

# Divine Service: Delivering Forgiveness of Sins

Pastor John T. Pless  
University Lutheran Chapel  
Minneapolis, MN

Presented at the South Dakota District Lay/Clergy Conferences  
Rapid City, SD May 6, 1995 / Sioux Falls, SD May 7, 1995

"Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer." Psalm 19:14

I am grateful for the invitation of your president to speak on the theme "The Way We Worship" from the perspective of a pastor. President Hartwig has asked that each of those presenting do so in a way that will assist pastors and congregations in making informed and knowledgeable decisions in regard to liturgy. It is my prayer that I can be of service to you in thinking through this matter on the basis of the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions.

The debate over the use or non-use of traditional Lutheran liturgical forms has emerged as a hot topic in the life of our Synod. For some, no doubt, what I have to say today will create more heat. However, my intention is no to enflame the debate but to shed light. I shall attempt to speak as forthrightly as possible, not to offend, but to set the issue before us with clarity. I do not believe that the current controversy is matter of "style" vs. "substance." It is clear from the apostolic church as well as from the Evangelical-Lutheran Reformation that the substance of the Gospel shapes and defines the style of that Gospel's delivery. Further, I believe it is spiritually dangerous to equate liturgy with adiaphora. Liturgy will always confess or deny the Gospel - the Gospel is never an adiaphoron. This brings me to the major thesis of this brief paper: The crisis over the liturgy is a result of confusion over the forgiveness of sins. As such it is a doctrinal issue and therefore, ultimately church divisive.

Article VII of the Augsburg Confession defines the church liturgically, to borrow a phrase from the Australian Lutheran theologian, John Kleinig. Article VII confesses that "it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word" ( AC VII: 2). Notice that the Augustana does not define the church on the basis of the mere presence of Word and Sacrament, but by the fact that the Gospel is purely preached and the sacraments are rightly administered in accordance with the divine Word. Preaching of the Word and administration of the sacraments require liturgy. Word and Sacrament are not static commodities but means through which the Lord Himself is working to constitute and sustain His church. To be sure, Augustana VII holds that the true unity of the church is not grounded in the uniformity of ceremonies instituted by men. But these humanly devised ceremonies are not the liturgy.

The liturgy is Gottesdienst,[1] divine service, the Lord's service to us through the proclamation of His Word and the giving out of His body and blood. In the theology of the Lutheran Confessions, God is the subject not the object of liturgical action. The trajectory is from the Lord to His Church and then from the Church to her Lord. In Luke 22, just after He had established the supper of His body and blood, the Lord says, "I am among you as one who serves" (v.22). This verse embodies the Lutheran understanding of the liturgy; it is the service that Jesus renders to His church, given by grace and received by faith. Rome had reversed the flow with the insistence that the Mass is essentially a sacrifice that the church offers to

God. Reformed Protestants likewise define worship as human activity, i.e. the church's obedient ascription of praise to the majesty of a sovereign God.

For confessional Lutherans, liturgy is not about human activity but about the real presence of the Lord who stoops down to put His words into our ears and His body and blood into our mouths. Liturgy, as it is divine service, delivers the forgiveness of sins. The liturgy does not exist to provide edifying entertainment, motivation for sanctified living, or therapy for psychological distresses, but the forgiveness of sins. In his treatise "Against the Heavenly Prophets," Luther writes "If I now seek the forgiveness of sins, I do not run to the cross, for I will not find it given there. Nor must I hold to the suffering of Christ as Dr. Karlstadt trifles, in knowledge or remembrance, for I will not find it there either. But I will find in the sacrament or the gospel the word which distributes, presents, offers, and gives to me that forgiveness which was won on the cross" (AE 40:214). In the liturgy, God Himself is present to forgive sins.

The real presence of Christ the forgiver of sins in His words and with His body and blood has shaped the cultus, the liturgical forms of confessional Lutheranism. At the present time, Lutherans are being invited to trade off a liturgical form shaped by real presence of Christ the forgiver for another form. The form that we are invited to make our own has its roots in American Evangelicalism. The forgiveness of sins has no real presence within the theology of Evangelicalism. At best, troubled sinners are pointed back to Calvary. The problem is as Luther has reminded us - that forgiveness was acquired at Calvary but not delivered there. Calvary is back there in time almost two thousand years ago. At its worst, Evangelicalism turns the troubled sinner inward to his own conscience. This is a gross mishandling of law and Gospel as Dr. Walther reminds us in Thesis IX: "...the Word of God is not rightly divided when sinners who have been struck down and terrified by the Law are directed, not to the Word and the Sacraments, but to their own prayers and wrestlings with God in order that they may win their way into a state of grace; in other words, when they are told to keep on praying and struggling until they feel that God has received them into grace." [2] This subjectivism is embodied in the hymnody and liturgical practices of Evangelicalism. The cultus of Evangelicalism exchanges the absolution for assurances of grace, the Gospel as the efficacious Word of salvation for a gospel that invites and requires a human decision, and the supper of the Lord's body and blood for a symbolic recollection of the upper room. Where is the forgiveness of sins?

