

LOGIA

A JOURNAL OF LUTHERAN THEOLOGY

EASTERTIDE/APRIL 1993

VOLUME II, NUMBER 2

CONTENTS

CORRESPONDENCE2

ARTICLES

Whose Liturgy Is It?
By Norman Nagel.....4

Toward a Confessional Lutheran Understanding of Liturgy
By John T. Pless9

Johannes Bugenhagen and the Lutheran Mass
By Dennis Marzolf14

A Call for Manuscripts20

Church Music at the Close of the Twentieth Century: The Entanglement of Sacred and Secular
By Richard C. Resch.....21

Ecclesia Orans: Letters Addressed to Lutheran Pastors
By Hermann Sasse28

Church & Ministry Part II: Systematic Formulation
By Jobst Schöne35

REVIEWS41

Review Essay: Martin Chemnitz—A Rigorous Theology
The Lord's Supper in the Theology of Martin Chemnitz. By Bjarne W. Teigen
The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology. By N.T. Wright
Luther's English Connection: The Reformation Thought of Robert Barnes and William Tyndale. By James McGoldrick
Vogel's Cross Reference and Index to the Contents of Luther's Works. By Heinrich J. Vogel.
Martin Luther: Reformer in the Making. By Edwin R. Scharf
For All the Saints: Changing Perceptions of Martyrdom and Sainthood in the Lutheran Reformation. By Robert Kolb

LOGIA FORUM47

Pastoral Style and God's Gifts • Allegorical Worship • What's in a Name? Eucharist or Lord's Supper?
Easter Buffoonery and Effective Ministry • Pietism for Evangelism and Missions?
Surrender to Secularism • Doing Without Liturgy • Worthy Reception • Luther's *Hausandacht*
To the Diaspora: Another Perspective • April Fools • Walter Sundberg's Vision
Creedal Catholicity

Toward a Confessional Lutheran Understanding of Liturgy

JOHN T. PLESS



WHAT DOES THE BOOK OF CONCORD CONFESS CONCERNING the liturgy?¹ As the term *liturgy* is variously used these days, we had best start with the Confessions' own definition of the term. Melancthon goes on for several paragraphs in Apology XXIV to supply the definition of liturgy: "But let us talk about the term *liturgy*. It does not really mean a sacrifice but a public service. . . . Thus the term *liturgy* squares well with the ministry" (Ap XXIV, 80-81).

Contrary to both the medieval Roman opinion that the liturgy or the Mass is church's sacrifice and the modern Liturgical Movement's slogan "Liturgy is the work of the people,"² the Confessions understand liturgy as God's work, *Gottesdienst*, Divine Service.

As the office of the holy ministry goes, so goes the liturgy and vice versa. The difficulty that the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod is currently having over the office of the holy ministry is perhaps a result of our failure to see the liturgy from the perspective of the means of grace, and therefore, from the very heart and center of the Lutheran Confessions: God's justification of the sinner for Christ's sake by grace through faith (AC and Ap IV). If the liturgy is our thing to do with as we please, then we are free to shape it as we please according to whatever cultural or personal whims may be popular at the moment. If the holy ministry is simply a set of functions, the church is free to shape and distribute them according to the desire of the majority or perceived pragmatic needs. Hence women's ordination and "lay ministry."

However, the Lutheran Confessions operate with an evangelical rather than an anthropocentric definition of the office of the holy ministry and of the liturgy which has as its stewards and dispensers (Ap XXIV, 80; 2 Cor 5:20) those ordained into this office. To be sure, certain forms and practices embedded within the liturgy may indeed be adiaphora.³ God's word and sacraments are not. The very nature of God's gifts in word and sacrament shapes and defines the form of their delivery in the Divine Service. The public worship of the congregation will always either confess or deny Christ and his word. What Wern-

er Elert said of Luther applies to the Confessions as well:

No matter how strongly he (Luther) emphasizes Christian freedom in connection with the form of this rite (the Sacrament of the Altar), no matter how much he deviates from the form handed down at the end of the Middle Ages, no matter how earnestly he warns against the belief that external customs could commend us to God, still there are certain ceremonial elements that he, too, regarded as indispensable.⁴

The Confessions make a clear distinction between the worship that flows from the gospel and forms of worship which obscure or deny the work of Jesus Christ. Article IV of the Apology describes evangelical worship as faith:

Faith is that worship which receives God's offered blessings; the righteousness of the law is that worship which offers God our own merits. It is by faith that God wants to be worshiped, namely, that we receive from him what he promises and offers (Ap IV, 49; also see Ap IV, 57, 59-60, 154, 228, 309-310).

