



FACE TO FACE

What Does It Mean to Be a Worshiping Community?

*A Response to Wright and Luecke*¹

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IN A RECENT ISSUE OF *WORD & WORLD*, TIM WRIGHT AND DAVID LUECKE DIALOGUE about the principles and practices of contemporary worship.² Though they are speaking (“Face to Face”) to one another, they are really “facing” a third person, removed from the conversation yet influencing almost every sentence. In this response I will identify that third person and point out several polarities in their dialogue that I believe are based upon false assumptions about worship style as well as a misunderstanding of some fundamental principles of Christian worship and its role in a Lutheran congregation.

Both Wright and Luecke incorrectly assume that the chief service of the congregation is intended to be the gateway into the congregation, the door through which the (non-believing) community is evangelized, brought to faith.³ While liturgical evangelism may be the intent of congregations like Community of Joy and Royal Redeemer,⁴ it is not the intent of the church’s traditional understanding of the liturgy.⁵ Before 1980, if Lutheran congregations shifted their chief services

¹Editor’s note: Although *Word & World* has not previously published responses to Face to Face contributions, J. Jeffrey Zetto’s unsolicited response is printed here because it provides a different perspective (a third “face”), extending a conversation that is important to the life of the church.

²“Face to Face: How Far Can We Go in Worship?” *Word & World* 17/4 (1997) 424-427. Hereafter, all parenthetical page references refer to this article. W will refer to Wright; L to Luecke.

³W: “Is our mission to share our best understanding of the gospel with people who have never been to church before?” (424). L: “The attraction is for [the unchurched] to witness others, people like themselves, expressing the relationship with God in ways that are spiritually moving and meaningful” (427).

⁴These are the congregations of the authors.

⁵Throughout this article liturgy and Eucharist refer to the service of word and sacrament (Holy Communion).

from evangelical worship to evangelism, the shift was unintentional, done either by historical accident or because of a misreading of history and theology.

Wright and Luecke assert a polarity in the church's liturgical style which posits arcane traditional worship over against a more user-friendly contemporary service.⁶ Luecke also asserts a polarity between presentation and participation in contemporary worship.⁷ Both express a cognitive approach to ritual and symbols in worship, assuming symbols and liturgical action must be understood to be effective.⁸

I.

Constantinian Christianity (312-1950)⁹ in the United States enjoyed a culture in which the church, as institution, received a greater or lesser degree of formal support from the government and/or community and, in turn, supported the government.¹⁰ This, of course, is not the situation today as congregations in the United States approach the third millennium.¹¹ Constantinian Christianity could assume infant baptism, a catechesis supported by parents and community, and a general culture in which the Bible (as literature), and the symbols of the church (as cultural accretions) were recognized, if not fully understood, by most of the general public; today, no longer.

The sixteenth-century reformation was as dependent upon Constantinian Christianity as was the church at any other time in its life.¹² What we know as

⁶W: "Is our mission...to continue to enculturate [life-long Christians] into the styles and language of traditional liturgics?" (424). L: "Simplicity is valuable, as is a sense of authenticity that is hard to impart through symbolic worship" (427). Yet the free-form prayer style of many evangelicals ("Lord, I just want...") can be as authentic or inauthentic as a liturgical prayer, carefully crafted by the presiding or assisting (lay) minister from cues in the liturgy's lessons and the community's life.

⁷"There is a clear difference emerging in the contemporary worship movement between those who approach worship...as presentation and those who want to offer opportunity to participate" (425).

⁸Wright's introductory polarities of Latin/German/English, KJV/NRSV, and "take advantage of contemporary music or stick to songs 500 years old or older" (424) are all cognitive polarities. Luecke does somewhat better, speaking of worship as "experience" and "event" (427). But he betrays his cognitive approach when he writes, "While ritual can be powerfully moving to some, it goes past many without bringing them into personal engagement" (427, emphasis added).

⁹Constantinian Christianity, as used here, describes the period roughly from the Edict of Nantes (the legalization of Christianity in the Roman Empire and Christianity's subsequent support, tacit and licit, by the state) to the years following World War II (when a series of American laws and Supreme Court decisions legally removed Christianity from the political culture of the United States).

¹⁰From Sunday "blue laws" to legislative chaplains, preferential taxation, and prayers at civic events, there was a close blending of Christian church and state.

¹¹A primary example is the "infringement" of school and sport activities on the once "sacred" times of Sunday morning and Wednesday evenings. Strangely, the same evangelical Christians who decry this "attack" by the American culture most vocally support the "separation of church and state."

