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# Between Luther and the "Now" Generation: Some Thoughts About "Contemporary Worship" as Advanced by the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship

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"I'M GRAVELY CONCERNED about the future of the American Lutherans," Prof. Werner Elert stated in his dogmatics lecture at Erlangen in 1953. "They are going back to the canon of the mass." Elert regarded the "eucharistic prayer" which was then being prepared for the *Service Book and Hymnal* of 1958 as Romanizing. However, in its revised form as approved by the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship (ILCW), a further step has been taken. In the Communion ("Eucharistic") liturgy which it has prepared for the new all-Lutheran hymnal and service-book, the ILCW has taken over much of the thought and practice of the Romanizing Anglo-Catholic, Gregory Dix.<sup>1</sup> Strangely enough, although the ILCW has asked for comments and criticisms, little interest or concern has been expressed. Most of the opposition to the innovations has come from representatives of The American Lutheran Church.<sup>2</sup> For example, in every yearly meeting since it has been founded, the Concordia Academy has served as a sounding-board for evaluations of the doctrinal and practical consequences of the proposed innovations in papers and discussions dominated by members of The ALC. The following is a summary of some of the issues and problems.

## 1. THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE NEW LITURGY TO THE PAST

Although the Lutheran theologian today does not place tradition on the same level as the inspired Holy Scriptures, he thankfully receives as testimonies of God's guidance in the past such things as the Lutheran Confessions, the writings of Luther, the Ancient Creeds of the Church, and liturgical forms which rightly divide Law and Gospel. Elert once said that a true liturgy can be confessed and a true creed can be prayed. The relationship between liturgies and creeds must remain close. It must regretfully be said, however, that the ILCW has not been very humble in its attitude toward the liturgies and creeds of the Lutheran Reformation. The liturgical calendar has also had to bow before the committee's iconoclasm, as the ILCW dislodges from its place the great hymnody, church-music, and sermonic and devotional literature of the richest liturgical treasury in Western Christendom. It has become fashionable to belittle

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Luther's brilliant liturgical works. One prominent member of the ILCW speaks of "Luther's Liturgical Surgery." Eugene Brand finds that Luther rejected the offertory of the Roman mass. This is correct.<sup>3</sup> But Brand faults him for this. Brand is not unaware that, for Luther, "The sacrifice of the Mass was opposed to the Gospel" (p. 114), but Brand remains blind to the implications of an "offertory" for the distinction of Law and Gospel. Instead, he remarks rather condescendingly: "He [Luther] cannot get beyond the western preoccupation with the elements, and so the Sacrament remains a 'thing' to be *received* or *offered*, rather than an *act* to be *celebrated*" (p. 116; emphasis ours). These words lead us directly to the heart of the doctrinal crisis implicit in this debate. Conceptions of the Lord's Supper as an "act" or "action" of man, rather than the gift of God, as well as the "contemporary" words such as "celebrate" or "Eucharist," are all symptomatic. Brand, in rejecting the Sacrament as something that is offered by God and received by man, is withdrawing it from the Lutheran categories of Law and Gospel and placing it under the Romanizing and Calvinizing aspects of something that is offered to God, either as a merit or as a proof of one's salvation. Thereby the concept of the Sacrament as a means of grace is lost. Consequently the doctrine of the Holy Ghost is also mutilated. Is it possible that the new anxiety about pneumatology, expressing itself in the charismatic movement of today, is partly the result of this distortion of the means of grace which occurs when the Sacrament is turned into a human work?

The Small Catechism is in accord with the Holy Scriptures when it shows how the Old Adam rules daily in the heart of even the baptized Christian (IV, 4). No one likes to confess that he is "by nature sinful and unclean" and that he has "sinned against God by thought, word, and deed."<sup>4</sup> Rather than being crushed down by our sin and unworthiness, we seek to show our spiritual or even theological superiority over others.<sup>5</sup> We feel that we do not want a Communion service in which we are so unworthy that God does all the giving and we have only to receive. We seek a sense of achievement by turning the gift of God into our own "offering." But in that moment we join company with the Pharisee whose offering consisted in keeping the commandments, fasting twice in the week, and giving supererogatory tithes, and who then scorned the publican, who came before God empty-handed (Luke 18:10ff.). In overlooking the distinction between Law and Gospel we endanger the doctrine of justification, the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*. Nothing worse could be said about a liturgical form offered to the Lutherans of America. Nothing could be sadder than the spectacle of a Lutheranism too much absorbed in other matters or else too indifferent to cast its witness against this departure from the truth. This is true because worship forms, church-music, and hymns will either strengthen the faith of the congregation when they are doctrinally sound or destroy the faith when they are at variance with the Gospel.