As I stated earlier, the crisis over the liturgy stems from confusion regarding the forgiveness of sins. Evidence for this assertion can be seen in a new book by Timothy Wright, one of the pastors at the ELCA's Community Church of Joy in Phoenix. In his book, *A Community of Joy: How to Create Contemporary Worship*, [3] Wright attempts to answer the question, "How can we use worship to attract and hold irreligious people?" (p.24). Wright finds the structures of Lutheran liturgy to be a road block in the evangelistic task. At the very least, Wright urges Lutherans to "warm up the liturgy" with a visitor-friendly campus, name tags, careful directions, and a corps of well-trained greeters and ushers. But more is needed. The confession of sins will have to go. Wright says "Some congregations begin the worship service with a time of confession and forgiveness. Long time churchgoers may appreciate opening with this important liturgical rite, but starting the service with confession and forgiveness says to the guests: 'You are sinners!' For years some people have stayed away from church, fearing such condemnation. Finally, having the courage to come, they hear from the start how bad they are - that they cannot worship until they confess their failures and shortcomings" (p.42). We are told to "Watch out for religious phrases in hymns" (p.46). All this talk about "cherubim and seraphim bowing down before Him" and "a bulwark never failing" will only confuse visitors. Preachers are instructed to remember "in preparing a message, the question is not, 'What shall I preach about?' but 'To whom shall I preach?'" (p.86). Therefore preachers get this advice from Wright: "The how-to section of a bookstore provides a great resource for relevant sermon ideas. The psychological and self-help sections prove especially helpful. Written to meet the needs of people (and to make money), the authors focus on sure-fire concerns" (p.102). When it comes to the Sacrament of the

Altar, Wright has this to say on closed communion: "This policy will not work in a visitor-oriented service. 'Excluding' guests will turn them off. It destroys the welcoming environment that the church tried to create" (p.122). Again, my question: "Where is the forgiveness of sins?"

Wright would have us abandon Lutheran liturgy for the sake of "cross-culturalism." He is, in effect, inviting us to abandon the means-of-grace-centered culture of Lutheranism for the increasingly pragmatic culture of American Evangelicalism. [4] This is an invitation which we must decline for the sake of the Gospel.

What is to be done? First, let us recognize that the ecclesial (religious culture) of North America is Evangelicalism. This culture has its roots first in Puritanism, which is basically Calvinistic, and secondarily in the great revival movements of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The ethos of American Evangelicalism is at home in North America. As Nathan Hatch has pointed out in his book *The Democratization of American Christianity*, [5] the Jeffersonian ideas of individual freedom and equality are congenial to Evangelicalism's emphasis on conversion as a personal decision and the church as a spiritual democracy. Evangelicalism's stress of the autonomy of the believer and the immediacy of spiritual experience apart from sacramental means has shaped a religious culture that accents individual faith over churchly life and tends to characterize Baptism, Absolution, and the Lord's Supper as externals on the periphery of the Christian life, at best. Subjectivity coupled with a suspicion of the intellect has produced a religious culture that elevates heart over head, emotion over intellect. Lutherans can no more compromise with this culture than Luther could strike an agreement with Zwingli, than the confessional Lutherans of the last century could join the Prussian Union. Evangelicalism is of a different spirit.

In a culture that has been so deeply influenced by Evangelicalism it is imperative that we emphasize our Lutheran distinctives. Article X of the Formula of Concord-Solid Declaration confesses: "We believe, teach, and confess that in a time of confession, as when the enemies of the Word of God desire to suppress the pure doctrine of the holy Gospel, the entire community of God, yes, every individual Christian, and especially the ministers of the Word as leaders of the community of God, are obligated to confess openly, not only by words but also through deeds and actions, the true doctrine and all that pertains to it, according to the Word of God. In such a case we should not yield to adversaries even in matters of indifference, nor should we tolerate the imposition of such ceremonies on us by adversaries in order to undermine the genuine worship of God and to introduce and confirm their idolatry by force or chicanery" (FC-SD X:10). At the time of the Formula, the challenge was an attempt to impose Roman ceremonies on Lutherans in order to give the impression of unity. Today, the challenge is from the other side of the fence as some Lutherans give the impression that there are no substantial differences between themselves and American Evangelicals.