¹²For example, the formula *cuius regio, eius religio* ("whoever rules sets the religion") at the Peace of Westphalia (1648) ended the Thirty Years War by asserting that the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed movements would be institutionalized according to the denomination of the territorial prince. This "executive authority" was no different than Charlemagne's "Christianizing" Europe in the ninth century by baptizing whole villages at the point of a sword. The epitome of this principle in the German church came in 1817 when Frederick Wilhelm III of Prussia, by his own reason and strength, joined the Reformed and Lutheran Churches in the "Prussian Union."

post-Constantinian Christianity had its roots in rationalism,¹³ the enlightenment,¹⁴ pietism,¹⁵ and the American frontier; all contributed to moving faith's personal commitment to politics' civil religion.¹⁶ While the United States enjoyed a veneer of Judeo-Christian culture, its political leadership donned the clothing of piety when seeking election but not when dealing with issues.¹⁷ The post-Constantinian relationship of church and state, incipient in the deist philosophy of the political thinkers of the American revolution,¹⁸ has become evident in legislation and Supreme Court decisions since World War II. Thus, thesis one: *The church can no longer live with a mythic understanding of American culture and must not conduct its cultus in the context of such a myth.*

II.

This starts to sound like Wright and Luecke's clarion call to liturgical revolution.¹⁹ But, to heed their call would be to succumb to another element of the American culture, the elevation of the individual over the community. Thus, thesis two: *American individualism, in its most popular mythic forms, is contrary to the biblical understanding of baptism as our incorporation into the body of Christ.*²⁰

Two philosophers and philosophies wrestle for the American soul. The "social contract" of John Locke (1632-1704) is the philosophical basis for the United States Constitution. He held that people, left to themselves in the wilderness, would become wild beasts. So people give up part of their absolute freedom to live in the assured liberty and prosperity of the city.²¹ Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) also

¹³In the church orthodoxy reigns supreme; faith equals right thinking (pure doctrine).

¹⁴From society's viewpoint, the church is intellectually bankrupt; if God exists, it is as a god of the gaps.

¹⁵In the church orthodoxy reigns supreme; pure doctrine is out, pure living is in. This is the era of good religious feeling.

¹⁶A desire to maintain a cultural (not religious) tradition led many Pennsylvania Lutheran congregations to accept any preacher as long as he could preach in German. The offspring is the "union church" tradition (extending to today) in which "Reformed" and Lutheran congregations share a building and even a single pastor. Other Lutherans, desiring to adapt to the "new" country and culture became so Americanized that they adopted the piety of other denominations while maintaining the name Lutheran. All of this was complicated by circuit-riding preachers who could not give even weekly pastoral care to the fledgling frontier congregations and by a lack of indigenous Lutheran seminaries in the United States until the mid-nineteenth century.

¹⁷The acts of the United States both corporately (e.g., manifest destiny) and individually (e.g., Teapot Dome) belie that Christianity was anything more than public facade for many of its political leaders. On the other hand, abolition and temperance (including feminism) were couched by Christian laypeople in the strongest evangelical terms; but these were movements to change the government from without, not within.

¹⁸"The pursuit of happiness" is not the same thing as the pursuit of righteousness, or, as Amos writes, "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8).

¹⁹Actually they call for a return to the predominance of the great American preaching service—with choral entertainment.

²⁰This by no means limits baptism to incorporation, but it does set incorporation over against its antithesis in mythic American culture.

²¹Thus, the United States Constitution's preamble reads: "We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquillity, provide for the common

held to a “social contract,” but asserted that people were naturally good and that the city, while rationally construed, was a compromise, a lessening of the powers of the individual and a source of crime and corruption. It is significant that Edmund Burke (1729-1797), British statesman and jurist, comparing the American (Locke) and French (Rousseau) revolutions, affirmed the principles and practices of the former English colonies over the abuses and anarchy of the French.

The philosophies of Locke and Rousseau are at the heart of the dialogue between Wright and Luecke and their invisible, but very present, antagonist (a proponent of the church’s classical liturgy). Frank Senn winsomely argues that one of the heresies of American culture is its gnostic tendency to ignore both physical and historical reality (contextualization).²² The checks and balances of the church’s classical liturgy bring us from church growth’s mythic egocentrism (Rousseau) to the body of Christ in time and culture (Locke).²³

To the extent that worship is the incarnation of the gospel, Wright is correct when he asks, “How far will we go to make worship and the gospel accessible to people?” (424). But that question, as the theme of his article, begs the real question: What are Christians doing when they gather for the chief service of worship?

III.