The faith of which the Apology speaks is bestowed through external means, word and sacraments. Article V of the Augustana demonstrates how closely the liturgy is linked to the office of the holy ministry:

For through the word and the sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given, and the Holy Spirit produces faith, where and when it pleases God, in those who hear the gospel (AC V, 2).

Word and sacrament are by their very nature liturgy; they do not exist in the abstract but only in the fact of their institution by Christ and their administration by his called and ordained servants within his church. Here we may note the insistence of Article VII of the Augsburg Confession, not simply on "word and sacrament" somehow being present in the church, but rather "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). We may not become liturgical Nestorians acting as if the "sub-

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stance” of word and sacrament does not shape the “style” of their delivery. The Augsburg Confession “defines the church liturgically” (John Kleinig), that is to say the church is located in the liturgy where the word is purely preached and the sacraments rightly administered.

Apart from the faith-creating gospel which is bestowed in word and sacrament, man will indeed worship, but his worship will be idolatry. So Luther writes in the Large Catechism:

As I have often said, the trust and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol. If your faith and trust are right, then your God is the true God. On the other hand, if your trust is false and wrong, then you have not the true God (LC 1, 2-3).

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Unbelief is not merely atheism in the conventional sense of the word, but false belief, belief in a lie about God. Such unbelief is energetic as it exchanges the truth of God for a lie and worships accordingly. So Luther writes:

Behold, here you have the true honor and the true worship which please God and which he commands under penalty of eternal wrath, namely, that the heart should know no other consolation or confidence than that in him, nor let itself be torn from him, but for him should risk and disregard everything else on earth. On the other hand, you can easily judge how the world practices nothing but false worship and idolatry. There has never been a people so wicked that it did not establish and maintain some sort of worship. Everyone has set up a god of his own, to which he looked for blessings, help, and comfort (LC 1, 16-17).

Man is by nature a worshiper. The problem is that the worship which we engage in by nature is idolatry. This idolatry is fueled by the *opinio legis*, the opinion of the law that we can do something to save ourselves from God’s wrath and judgment. It is for this reason that Luther identifies idolatry as the foundation upon which the Roman Mass stands (see LC 1, 22) as it confuses God’s *beneficium* with man’s *sacrificium*.

Luther’s treatment of this theme under the First Commandment’s requirement that “We should fear, love, and trust

in God above all things” (SC 1, 2) informs his exposition of the Second and Third Commandments as well. In his explanation of the Second Commandment, the misuse of God’s name is set in opposition to faith’s use of the Lord’s name in prayer, praise and thanksgiving. The Second Commandment is related to the Third Commandment as God’s name is to his word. The link between the Second and Third Commandments is the explanation of the First Petition of the Our Father where we are taught that God’s name is hallowed “when the Word of God is taught clearly and purely and we as children of God, lead holy lives in accordance with it” (SC III, 5).

Seen in this light, the Third Commandment has its focus not on a specific day (which is fulfilled in Christ according to Colossians 2:16-17; also LC 1, 82) but on the pure preaching of the gospel and faithful hearing of the same. Vilmos Vajta explains:

In no sense is this worship a preparatory stage which faith could ultimately leave behind. Rather faith might be defined as the passive cult (*cultus passivus*) because in this life it will always depend on the worship by which God imparts Himself—a gift granted to the believing congregation.

This is confirmed in Luther’s Explanation of the Third Commandment. To him Sabbath rest means more than a pause from work. It should be an opportunity for God to do his work on man. God wants to distract man from his daily toil and so open him to God’s gifts. To observe the Sabbath is not a good work which man could offer to God. On the contrary it means pausing from all our works and letting God do his work in us and for us. . . .

Thus Luther’s picture of the Sabbath is marked by the passivity of man and the activity of God. And it applies not only to certain holy days on the calendar, but to the Christian life in its entirety, testifying to man’s existence as a creature of God who waits by faith for the life to come. Through God’s activity in Christ, man is drawn into the death and resurrection of the Redeemer and is so recreated a new man in Christ. The Third Commandment lays on us no obligation for specific works of any kind (not even spiritual or cultic works) but rather directs us to the work of God. And we do not come into contact with the latter except in the Service, where Christ meets us in the means of grace.⁵

As it is Christ who gathers his congregation by his name and around his word and sacraments, the Lutheran Confessions are engaged in a polemic against all “self-chosen”⁶ forms of worship which obscure the glory of Christ and rob sinners of the sure comfort of the forgiveness of sins. Article xv of the Apology states:

Scripture calls traditions ‘doctrines of demons’ (1 Tim 4:1) when someone teaches that religious rites are helpful in gaining grace and the forgiveness of sins.

