccustomed environment. One can view Orthodox worship as operating in an antechamber of heaven, so to speak, and that’s not where we worldlings normally dwell. The visitor will have to learn the surroundings and the traditions associated with them.

For other traditions, the emphasis falls on the modern. Here dress, gesture, and language are closer to those of the culture. A Unitarian service, for example, may take on the earmarks of a town meeting or a secular musical recital. The visitor will clearly have less adjusting to do.

Though the poles of the esoteric and modern may be apparent in these examples, no tradition escapes this tension. As soon as people gather for worship more than once, habits set in. Unconsciously there will be a persistence of texts and practices which will sooner or later—and in our rapidly changing culture it will likely be sooner rather than later—not be those of the surrounding culture.

This esoteric/modern tension is not merely arbitrary. Theological issues are at work here. Theology generates practice, and practice generates theology. It is no accident that Orthodox and Unitarians come out at different points; they believe different things.

Fifth, at its heart the liturgy shows forth Christ. Its purpose is not to adapt us to the culture, but to make us new creatures in Christ—new creatures who are in but not of the culture.

Here is the fundamental problem these discussions face: What is cultural accretion, and what is core? Where are the earthen vessels, and where is the treasure?

Those are not easy questions, and there are no easy answers. Several things might be said, however. First, there are cultural accretions in our liturgies, and some of them may well have to go, whether we like it or not. We should not minimize the pain. It's similar to the pain of Jesus walking into the night of the cross without knowing the resurrection was on the other side. This means death with new life only as promise—and no clear sense of what shape the new life will take. This is painful, and it should not be minimized.

However, we should not be too quick to throw everything away. It is a drastic mistake, as Aidan Kavanagh points out, to assume that everything archaic is obsolete.⁵ As in our unconscious selves, there may be more imbedded in the archaic than we dreamed. It is powerful and may contain untamed demons, but it may also be among the most hospitable and welcoming of things—because it has to do with memory.

⁴Notes from worship classes with Cyril Richardson and Bard Thompson.

⁵Aidan Kavanagh, *Elements of Rite* (New York: Pueblo, 1982) 41.

It is surely the case that the liturgy that is most esoteric and most archaic is often the most prophetic. The liturgy, because it embodies the word of God, even stands against itself. To attempt to adapt it to the prevailing currents of the moment is to defang it and to remove some of its deepest power.

Sixth, the place where all of this comes to a head is in music. Music and musicians have become the central battleground for these matters. There are no easy solutions to the musical problems we face, but here are some observations about them.

1. We are not the first Christians who ever lived. We have a massive musical repertoire to draw from. To avoid it is to deprive ourselves of a great treasure and to deny ourselves part of our own story.

2. There is no such thing as a sacred or secular major-minor seventh chord. To assume a given style is by definition sacred or secular is a delusion and avoids what history has taught us.

3. There are, however, associations, which need to be sorted out. Rap music is a male phenomenon and may imply violence against women. Classical music and all it encompasses (or now even jazz) may imply classism. Rock may suggest an antinomian argument against all authority. What is often called church music may suggest death. Popular music and commercial jingles may suggest the manipulation of the market place. African-American music may be attractive, partially because of its rhythm (as with the baroque), but also because its use assuages white guilt. White guilt may turn whites against the music of their own ethnic heritages and make them into unconscious and inverse racists.

If this sounds like we are having a problem knowing what we can do or finding anything we can sing together, that is precisely the case. That's why we need composers who will fashion music for us that gives us our voice. That's why we need to take our own traditions seriously and find what is compelling about them, not only for our sakes, but for the sake of the whole ecumenical mosaic. That's why all the multi-cultural materials are so important. That's why conferences with genuine dialogue (not acerbic attacks) are helpful. And it's especially why those musicians who try to work things out weekly in local churches are so important. Those who do

that don't get many strokes today. Usually they get attacked no matter what they do. But they are doing precisely what makes it possible for us to sing.

4. We need music for worship that is durable. What is durable has to be well-crafted. We can argue about what that means, and we will, but the importance of careful craft is a given.

5. The center of what we do is counter-cultural, no matter what style it takes.

i. Music of the church starts from the song the people sing. That is communal music, not solo music. The norm for the culture is solo singing.

ii. Music of the church is led by a musician who is present in the assembly to do the leading. The norm for the culture is an absent musician who is heard through headphones.

iii. Music of the church is live, in the flesh, acoustic. The norm of the culture

is amplification. Thomas Day is not so wrong when he calls us to “melt down the microphones or beat them into plowshares.”⁶

V. PRACTICAL MATTERS

I do not pretend to have any special expertise about how visitors may be welcomed. But these reactions grow out of my experience visiting more and more churches over the years:

1. The building itself needs to be hospitable.

i. The building needs to be taken care of, not left to fall apart.

ii. Are there signs to the bathrooms and other rooms in the church (like the office)?

iii. Is there access for handicapped?

iv. What about the architecture and art? Is the space of the building functionally arranged for the use to which it will be put? If so, that in itself welcomes people. If the building is arranged so that some people cannot see or cannot easily move, there is less than a welcome. If the art only makes sense to a parish in-group, trouble is afoot. It is not popular to talk about good and bad art, but people do know the difference and do sense what is appropriate and inappropriate. Overly elaborate and gaudy things or the pretense of simplicity do not welcome people.

v. If there has to be a sound system—and churches that are designed where these are not necessary are in the best position—it has to work, making the sound as natural as possible. If there are places where people sit and cannot hear, or if the sound system fades in and out or crackles and blares, people do not feel welcomed.

vi. Are the acoustics such that a community can effectively sing in them? If they absorb sound and make everyone feel like individuals who stick out when they sing, there is no welcome.

