



Whence and Whither in Worship: A Reflective Attempt

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The year 1988 was one for celebration in the worship of the church:

- C 100th anniversary of the Common Service for English-speaking Lutherans on this continent;
- C 10th anniversary of the appearance of the *Lutheran Book of Worship*;
- C 30th anniversary of the appearance of the *Service Book and Hymnal*;
- C 25th anniversary of the acceptance of the Constitution on Liturgy by the Second Vatican Council.

The celebrations have brought us out into clearing places from which we can survey the vista—see from whence we have come, and where we shall go.

From these various viewpoints, I would like to select three in particular to demonstrate where we think we are: the centennial of the Common Service; the 25th anniversary of the acceptance of the Constitution on the Liturgy; and the 10th anniversary of the *Lutheran Book of Worship*.

I. THE COMMON SERVICE

In a very sensitive recent article, Michael Aune assessed the attainments of the Lutheran Common Service of 1888 and set it within the problems of that time.¹ He maintained that the commissioners brought forth an English service based in the use of the pure Lutheran liturgies of the sixteenth century, but also led the church from its previous liturgical habit of verbal reading to a liturgy made up of a flow of liturgical actions under the words. The final development of this liturgical flow of actions was the liturgy in the *Service Book and Hymnal*

¹Michael B. Aune, "The Corporate and Confessional Character of Worship: The Common Service Debate," *Word & World* 8/1 (1988) 32-41. Here is a historian bringing us into the debate of the 19th century as though it were part of our present debate.

of 1958. The majority of Lutherans stepped firmly into this Common Service as their first use of English in the liturgy. There is much more than meets the eye in that original step toward liturgy as a flow of succeeding actions. We give thanks today for that step.

II. VATICAN II

The changes brought about in Roman Catholic worship twenty-five years ago were momentous; they have affected all Christians. Some of us stood by as observers, open-mouthed to see how a hierarchically structured church can make changes by fiat. The church "gave the

word”—and immediately the changes were in force. Chancel tables replaced high altars at the east end; lay lectors and communion assistants were employed; worship belonged to the people; congregations responded in chant and act. The confusion was necessarily great, but the changes were effected. Today, few parishes can even imagine whence they have come.

All has not been perfect, however. Basic to a knowledge of liturgy, especially in its new form, is consciousness of what is meant by a liturgical act, for the new liturgy is a succession of liturgical actions performed by the people and their leaders. Yet there are cries from respected leaders in the reform that this first step, assumed to have been taken now long ago, was missed by many.² And until one knows what the meaning of a liturgical act is, the multiplication of such actions makes little sense. Sure, many people receive the Eucharist more frequently, but if they don't realize what it is they do, are we any better off?

This is the haunting question underneath the whole liturgical movement. We just assumed *if* the flow of liturgical actions were revealed for all to see and experience, by some miraculous inner reasoning people would understand what they did. But most sensitive pastors who have honestly tried to increase the availability of the Eucharist to their people, though grateful that everybody is coming to the table, cannot really be sure that receiving the Eucharist brings with it what the movement promised.

III. LUTHERAN BOOK OF WORSHIP

The *Lutheran Book of Worship* (LBW)—how does it stand now after a decade of use? Well, the liturgical services have worn unusually well. Sure, congregations have not been able to keep up with its encouragement of a variety of choices within basic forms—ways to interest the congregations in different expressions Sunday after Sunday. They have been too anxious to attain some routinely repeatable and familiar items for worship. Yet throughout the land, in whatever setting, most Lutheran congregations have used the format of the liturgy with surprising congregational acceptance. In religious communities such as seminaries, this acceptance has gone farther and has embraced with real affection Morning and Evening Prayer, Compline, the Service of the Word, and Responsive Prayer I and II. Though I predicted that the musical settings were too difficult for the sporadic use a congregation makes of these resour-

²*Assembly* 12/4 (1986). The issue is on the liturgical act.

ces, those groups which can repeat them often enough to become familiar with them feel they have something precious. Especially creative in the LBW has been the ingenious way of chanting the Psalter, a method much used throughout the church.

The hymns of the LBW have been a mixed bag. Though there is a fine collection of twentieth-century hymns, it is my impression that they are not much used, chiefly because of the difficulty of accompaniment for many of the best. The generous offering of chorales is overused by some, and greatly underused by most in my section of the country. The tinkering with accepted English harmonies has set up a constant vexation among many Lutherans that won't go away, despite the tardy provision of a pamphlet with traditional harmonies provided. And the needs of those who seek an inclusive church have yet to be satisfied within the hymnal. Yet, all in all, when supplemented with traditional harmonizations, the LBW is accepted more willingly now than ten years ago. What grumblings remain have moved underground.