Why have Lutherans in the United States been so slow to see the perils in the proposed new mass? The answer must vary accord-

ing to the problems in each of the general bodies. The ALC has not learned how to benefit from the input of a large part of its constituency. The LCA suffers, on the one hand, from theological indifference of part of its clergy and, on the other hand, from the fact that much of the rationale behind the ILCW's liturgy came from this synod. The LC-MS apparently is so deeply involved in its struggles between "moderates" and "conservatives" and has devoted so much special attention to the doctrine of the Scriptures that this great synod, normally preeminent in theology, has not devoted sufficient time to these problems. Much of the supine attitude in all three synods should further be attributed to the notion that somehow the church must change. Not the wishes of the "in" group, but the demands of certain outside voices (youth, other denominations, liberated women, homosexuals, Marxists, "liberals") must decide church policies, according to this opinion. The Bible, the Confessions, and the Creeds count for little in the thinking of many, who, unlike the apostle's admonitions, are with itching ears constantly seeking for novelties (I Tim. 4:3) and are continuously blown around by every wind of doctrine (Eph. 4:14). Yet another factor is undoubtedly the tendency to downgrade church-music, coupled with a careless and uncritical attitude toward liturgical forms in general. Too often texts as well as musical settings of the liturgy and hymns have been relegated to a limbo which many, with striking inaccuracy so far as the Formula of Concord is concerned, call "adiaphora."

## 2. DOCTRINAL CONCEPTS BEHIND THE ILCW PROPOSED LITURGY

It appears that the rite provided in *Contemporary Worship 2: Services: The Holy Communion*, 1970 (CW 2), is, in regard to its textual content, heavily dependent upon the theology of Gregory Dix. This man, strongly influenced by Romanticism, looked back to the fourth century as a golden age in church history. Quite aside from the historical fact that this century was a time of theological turmoil and of uncertainty regarding Law and Gospel, Dix attempted to absolutize the dogmatic and liturgical teachings of that time regarding the Lord's Supper ("Eucharist"), and to make them normative for our century. It did not seem to trouble him that he was jumping back across sixteen centuries of Christian tradition, much of which stood far closer to Holy Scriptures than did his favorite century. The careless manner in which he treated Luther and the Reformation is a case in point, even though he seems to have weakened the faith of many modern Lutheran liturgiologists in the Lutheran symbols and in the writing of Luther himself.

Out of the worship practices of this legalistic age, Dix distilled his four-action "shape of the liturgy" from which evidently grew the four steps of the ILCW rite: the offertory (CW 2, p. 10), the eucharistic prayer of thanksgiving (CW 2, p. 12), the breaking of the bread (CW 2, p. 18), and the act of receiving the elements (*ibid.*). When we survey this four-fold action which the ILCW recommends for adoption, we see a radical break with Lutheran tradition at almost every point. (1) The offertory, in which bread and wine

are pompously carried to the altar, seems like the attempt to turn the gift of God (Gospel) into the demands of a human gift (Law). Is this act the unconscious survival of pagan notions about propitiating the deity with sacrificial offerings? At any rate, it rejects Luther's deep insights that only God offers and only man receives the gift of the Gospel. Conversely, in Confessional thinking, the Sacrament is Gospel, not Law. (2) The canon of the mass was the secret part of the liturgy which the priest read to himself, containing many incantations to the saints and martyrs and performing the wondrous act of transubstantiating the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. Luther abolished this practice and replaced it with the clear reading (or singing) of the Words of Institution in a voice audible to the congregation. The Formula of Concord followed Luther's lead when it said: "In the usage of the Holy Supper, the words of institution of Christ are by no means to be omitted, but rather spoken openly" (Epitome VII, 9). The notion of a Eucharistic Prayer, in which one approaches as closely as possible to Roman usage, seems to repudiate Luther and the Confessions, which saw the *verba* not as a prayer directed to God but as the proclamation of the Gospel to the congregation. The fact that the Words of Institution are clearly proclaimed neither in the act of consecration (Eucharistic Prayer!) nor in the distribution of the ILCW mass represents a serious distortion of Lutheran thought about the Sacrament. (3) The insistence that the bread must be broken (fraction) accords well with the stress by the Reformed upon externals, to the accompanying neglect of the spiritual gift of the Sacrament. We know, of course, that the Bible teaches that not a bone of His body should be broken. Nor did Christ command us to break the bread, but he did call us to believe that the bread and wine are his body and blood. Ever since the Calvinist polemics of the sixteenth century, Lutherans have felt it a matter of confessional principle to refuse to break the host (the body of the Lord). This accounts for the revolt by the common people which confronted Moritz the Learned, a Lutheran apostate to the Calvinistic church, when he ordered the breaking of the bread. The landgrave finally decreed that the Communion wafers be baked containing pieces of iron in the attempt to force the Calvinistic practice of the fraction upon Lutheran congregations. When one stands *in statu confessionis*, such concessions cannot be made. To make them seems a repudiation of the Confessional principle in an act unionism. (4) Even the word "distribution," which suggests our passivity at the Lord's table, is avoided in the rubrics of this rite.