This obscures the gospel, the blessing of Christ, and the righteousness of faith. The gospel teaches that by faith, for Christ's sake, we freely receive the forgiveness of sins and are reconciled to God. Our opponents, on the other hand, set up these traditions as another mediator through which they seek to gain the forgiveness of sins and appease the wrath of God (Ap. xv, 5).

It is clear that this polemic is not against traditions *per se*, but against a use of traditions to obtain the forgiveness of sins. Article xv continues:

Although the holy Fathers themselves had rites and traditions, they did not regard them as useful or necessary for justification. They did not obscure the glory or work of Christ but taught that we are justified by faith for Christ's sake, not for the sake of these human rites. They observed these human rites because they were profitable for good order, because they gave the people a set time to assemble, because they gave the people a good example of how all things could be done decently and in order in the churches, and finally because they helped instruct the common folk. For different seasons and various rites serve as reminders for the common folk. For these reasons the Fathers kept the ceremonies, and for the same reasons we also believe in keeping traditions (Ap xv, 20).

The Apology notes that traditions "interpreted in an evangelical way" are useful for catechesis and preaching:

We gladly keep the old traditions set up in the church because they are useful and promote tranquility, and we interpret them in an evangelical way, excluding the opinion which holds that they justify. Our enemies falsely accuse us of abolishing good ordinances and church discipline. We can truthfully claim that in our churches the public liturgy is more decent than in theirs, and if you look at it correctly we are more faithful to the canons than our opponents are. Among our opponents, unwilling celebrants and hirelings perform Mass, and they often do so only for the money. When they chant the Psalms, it is not to learn to pray but for the sake of the rite, as if this work were an act of worship or at least worth some reward. Every Lord's Day many in our circles use the Lord's Supper, but only after they have been instructed, examined, and absolved. The children chant the Psalms in order to learn; the people sing, too, in order to learn or to worship. Among our opponents there is no catechization of the children at all even though the canons give prescriptions about it. In our circles the pastors and ministers of the churches are required to instruct and examine the youth publicly, a custom that produces very good results. Among our opponents, there are many regions where no sermons are preached during

the whole year, except in Lent. But the chief worship of God is the preaching of the gospel (Ap xv, 38-42).

The Lutheran Confessions, therefore, gladly embrace the catholic liturgical heritage, cleansing it of the virus of works righteousness. The Confessions thereby maintain the mass "with greater devotion and more earnestness than among our opponents" (Ap xxiv, 1; see also Ap xxiv). For the Lutheran Confessions, "spiritual worship," that is, "the worship of faith," is not set in opposition to the external proclamation of the word and the administration of the sacraments. Indeed, the Confessions' attack on the enthusiasm of the spiritualists is particularly sharp:

In these matters which concern the external, spoken word, we must hold firmly to the conviction that God gives no one his Holy Spirit or grace except through the external word which comes before. Thus we shall be protected from the enthusiasts—that is, from the spiritualists who boast that they possess the Spirit without and before the Word, and therefore judge, interpret, and twist the Scriptures according to their pleasure (SA III, VIII, 3).

As God graciously comes to us only by means of the external word, it is this word that gives content and form to the Divine Service. The word gives content and form to the Divine Service not in a biblicistic sense but in the way of the *viva vox evangelii*. As the clear proclamation and confession of the saving gospel is not a matter of indifference, the content and form of the liturgy is hardly a matter of indifference. Under "the impact of the gospel" (Elert), the Lutheran Confessions restore the liturgy as Christ's service to his people to be received in faith. The liturgy is the "external word" in action bestowing God's gifts and unlocking the lips of his people to extol his name in faithful confession and praise.

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Calls for renewal in worship are common these days. Yet most of the proposals for renewal stem from the pressure of the law rather than the way of the gospel.⁷ The Lutheran Confessions' call for a renewed *cultus* is concerned not with innovative or clever changes in texts and ceremonies, but with a liturgy that revolves around the Lord's forgiveness proclaimed and bestowed in the preached word, baptism, absolution, and the Supper. Such a liturgy is geared toward renewal in repentance, faith, and holy living.