With all these positives, we cannot escape some movements in our peripheral vision that trouble the surface of worship somewhat. The uncertainties of the sixties that brought into prominence slide-shows, balloons, guitars, and orders of service determined by drawing cards from a deck, have not gone away. Leaders of worship, on the other side, have not opened their focus wide enough to encourage traditions of self-expression that must be apart of Christian growth and an addition to style in worship.

IV. A BROAD SURVEY

Not so long ago I read a piece somewhere describing the situation in worship in the Anglican church (not so different from ours). The author imagined a historian from the twenty-first century looking back at worship in our times. He would divide the developments into three parts historically: a period of almost a century when the scholarly work had been brought together to ecumenical satisfaction; a second period—much shorter—of political efforts to effect the changes in the churches; and finally a period of clean-up—simply reaching out and gathering the details. He felt that we are now in the activity of cleanup.

For Lutherans, this outline also seems to make sense. Certainly we can look back on a little more than a century of scholarly work. The production of the Common Service appears now to have been largely the work of just three men for a larger commission which accepted it.³ Directly after its appearance, a Common Service Committee was appointed to give scholarly direction to the church's worship. The *Common Service Book* (1917) was the result; the Common Service Book Committee then led the United Lutheran Church in America into the Joint Commission on the Liturgy (appointed personnel of scholarly bent) which produced the *Service Book and Hymnal*.

I became the chair of the Commission on Liturgy and the Hymnal *after* the *Service Book and Hymnal* (SBH) and involuntarily ushered in the period of political activity. We were faced with a new reality: the eight Lutheran groups

³Edward T. Horn, III, "The Common Service—A Centennial Memoir," *Lutheran Forum* 21/3 (1987) 21ff.

that had produced the SBH were now becoming only two—the American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church in America. Moreover, the ALC decided to vote as a block on every issue. This threw everything into a political decision. There was nothing possible to do except invite a third party to break deadlocks; we invited the Missouri Synod (then the Synodical Conference). They accepted, and we had two fine meetings with an exchange of papers and discussed the possible cooperation on all future steps toward liturgies and hymnals. They accepted, but in their own way, which was to issue an invitation *de novo* to all the bodies, and a new Inter-Lutheran Commission was formed.⁴ The political stage had been ushered in. One cannot understand the basic decisions which made the LBW what it was except from the political realities. Political necessities are evident at every turn. The LBW is a child of the times.

Yet the LBW stands before us as an accomplishment of the first order. It has brought together some really diverse traditions, especially in the music of the various bodies. Muhlenberg's initial dream of one service, one book, has partially been realized; yet there is room between the covers for much variety and choice.

If this analysis is correct, then once the LBW is out in the churches for use, Lutherans

enter into the phase of “cleaning up.” There are all those practical and pastoral problems in its use: frequency of the Eucharist; how best to create a Service of the Word equal to the weight which our traditional reverence for preaching has placed on that service; ways to adapt the offices to congregational use; ways and means of introducing a wider choice of hymns; use of occasional or seasonal services such as Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Vigil, services of healing and confession, etc. This “cleaning up” might require only a programmatic committee. No big deal! And that seems to be the way the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is drifting.

But what if this Anglican analysis is wrong? What is to prevent those movements on the periphery of our vision from moving into the center of congregational planning again? What is to come from the urgent requests from excluded groups for a place in the worship of the church? If the whole area of worship opens up again, where are Lutherans to look for scholarly guidance—both textual and musical—especially when it takes a life-time of openness and study to bring the reasoned judgment that we need?

Lutherans are not unified in worship as are the Anglicans and Roman Catholics, who seem to be our present models. In those churches, a change can come about by a movement from the top down. It is not hard to talk about new lectionaries there, because the decisions are made and the whole church follows immediately. But for Lutherans, there is always the necessary percolation from the bottom up—of that we are aware constantly. We just hope this percolation is met with something substantive coming down from those set apart to be our watchmen and watchwomen. Will we be completely open to the new?

⁴On page 7 in the Introduction of the *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg; Philadelphia: Board of Publication, Lutheran Church in America, 1978) the initiation is attributed to the Missouri Synod only. This is *not* the whole truth. I hope that my notice here will encourage historians to search the minutes of the Commission on Liturgy and the Hymnal from about 1960 to 1965.

Are there not some gains in these past celebrations that must be sustained at all cost?