Thesis three: *Lutherans do not have absolute freedom of liturgical expression*. By virtue of our ordination oath, Lutheran pastors pledge to “preach and teach in accordance with the Holy Scriptures, [Apostolic, Nicene, and Athanasian] creeds and [Lutheran] confessions.”²⁴ Members of the ELCA are committed to that church’s principles, policies, and practices, one of which is the weekly Eucharist.²⁵ Thus congregations and their clergy do not have the freedom to say, “I did it my way” — at least not for the chief service of the church. While the Bible and the Lutheran confessions do not “dictate one certain style of worship” (427), the confessions do articulate and assume that the Eucharist will be celebrated as the

defense, promote the general welfare, and insure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this constitution for the United States of America” (emphasis added). It should also be noted that the more federal United States Constitution (1787) came *after* the original Articles of Confederation which were judged to be too loose to effectively govern the growing nation.

²²Senn writes about the American ethos, “Heritage is preserved for nostalgic, not critical, purposes; and nostalgia, in its selective use of memory, promotes myth more than real history,” in “What Has Become of the Liturgical Movement,” *Pro Ecclesia* 6/3 (1997) 321. Senn bases his detailed analysis of American religion as gnostic upon the work of Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992); see *ibid.*, 325-327.

²³The liturgy assures that we are bound to both sacred and profane history, to the immediate (social) context, and to the faith-full hope of the future.

²⁴*Occasional Services: A Companion to Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg; Philadelphia: Board of Publication, Lutheran Church in America, 1982) 194.

²⁵“The Holy Communion is Celebrated Weekly: According to the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Lutheran congregations celebrate the Holy Communion every Sunday and festival. This confession remains the norm for our practice”: *The Use of the Means of Grace*, A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament (Churchwide Assembly, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1997) # 35. The churchwide assembly added to the proposed draft: “but not every service need be a Eucharist,” thus indicating the distinction between and expectation of a chief service and ancillary services.

chief service of the congregation at least “every Sunday and on other festivals.”²⁶ Our unity with and commitment to the worshiping community “of every time and every place”²⁷ moves us out of the wilderness of liturgical anarchy and egocentrism and into the “decency and order” (1 Cor 12:31)²⁸ of the church.

The significant difference between Wright/Luecke and their unnamed polar correspondent is that, for a Lutheran, once the chief service of the church has been designated, all other services (prayer, healing, seeker, etc.) can be constructed with the greatest degree of liturgical freedom. But the chief service must be a service of word and sacrament (the Eucharist). Why?

IV.

Thesis four: *The chief service of the church has never been intended to be the entry point to faith; it is rather the empowerment of faith.* The chief service may be the entry point to a congregation or, perhaps, to the institutional church, but not to faith. From the inception of the church up to the time of Constantine’s conversion,²⁹ the church made a careful distinction between those portions of the service open to the general public and holy communion, which was closed to all but the local congregation and their believing-and-certified guests.³⁰ Even Billy Sunday and Billy Graham did not intend their rallies to be substitutes for a formal relationship with a congregation in its liturgical context.

The unfamiliarity and exclusions felt by a non-believing visitor to a Lutheran congregation’s chief service may not be “politically correct” in the “touchy-feely” world of church growth, but faith is not simple feeling, just as the “pursuit of happiness” is not biblical joy. The Eucharist is celebrated as that which feeds and leads the believer. It is breakfast, lunch, dinner, and pep rally for workers in God’s fallen world. It is a time of forgiveness and fellowship, an opportunity for personal and corporate healing, and a confrontation with the word of God in its visible and invisible forms. We worship not because we feel good or because the service makes us feel good, but because we have a need to be in God’s presence, to receive God’s grace and support, and to be supported by God’s people. The Lutheran liturgical genius is to uphold the absolute objectivity of the gospel in word and sacrament.

Does that mean that Lutheran worship must degenerate into arcane oblivion? Of course not. But it does mean that each congregation needs to have a service of word and sacrament (Eucharist) as the chief service, even if it is the only service. The service, however it is crafted, must affirm the church’s historical and theologi-

²⁶*Apology to the Augsburg Confession* 24:1, in the *Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959) 249. Also: “The Lord’s supper is given as a daily food and sustenance so that our faith may refresh and strengthen itself and not weaken in the struggle but grow continually stronger” (Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism*, Lord’s Supper 24, in *Book of Concord*, 449).

²⁷Eucharistic Prayer # 31, *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg; Philadelphia: Board of Publication, Lutheran Church in America, 1978).

²⁸Note that Paul’s plea for an orderly liturgical and congregational life is in direct response to the “ecclesiastical henhouse” that was First Church, Corinth.

²⁹Really from the Edict of Nantes (312) and the Council of Nicea (325).

