

For the

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During his entire career, Luther taught the Bible, translated the Bible, and preached from the Bible. For him, it was the Christian book *par excellence*, and he valued it above all others because it brought him the good news of Jesus Christ the Savior.

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By the Rev. John T. Pless, Assistant Professor of Pastoral Ministry and Missions, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Ind.

Beginning in 1518, Martin Luther frequently preached a sermon series on “the catechism,” that is, the basic components of Christian doctrine as they had been arranged and handed down from earlier generations of Christians. Eventually, these catechetical sermons would become the basis for the Large Catechism and would be crystalized in the Small Catechism.

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What Should the Church Have to Do with the Theatre?

By Paula Trimpey

It doesn't matter if it's a Broadway show or the local community college production, there is something very special about opening night at the theatre. Actors anxiously sit in front of lighted mirrors running lines and putting on makeup, technicians are busy back stage making preparations, and the audience is slowly wandering into the house. The curtain rises, the show begins, and the audience is transported to a new world. People go to the theatre for a variety of different reasons, but ultimately it all boils down to one reason: they enjoy the live experience; interaction, one on one, with that new, fictitious world created on the stage. Interestingly enough, another place where live interaction takes place in much the same way is the church service on Sunday morning. Now, before you cringe at the thought of comparing these two entities, ask yourself, "Do I attend church on Sun-

day morning, or am I attending a Jesus Theater?” Just exactly how should a member of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod discern the difference and choose a church with integrity and regard to the Scriptures?

I recently moved from St. George, Utah, to Huntington, Indiana, to take a position at Huntington College, where I will be teaching in the Theatre Department. Both the theatre and the church have always been a part of my life. I remember putting on shows in the backyard with the neighborhood kids. We had four chicken coops for a stage and old shower curtains on the

“What should the church have to do with the theatre? It should have nothing to do with it! With regard to Scripture and the accepted worship practices of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, the sanctuary of a church is not a performance space where music, lights, costumes, projection screens, or personal performance are ever the focus of attention, but a place of worship where God’s presence is acknowledged with great awe, respect, and devotion.



washline for a grand curtain. As a very young child of four or five, I also remember standing on the pew beside my mother, helping her to hold a hymnal, singing the liturgy in church. Interestingly enough, the church and the theatre have had an intertwining love/hate relationship over the last 2000 years of history. In most cases, when the church has used and supported theatre, it was always for the recruitment of members and to strengthen the treasury. And unfortunately, in most cases today, it is used for the very same reasons.

You may ask, “So what does the church have to do with theatre today?” Unfortunately, many Lutheran churches are nothing more than Jesus Theatres, and the average layperson doesn’t even realize it. Every Sunday morning, congregant’s hearts have been touched by the beautiful uplifting music that John wrote for the service and the wonderfully dramatic way that Bill read the Scriptures and put them up on a big computer projection screen for everyone to read. Yes! The children, they were so charming and cute as they ran to the front of the church for the children’s sermon, especially that one little girl who had her dress pulled up over her head. And Pastor’s sermon . . . WOW! He even dressed up like St. John the Divine and presented the sermon as though John were right there in the church. People leave the church on an emotional high, recalling how talented all those young people in the youth praise band were and how wonderful they made everyone feel. Well, most people think that’s church, but is it really? Where was the focus? Was it on John and how well he writes music? Was the focus on Bill, his oral interpretations and computer graphics? What about the children? They deserve to hear the Word of God, too, don’t they? Pastor’s sermon was different, and we need a little change, don’t we? And young people, they need to have things to which they can relate on their own terms, right? Well? Where was the focus? On man or on God?

Perhaps a better question to ask is, “What should the church have to do with the theatre?”

It should have nothing to do with it! With regard to Scripture and the accepted worship practices of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, the sanctuary of a church is not a performance space where music, lights, costumes, projection screens, or personal performance are ever the focus of attention, but a place of worship where God’s presence is acknowledged with great awe, respect, and devotion. We do not go there to be entertained by someone’s musical or dramatic talent, but to acknowledge our sin and to receive forgiveness. The sanctuary should have the altar, where prayers are offered and the sacrament received, as

its primary focus. It is on the altar where the actual presence of God exists, His body and blood, in the Eucharist. To the sides of the altar are the lectern and pulpit respectively. It is from there that our focus is directed to the reading and preaching of His Word.

In conjunction with the worship space is the act of worship itself. It is not the individuals’ personal performance or heartfelt testimony about God, but the act of the church, together with one voice, responding to God’s voice. The liturgy plays a vital and essential role bringing the believer into conversation with God, and *The Lutheran Hymnal* and *Lutheran Worship* were created by our synod for such a purpose. In them we find the appropriate words for confession and God’s response of absolution. There are prayers and praise offered to God in thanksgiving for the gift of Christ’s redemptive sacrifice. The Eucharist, Christ’s Body and Blood, is the culminating act of God toward us in the Divine service.

“But, the liturgy is boring and redundant and I don’t really get anything out of it,” you say. Do you? Yes, you do. It is not a fictitious play presented on a stage, or performers displaying their talents, but a scripturally-based understanding and means of worship wherein God acts and we respond with praise and thanksgiving. Often I have seen mothers sing the liturgy from memory while they are busy comforting a baby in their arms. Elderly people in the congregation who have lost partial or full sight still respond with the church in one voice from years of singing prayers and praise to God in response to His call. Young people, who are not always given credit for their knowledge and understanding of worship, bow and kneel in reverent response to God. The life of the church is its liturgy, and it is there where we should be found in devotion to God.

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