V. ELEMENTS AND STYLE

One of the foremost leaders of the Vatican II renewal is Father Gelineau. In a fine critique of the movement, Gelineau draws a distinction between the *elements* of liturgy and the *style* of liturgy. Using the model of building a house, he claims that the reform has provided the elements of the structure of the liturgy. But a house made up of elements is simply the outline; it has no provision for those things which surround us and make the house our home. This aspect is called *style*. Remaining for most of us are those many routines and choices which adapt the liturgy to our particular time and place. Style must be contributed by the people of God.⁵

This provides a good way to think of the Lutheran program. I think that the liturgical scholarship of the last fifty years has provided us with a structure of actions which the people of God perform in liturgy. Whether we think of the Eucharist or the Service of the Word or the offices, we now think of actions as basic to the rites. For the Eucharist this succession roughly imitates the actions of our Lord in the Supper: he took bread/wine; gave thanks; divided it; distributed it. For the Service of the Word we follow the shape from our Jewish foreparents: preparation, proclamation, meditation, response. For the offices, our shape consists of stimulating

the imagination with pictures from the past (psalms), listening to the lore of the people of God (Scripture), projecting one's intentions in the presence (prayer).

Moreover, there is something about these successions of actions which is constitutive of a Christian community—which makes the people into what they are and shall be. Walter Brueggemann has proposed a type of training in biblical education of Christians that will approximate the story of the development of the Old Testament canon.⁶ There he finds three elements: the Law or Torah, the Prophets, and Wisdom. Torah is constitutive of the people—it makes them what they are and shall be.

Brueggemann uses the example of a Passover Seder. The youngest child starts it all out by asking a formal question: Why is this night different? This invites the answer from the adults which is always the same: the story of the events which made the Jews a separate people. In the retelling, this happens all over again.

There is this sort of constitutive event that should take place whenever Christians meet for worship. The shapes are the same; the elements are the same. There are, of course, those changes in time and place which integrate us into the story, but it is the same story. Can we then count on having reached a plateau in our scholarly progression where we have established a shape for worship? We don't need to travel this pathway again, do we? That much at least—the elements of worship—we can count on! This is a matter of ecumenical consequence.

⁵Joseph Gelineau, *The Liturgy, Today and Tomorrow* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1978) 16ff.

⁶Walter Brueggemann, *The Creative Word: Canon as Model for Biblical Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

However, when we turn to style, the scene is confusing. Style comprises language, music, the arts, mannerisms—all the loving gifts of this particular people. Here is where we are still uncertain. And this must ever be so.

After all, Luther himself laid the egg. He provided three models of liturgy: one a “high” liturgy of the *Formula Missae* which seems to be the Lutheran obsession today; then a “low” liturgy, the *Deutsche Messe*, bringing in the same structure, but with the vernacular and hymns. Both of these are valid, but there is a great difference in the style.

Thus, in just two liturgies, Luther opened to Lutherans great variety. Now, with the LBW, we are engaged in becoming familiar with this variety of vernacular heritages and the ethnic and cultural clothing in which they are dressed. Henry Melchior Muhlenberg's yearning for one service for all Lutherans in America has to be set against this inherent conflict of Lutheran styles.

In addition, Luther opened up the possibility of “evangelical worship,” which would follow neither of these lines but simply be the expression of mature faith of Christians met together for worship. The hope of adding this type of worship was taken up by the pietists; it should definitely remain as another alternative within the Lutheran tradition.

If we have had trouble opening up to the styles of other Lutherans, where are we in providing space for the styles of native Americans, blacks, Hispanics, feminists, Asians? How shall we hold on to the basic elements while giving free encouragement for the flowering of new cultural traditions?

VI. UNFINISHED ITEMS

There are four problem areas in worship where Lutherans must do a lot more thinking. The first is the problem of the *frequency of the Eucharist* in our congregations. In the primarily eucharistic emphasis of the liturgical movement it has been a natural thing to promote the Eucharist as the liturgy for whenever Christians gather together in worship. Church architecture has been revolutionized around the table. Congregations throughout the church have been revitalized in a new interest in sacramental worship.

I have continually warned, however, that, though part of our culture is moving toward the use of sign language and of images more friendly to the sacraments, it is by no means to be assumed that everybody shares in this movement. There are probably as many who belong to an exclusively verbal culture and who are not moved in the sacramental direction one whit. They either follow like sheep to the table without discerning the meaning of the liturgical act or just drop away from the church in silence. Nor is it clear that a well-performed eucharistic rite has within its very actions the drawing power to serve as a vehicle of outreach.