Actually this is not a new challenge to the Missouri Synod. The so-called American Lutheranism championed by Samuel Schmucker in the last century caused C.F.W. Walther to write:

We refuse to be guided by those who are offended by our church customs. We adhere to them all the more firmly when someone wants to cause us to have a guilty conscience on account of them... It is truly distressing that many of our fellow Christians find the differences between Lutheranism and Papism in outward things. It is a pity and dreadful cowardice when one sacrifices the good ancient church customs to please the deluded American sects, lest they accuse us of being papistic! Indeed! Am I to be afraid of a Methodist, who perverts the saving Word, or be ashamed in the matter of my good cause, and not rather rejoice that the sects can tell by our ceremonies that I do not belong to them?... We are not insisting that there be uniformity of perception or feeling or of taste among all believing Christians-- neither dare anyone that all be minded as he. Nevertheless it remains true that the Lutheran liturgy distinguishes Lutheran worship from the worship of other churches to such an extent that the houses of worship of the latter look

like lecture halls in which hearers are merely addressed or instructed, while our churches are in truth houses of prayer in which Christians serve the great God publicly before the world. [6]

It is for good reason that the Constitution of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod follows Walther in making it a condition for membership in the Synod the "Exclusive use of doctrinally pure agenda, hymnbooks, and catechisms in church and school." [7]

There are several implications for congregational life and pastoral practice. Rejection of the "alternative worship movement" is not an affirmation that all is well in congregations that stick to the hymnal. Kenneth Korby has commented that there are three kinds of churches: (1) churches with the liturgy; (2) churches without the liturgy; and (3) liturgical churches. There are congregations that never depart from p.5 or 15 in TLH or p.158 in LW; they have the liturgy, although they really don't know why. Then there are congregations that have abandoned the liturgy altogether. Genuinely liturgical churches are at home in the liturgy; it is the source and center of their life. I have no doubt that one of the reasons "alternative worship forms" have been so eagerly embraced by many in the Missouri Synod is that the liturgy was never taught and the richness of our hymnbooks was left largely untapped. It is not the liturgy that is the problem but the way it has been misused. In his chapter on "Liturgical Renewal in the Parish" in *Lutheran Worship*:

History and Practice, Arthur Just writes, "A chapter on liturgical renewal suggests that the liturgy is in need of renewal... Perhaps what is wrong is not the liturgy but those who use the liturgy. The targets of liturgical renewal are the clergy and the congregation." [8]

Congregations should expect the seminaries of the Synod to provide pastors who are fully at home with the liturgy. At the present time, our seminaries require only one course in liturgy. This is hardly sufficient in preparing pastors who will be equipped to understand the theology of divine service and plan and lead liturgy accordingly. A basic course in the theology of the liturgy should be foundational for at least two other required courses in the mechanics of the Divine Service (the rubrics, the actual conduct of the service) and liturgy as it relates to pastoral care (the occasional services). A strengthened curriculum in liturgical theology needs to be set in the context of a vibrant liturgical life on campus. In other words, the dean of the chapel should be the most competent liturgist on campus. The chapel should model the absolute best in our heritage.

If we get the forgiveness of sins right, we will get the liturgy right. Luther writes in the Large Catechism, "We believe that in this Christian church we have the forgiveness of sins, which is granted through the holy sacraments and, in short, the entire Gospel and all the duties of Christianity....Therefore everything in the Christian church is so ordered that we may daily obtain full forgiveness of sins through the Word and through signs appointed to comfort and revive our consciences as long as we live" (LC II:55). For Luther and the Confessions, the church is constituted in the liturgy, that is, she receives her life from Christ in His words and gifts which deliver the forgiveness of sins. No wonder, then, that our Confessions place sermon and sacrament at the center, insisting that our churches have not abolished the Mass but celebrate it every Sunday and on other festivals (Ap XXIV).

Our concern for the liturgy is not fueled by a traditionalism that is intent on merely preserving the past. It is a concern that the forgiveness won by our Lord in His suffering and death be proclaimed and distributed in their truth and purity for the salvation of sinners. Liturgical texts and practices are to be evaluated from this perspective. Pastor Joel Brondos, one of my colleagues in the editorial group of *Logia*, has developed the following instrument to assist with such an evaluation:

(cf.: chart on p.66 in Logia: A Journal of Lutheran Theology, volume 3, number 1, Epiphany/January 1994)

Our historic Lutheran liturgical orders are Christ-centered as opposed to man-centered, they reflect the theology of the cross rather than the theology of glory, they center in special revelation not natural revelation, they tie us to the means of grace, they appeal to faith instead of emotions, and they anchor us not in myth but in the incarnation. This instrument along with the Introduction to the hymnal Lutheran Worship are to be commended to pastors for tools as they instruct their congregations in the doctrine of the liturgy.