Genuine liturgical renewal will be a renewal in the catechesis of the Small Catechism. The Small Catechism has a dual

function as it serves as both a confessional document and a liturgical text. Of all the catechisms of Christendom, Luther's Catechism is the only one that may be prayed (Wilhelm Löhe). The Small Catechism weds doctrine with doxology as the believer is tutored in the truth of God's Word to the praise of his grace. The strength of this union can certainly be seen in Luther's "catechism hymns" ("Here is the Tenfold Sure Command," "We All Believe in One True God," "Our Father, Who From Heaven Above," "To Jordan Came the Christ, Our Lord," "From Depths of Woe, I Cry to You" and "O Lord, We Praise You") as the reformer casts the content of the catechism's doctrine into hymnic form.⁸

As a handbook for the royal priesthood of believers, the

Small Catechism tutors God's holy priests in the reception of his gifts in word and sacrament. These gifts are received in repentance and faith and as they have their way in the Christian's life they come to fruition in the places where God has called him to live within the world. The catechism, like the Lutheran liturgy, takes sacrifice out of the chancel and relocates it in the world. Faith gives birth to works of love for the sake of the neighbor (Rom 12:1-2). Earlier in this century, Dom Gregory Dix proposed a "four-fold shape"⁹ of the liturgy. The Small Catechism suggests a "three-fold shape" of repentance, faith, and holy living that, unlike Dix, distinguishes law from gospel, works from grace, and love from faith.

NOTES

1. For helpful anthologies of citations concerning worship in The Book of Concord, see David Magruder, "The Lutheran Symbols and a Theology of Worship" (Fort Wayne: Concordia Seminary Printshop, 1990) and Arthur Carl Piepkorn, "What the Symbolic Books of the Lutheran Church Have to Say About Worship and the Sacraments" (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Printshop, 1952). Helpful treatments of the Confessions' view of the Divine Service, worship, and liturgical practices are found in Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism* trans. by Walter Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962); *Confession* translated by H. George Anderson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986) pp. 204-219. Luther's theology of the Divine Service and its impact on Lutheran liturgical practice is aptly treated by Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther in Mid-Career: 1521-1530* trans. by E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983) pp. 459-480; Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: Shaping and Defining the Reformation 1521-1532*, trans. by James L. Schaaf (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1990) pp. 119-135; and especially Bryan Spinks, *Luther's Liturgical Criteria and His Reform of the Canon of the Mass* (Nottingham: Grove Books, 1982).

2. See Charles Evanson, "Evangelicalism and the Liturgical Movement and Their Effects on Lutheran Worship" (Fort Wayne: Concordia Seminary Printshop, 1989) for an analysis of the theological presuppositions behind the dictum "liturgy is the work of the people."

3. For a treatment of Article X of the Formula and its relationship to the current confessional-liturgical crisis in Lutheranism, see John T. Pless, "The Relationship of Adiaphora and Liturgy in the Lutheran Confessions" in *And Every Tongue Confess: Essays in Honor of Norman Nagel on the Occasion of His Sixty-fifth Birthday* edited by Gerald S. Krispin and Jon D. Vieker (Dearborn, Michigan: Nagel Festschrift Committee, 1990) pp. 195-210. For historical background of Article

X see Robert Kolb, *Confessing the Faith: Reformers Define the Church 1530-1580* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1991) pp. 63-81.

4. Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism* trans. by Walter Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962) p. 325.

5. Vilmos Vajta, *Luther on Worship* trans. by U.S. Leupold (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958) p. 130.

6. George Wollenburg has identified the "ordination" of women to the pastoral office as one such form of "self-chosen worship." See George Wollenburg, *The Office of the Holy Ministry and the Ordination of Women* (Minneapolis: University Lutheran Chapel, 1990) p. 25. A related example of such idolatry would be liturgical and sacramental use of feminine names for the Godhead. See Alvin F. Kimel Jr., "The Grammar of Baptism" in *First Things* (December 1991) pp. 33-37 for an excellent critique. In light of what the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions teach us regarding the relationship of God's name to worship, catechumens will need to be warned that "baptisms" performed in the name of "creator, redeemer, and sanctifier" or other substitutions for the canonically mandated name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are pagan rituals that profane the name of God.

7. John Fenton spots this as the key problem with the recently published report of the LCMS Commission on Worship report entitled "Worship Toward 2000." See John Fenton, "Worship Toward 2000: A Review" in *The Bride of Christ* (St. Michael's and All Angels, 1991) pp. 33-34.

8. For an excellent treatment of the relationship between theology and hymnody see Robin Leaver, "Renewal in Hymnody" in *Lutheran Quarterly* (Winter 1992) pp. 359-383.

9. Dom Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (New York: Seabury Press, 1945) pp. 36 ff.