Second, and closely tied to this, is the growing recognition that there is *something sacramental in the traditional Lutheran activity of preaching*. Compare a Lutheran sermon with a Catholic homily; there is usually all the difference in the world, despite the excellent protestations of Catholics that they now have a new appreciation of the preached Word. Though this is fine in theory, what Catholic parish has crowds attending preaching at their services of the Word? That just doesn't catch on with Catholics at all.

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Some time ago, Heiko Oberman demonstrated that Protestants actually used a sort of sacramental understanding of the preached Word as a substitute for the Eucharist.⁷ Therefore, Lutherans have taught people to expect more from a service of the Word than have other Christians. If that teaching has been effective, then we should hold on to this fact even while we are also emphasizing the Eucharist. Some evidence of this tradition should bring forth a service of the Word worth standing by itself, especially needed as an evangelical tool.

Third, we should be able to bring together some *offices* which would serve for the occasional use of congregations. There are two traditions of the offices that have come down to us. The offices developed by the monastic orders are far better known and followed, even though we have neither the time, nor the routines. The second type is called the "cathedral tradition," stemming from the bishop's congregation in the early church; it is congregational. We really don't know much about the latter. But it seems clear that American churches will rarely have the constant congregations, routine, and repetition characteristic of the monastic offices. It should not be too hard to design simple services for morning and evening prayer that take their genesis from what congregations need rather than from what monks had.

Fourth, it is gradually dawning on all of us that the *missionary potential in our liturgical reform*—the clear opening up of liturgical actions to view and experience—is not by itself going to reach out to the American public and draw people in. The liturgy was really not intended to do that. It is primarily a rite of identity formation and renewal, a constitutive event which makes us Christians and ever nourishes us as Christians. We have emphasized our need for this, and we must hold that fast. It is the step we needed.

What then of our outreach? Some time ago, I suggested that Lutherans follow the hint

provided by the Anglicans: each congregation, now that it has reestablished the Eucharist as a weekly event, should set aside one Sunday a month for a liturgy with the possibilities of outreach. For Protestants, there are certain elements that have worked with the general public: readings (especially from Scripture), hymns, a sermon of some kind, and prayers. Such an evangelistic service should be the congregation's gift toward mission. Members could understand it that way, and cooperate by drawing up lists of invitees. If that could be established, every congregation could reach out once a month with a service designed for that purpose. I no longer believe that a well done eucharistic service is its own advertisement. Once we admit this, and find a way to still hold the Eucharist as a constitutive event, Christians are ready to go on to anew adventure.⁸

VII. WHO SHALL LEAD US?

I have tried to sketch where Lutherans are in worship today. Even to guess where we are about to go is pretty difficult. At this writing, there is no clear

⁷Heiko Oberman, "The Preaching of the Word," *Harvard Divinity School Bulletin* 25/1 (1960) 7-18.

⁸John A. T. Robinson used to observe that most of the church's worship was somewhat like an athletic team "playing at home" before a sympathetic audience. But, he insisted, we have to play half of our games away in front of a hostile audience. To learn to do this is another matter.

picture of who's in charge and whether the ELCA has more than a programmatic commitment ("cleaning up"). Our suggestion of a three-stage history (scholarly work done, political activity, cleaning up) would seem to imply that Lutherans are in phase three. Our suggestions of what still needs to be done (keeping the strong elements of those rites which are constitutive of ourselves as ecumenical Christians *and* stimulating various cultural styles) shows that there is much activity which needs technical, wise, and political advice from knowledgeable persons who give their careers to the subject. In other words, there is little evidence that we have indeed moved beyond the scholarly stage.

So we need some unit of leadership. In this, perhaps, the experience of the past will help. I cannot emphasize too strongly that the present Lutheran position in worship is due to the voluntary life-long contributions of those who were at one time selected to develop liturgical competence. It takes at least six years for a person to become informed in the field; it takes more time to move with others in ecumenical conversations; it takes the development of a pastoral sense to match elements with style. Experience has shown that ten years is not enough to make a commissioner able to speak out in committee. With musicians, there is a further problem. We are not set up with regular places for discussion and comparison and pastoral anticipation of musical compositions before they are accepted for a book. That too takes time.

The method of choosing personnel was changed in the sixties from calling people to develop liturgical expertise to selecting representatives of groups, geographical districts, church bodies, etc. Most of the actual work then had to be delegated to too few individuals. Often much of it was loaded on paid staff. The ongoing accumulation of agreed-upon materials from which liturgies and texts could flow ceased. Decisions were almost entirely politically determined. Lutherans are now reaping some of the ill effects from these failures.

Is it too much to claim that the future of worship in the church is perhaps the most

important thing in church life? That the ongoing development of worship should be regarded as the church's primary task of "research and development"? That a special ELCA commission should be set up for worship?