³⁰Werner Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, trans. N. E. Nagel (St. Louis: Concordia, 1996) passim.

cal heritage in all its fullness without compromising cultural relevance.³¹ The issue is not cutting-edge creativity but catholic necessity.

V.

Thesis five: *Cultural relevance or irrelevance is neither automatically a vehicle for the gospel nor a hindrance to the gospel. "Traditional kinds of worship" resonate not only with "those raised in them" (426), but also with non-church-going people as well. The issue is not Corinthian exclusivity but evangelical inclusivity.*

One needs to ask Wright and Luecke why so many evangelical Christians are joining Eastern Orthodox congregations; it is certainly not because they fully understand the language and cultus. Rather their spiritual journey is impelled because in the *mysterium tremendum* of the Orthodox liturgy they experience the *mysterium tremendum* of the gospel. Similarly, why are so many Christians and non-Christians purchasing recordings of Gregorian chant? It cannot be because the ninth century is so popular on television; it seems rather that the music, incomprehensibly by church growth standards, touches them at a preconscious level.

Liturgy operates much more in the affective domain rather than the cognitive. It is to be experienced, and in being experienced it works at levels that have more to do with feelings than with understandings. The question is less "Do I understand?" than "Am I moved?"³² The seeker service, particularly entertainment evangelism, relies on the experiential rather than the cognitive. It is just that the rhetoric (and perhaps liturgical understanding) of those who write about such services is generally couched in cognitive terms.

Lutherans need to know the sixteenth-century rituals, symbols, and music, because that is part of our identity—as much as it is essential for Americans to understand the language and philosophy of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England to understand our Declaration of Independence and Constitution. That does not mean that the liturgy is only for the sophisticated; it does mean that there is always something more to be experienced and appreciated.

Neither does it mean that the rites, rituals, ceremonies, and symbols of the past five hundred years, nor the spiritual activity for the millennium and a half prior to the reformation, are absolutely normative for our liturgical actions today. Thesis six: *Our catholic heritage and ecumenical commitment demand that we have a working familiarity with the worship patterns of African, Asian, and Hispanic Christians as well as our own.*

VI.

The question is not "How far can we go in recreating worship?" but "What does it mean to be a worshiping community?" Why do and *must* Lutherans gather

³¹Twenty-first century cultural relevance, especially in liturgical forms, is no different than the struggle of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Lutheran congregations moving from European languages to English.

³²Liturgy is also never pure experience. Luther's charge against the *Schwärmer* (enthusiasts) was that they had reduced spiritual certainty from the evangelical certainty of word and sacrament to "how I feel about what I hear."

around word and sacrament? What norms do we follow and what forms do we use? Having received our Lord in word and sacrament, what does the gospel impel us to do and to be in the name of Jesus Christ for our worshiping community (including our denomination and the whole church) and for the greater community (the world) in which we live?

Luecke posits this polarity: “The most solid foundation for worship is a living relationship with God, not layers of symbols about God” (427). Yet all relationships with God involve layers and levels of symbolism—in language, behavior, ideation, etc. One cannot divorce symbol from worship. The question is: What is appropriate for the occasion?

For Lutherans, “the most solid foundation for worship” is the objective promises of God (gospel), which are proclaimed in words (scripture, sermon, liturgy, hymnody), art, music, and actions (postures, gestures, and dance). These have reality in themselves, but they are also symbols of the greatest reality, which is Jesus Christ. Above all stands the absolute promise³³ proclaimed by Jesus Christ in bread-and-wine, “This is my Body and Blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. Do this in remembrance of me.” Weekly, not weakly.

Jesus did not call us to a discipleship that uses worship as a tool for increasing numbers; rather, Jesus said, “Seek first the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness, and all these things [including membership numbers] shall be yours as well” (Matt 6:33).³⁴ ⊕

³³So Luther, who recognized, even before the Augsburg Confession (1530), that the greater threat to the gospel came from those who would spiritualize God’s promises rather than the medieval Roman Catholic Church, whose abuses, while real, did not remove the gospel’s authenticity or objectivity: “I have often enough asserted that I do not argue whether the wine remains wine or not. It is enough for me that Christ’s blood is present; let it be with the wine as God wills. Sooner than have mere wine with the fanatics, I would agree with the pope that there is only blood” (*Confession concerning the Lord’s Supper* [1528], trans. and ed. Robert H. Fischer, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 37 [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1961] 317).

³⁴In its context (sermon on the mount), this text seems to ask whether the liturgical principles of the church growth movement, as expressed in “Face to Face,” are really a statistical security blanket compared with the classical liturgy’s act of faith.