2. The liturgy's leaders do not welcome when they call attention to themselves or to the liturgy.

i. “Good morning” says “This is my (the leader's) house, not God's,” or “Let's play pep rally.” This greeting, though well-intentioned, invariably highlights the ego of the minister and suggests a meeting or greeting like all other meetings or greetings. It calls attention to the greeter. As I have watched this, my sense is that people force a smile or laughter, but underneath they often feel they have been violated.

ii. Long announcements make visitors want to leave. In two churches I visited recently, announcements were eight and thirteen minutes long. Only a few people paid any attention. Those of us who were visitors were totally left out.

iii. Having visitors stand or singling them out in some other uncomfortable way simply embarrasses most people. It does nothing to welcome them.

iv. Making what is simple needlessly complex points to the insecurity of the pastor or leader and puts people off. In one church I recently visited a pastor told

⁶Thomas Day, *Why Catholics Can't Sing* (New York: Crossroad, 1991) 169.

his congregation the first hymn would be difficult. It was as easy as all the other hymns and turned out to be sung quite well, though it started out hesitantly because the pastor had demoralized the people by his foolish comments. The same is true for portions of the liturgy. Announcements about liturgical matters need to be as brief as possible or, preferably, left out altogether. Have the choir and other leaders prepared to lead. Otherwise don't do whatever it is you want to do. This is obvious and simply implies planning by more than one person.

v. Making the bulletin overly complex is one of the worst sins. Things can be laid out plainly and clearly. Careful thought is required, and many bulletins point to its absence.

vi. Avoiding what's needed is another disaster, like printing out a whole service and omitting the music for a hymn that's not in the hymnal, or using a setting of the liturgy the congregation knows without giving visitors the text and music, or not providing a hymnal and expecting visitors to sing from memory what they don't know!

3. The leaders welcome when everything they do points beyond themselves to God in whose name we gather.

i. Historic greetings like "The Lord be with you," "Oh, Lord, open my lips," "Jesus Christ is the light of the world," "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all" genuinely welcome people, make it clear why we gather, and set the context for worship.

ii. Announcements may be necessary, like naming those for whom prayer is being made. That points beyond itself to the direction of our prayer and suggests the kind of concerns we are called to have. Most other announcements turn out to be little more than fluff and only call attention to ourselves.

iii. Let the people greet visitors in the way you greet visitors cordially in your home or anywhere else. There are folks in the congregation who can do this, who know who is visiting, and can simply be neighborly without guile or violation.

iv. The use of lay people to function as assisting ministers, to read lessons, etc., is welcoming because it grows out of the whole community rather than a few leaders' egos.

v. Everyone is welcomed by reading and leading—including musical leading—that is done well, with authority, and with genuine concern for people. Nothing is so demoralizing as reading that cannot be understood and playing that is incompetent or calls attention to itself, leaving the people to fend for themselves in a swirling sea of chaos. Avoiding this requires planning, preparing (practicing), and competence. I was once told of a study which indicated the only common characteristic of growing and vital congregations was the presence of a full-time

musician. The issue is not style, but competence and commitment to excellence.

vi. The fundamental principle is to let the liturgy be the liturgy and hide our egos. That's what vestments do: they dress us down, not up. That's what the discipline we call liturgy does. These things give us a balance of form and freedom so that people won't be ambushed. One of the strongest arguments for the historic

liturgy is that it protects the people—all the people, the faithful and the visitors—from the egos of pastoral, musical, and other leaders.

4. We need new translations and new hymns that are inclusive for humanity in all ways and that give a full-orbed set of biblical metaphors for God that are not simply male. This is an ongoing process for which the most careful work of the best scholars and poets among us is required.

5. In the process of making new translations we need to respect the people's memory bank. Not much is left of the memory bank because we have largely neglected it. One way to be hospitable is to choose worthy texts with care and ecumenical sensitivity, then use them without constant change. The loose talk about everything in the liturgy being throw-away is nonsense. Nothing is so inhospitable as keeping people perpetually on edge with texts that are forever being altered. If visitors come back a second or third time, they sense chaos and not hospitality when the texts are forever changing.

6. I think a balance between old and new—esoteric and modern—is important, but each congregation has to determine what that means in its own context. The real problem we face in our swirling turbulence is how to use the incredible resources from past and present and to fashion new ones which will carry the welcome of the gospel. That is why we need the work of the finest poets, composers, and musicians.