Two comments on the importance of teaching are in order. Let the pastor begin by teaching the board of elders or church council. Why not build in forty-five minutes to an hour of study time to each meeting of the board of elders? Over the period of a year, the pastor could work through the basics of our doctrine and practice of liturgy on the basis of the Scriptures and the Confessions. [9] Any liturgical changes which are to be made in the worship life of the congregation must be undergirded with substantial teaching.

The teaching of the liturgy is a key component in the catechesis of new members. I have argued elsewhere that the catechesis is the lively link between evangelism and liturgy. [10] The liturgy is not readily understandable or accessible to the unbeliever. Through catechesis the unbeliever is being transported from the culture of this world to the culture of God's colony on earth, the holy church. [11] The culture of God's colony has its own language, the language of faith. The language of faith is the language of the liturgy. Catechesis teaches the convert this language. Three books are essential to this catechesis: the Holy Scriptures, the Small Catechism, and the hymnal. The doctrine that is drawn from the Scriptures is confessed in the Catechism and expressed doxologically in the liturgy and hymns.

## CONCLUSION

Remember the story of the golden calf in Exodus 32. The children of Israel, fresh out of Egypt, are encamped in the Sinai wilderness. They do not know what has become of Moses. The people go to Aaron with the request for new gods. Aaron is responsive to their "felt needs" and fashions for them a golden calf, a "worship form" that was culturally relevant to their Canaanite context. This was entertainment evangelism at its best as we read that "the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play" (Ex.32:6). Even though Aaron called it "a feast to the Lord" (Ex.32:5), God called it idolatry. The Apostle writes "Now all these things happened to them as examples, and were written for our admonition, on whom the ends of the ages have come....Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry" (I Corinthians 10:11, 14).

The opposite of idolatry is faith in Jesus Christ. Indeed faith is the highest worship of God as the Confessions so often remind us. No forgiveness of sins, no faith. The liturgy delivers us from self-chosen forms of worship, drawing us out of idolatry to repentance and faith. The Introduction to Lutheran Worship gets it right:

Saying back to him what he has said to us, we repeat what is most true and sure. Most true and sure is his name, which he put upon us with the water of Baptism. We are his. This we acknowledge at the beginning of the Divine Service. Where his name is, there is he. Before him we acknowledge that we are sinners, and we plead for forgiveness. His forgiveness is given us, and we, freed and forgiven, acclaim him as our great and gracious God as we apply to ourselves the words he has used to make himself known to us. [12]

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1 - For a fine exposition of Gottesdienst see Norman Nagel, "Whose Liturgy Is It?" *Logia* (Eastertide, 1993), 4-8. Also see Fred Precht, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1993), 44-57.

2 - C.F.W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, trans. W.H.T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1928), 2. Also see Robert Schaibley, "A Lutheran Strategy for Urban Ministry: Evangelism and the Means of Grace" *Logia* (Holy Trinity, 1994), 6-13.

3 - Timothy Wright, *A Community of Joy: How to Create Contemporary Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994). All page references to this book are noted in the body of the paper.

4 - See the following critiques written from within Evangelicalism: Os Guinness, *Dining With the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts With Modernity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993); Douglas Webster, *Selling Jesus: What's Wrong With Marketing the Church* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1992); Michael Scott Horton, *Made in America: The Shaping of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991); David Wells, *No Place for the Truth or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); and David Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

5 - Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

6 - C.F.W. Walther, *Essays for the Church*, Volume I (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), 194.

7 - *Handbook of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod* (St. Louis: Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, 1992), II.

8 - Precht, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, 21.

9 - Additional resources for the teaching of the liturgy include *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*; Roger Pittelko, *Touchpoint Bible Study: Worship and Liturgy* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1995); Harold Senkbeil, *Dying to Live: The Power of Forgiveness* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1994); Harold Senkbeil, *Sanctification: Christ in Action- Evangelical Challenge and Lutheran Response* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1989); John T. Pless, *Real Life Worship Reader* (Minneapolis: University Lutheran Chapel, 1994).

10 - See my GEM module entitled *Catechesis: The Lively Link Between Evangelism and Worship*.

11 - The chart from the Trinity-Pentecost 1995 issue of *Concordia Pulpit Resources* may be helpful. I would argue, along with David Wells, that much of Evangelical worship is reflective of "the world's view." Lutheran worship is reflective of "the Christian view." Also see Gene Veith, *Postmodern Times* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1994); Philip J. Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

12 - *Lutheran Worship* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1982), 6.

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