These are not the only features of the ILCW mass which cause a Lutheran to hesitate. (1) The *epiklēsis* is introduced with its prayer: "Send the power of your Holy Spirit upon us and upon this bread and wine . . ." (CW 2, p. 17). In Lutheran theology, the presence of an absent Christ is not effected by the Holy Ghost, as in Calvinistic thought, for Christ himself is present for unbelievers as well as believers by virtue of his ubiquity or multivolipresence. It is the second, not the third, person of the Trinity who bestows his body and blood in this Supper. (2) One is struck by the preference of the ILCW for

the pronoun "you" (German, *Sie*) in place of the intimate word, "thou" (German, *Du*), and this in an age when strangers call each other by their first names!<sup>6</sup> Luther said that the heart of the Gospel was that we could call God *Du* instead of *Sie*. We may associate the form "you" with the *Deus absconditus*, the God of judgment, and the word "thou" with the *Deus revelatus*, the God of our salvation. Is this not a truly substantive change? Can the church not afford to have a language which is different from that of the world? Can the church not say, "In the kingdom of God, all is different"? If in this age of estrangement people do not know how to say "thou" or "thy," ought we not to teach this to them? (3) Closely linked with this has been the almost fanatical suppression of the Authorized Version of 1611 ("King James" Bible). Certainly this version is badly in need of a modernisation, and it deserves something far better than the RSV. But the appearance of dozens of vulgar new versions seems to have opened the way for license. Unsuitable texts are frequently heard in Lutheran services. We must not overlook the advantage of using one text of Holy Scriptures which is familiar to the church-members, which renders feasible the memorisation of Bible verses by children and adults, and which creates a close tie between Christian instruction and worship. Most of the blandly contemporary versions are almost impossible to memorize, and, besides, they will soon be discarded. One of the prisoners-of-war in Vietnam confessed that it was the texts memorized in childhood from the Bible and Luther's catechism which had been a bulwark of strength during his dreadful ordeal. Have fleeting theories of paedagogy and liturgics blinded us to this need?

### 3. SOME CONCLUSIONS

As the Lutheran Confessions fervently proclaim, Lutheranism is not a new faith. Rather, it represents the authentic strain of the Christian faith, of the truly Catholic Church. The Augsburg Confession begins by pointing out its agreement with the faith of the ancient tradition *magno consensu*. The Schmalkald Articles of Luther hammer away at this issue again and again. The forefathers who wrote the Formula of Concord appended the catalog of testimonies from the best writers of the Ancient Church to make this consensus as clear as possible.

Creed and liturgy ought to go hand in hand. A mere conservatism for conservatism's sake may become lifeless. But that is not the point at this juncture in history. An unwholesome individualism and subjectivism permeates too much of what the ILCW has published. Is this the result of that Existentialism which has ravaged the churches of Europe with its insistence that the experiences of the past have no relevance to me, and that only what I myself elect to do in my present moment of decision has any true meaning? Or did that revolt of American youth in the late sixties, which ran completely counter to the letter and spirit of the Fourth Commandment with its emphasis upon the authority and dignity of age, lead some to lay hands upon the hymns and liturgies of the church and to insist upon remaking all for the "now" generation? Is the unbridled sensualism of many

so-called "contemporary hymns" an authentic expression of the spirit of him who has yielded his life to Jesus? Perhaps much of what has been offered in the name of contemporary worship is not at all contemporary, but a return to that egoism which has plagued mankind since the days of Adam and Eve. At the very least, the possibility exists that the church must take a long and critical look at the productions of the ILCW, something which the ILCW has, after all, asked us to do.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. See Dom Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1945 ff.) This book is regarded as a standard work by many Lutheran liturgiologists.
2. See especially Oliver K. Olson, "Luther's 'Catholic' Minimum," in *Response*, XI (1970), pp. 17-31. A symposium on the ILCW liturgy is presented in *The Lutheran Quarterly*, XXVI (1974), pp. 108-224. The proposed rite is critically examined and rejected in Oliver K. Olson, "Contemporary Trends in Liturgy Viewed From the Perspective of Classical Lutheran Theology," pp. 110-157, including an important analysis of the contributions of Odo Casel and Gregory Dix. The Eucharistic Prayer is defended by Gordon Lathrop, "The Prayers of Jesus and the Great Prayer of the Church," pp. 158-173, by Ronald M. Hals, "The Concept of Sacrifice As A Background For The Eucharist," pp. 174-188, and by Herbert F. Lindemann, "CW-2 Passes in Review," pp. 221-224, who states with misplaced optimism, "No defense need be made for . . . the introduction of a eucharistic prayer" (p. 221). Robert W. Jensen, in "Liturgy of the Spirit," pp. 189-203, defends the *epiklesis*.
3. Eugene L. Brand, "Luther's Liturgical Surgery," in *Interpreting Luther's Legacy: Essays in Honor of Edward C. Fendt* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1969), pp. 108-119.
4. The ILCW confession of sins in disguised in an "Act of Reconciliation," where the embarrassing reference to original sin is excised and replaced with this form: "Most holy and merciful Father, we confess to you and to one another [is this really a prayer?] that we have sinned both in our actions and in our failure to act." This is to be followed by a series of biddings, by which is likely meant a catalog of such transgressions as polluting the environment, forgetting to help little old ladies to cross the street, or insufficient concern for people who make their living by harvesting lettuce. These are all worthwhile concerns, but they are here out of place because they "atomize" the doctrine of sin, totally obscuring the teaching of the Bible and the Confessions, viz. that sin is a disease of the heart and not merely outward manifestations. A rich supply of such deviations from Christian doctrine may be found in *Celebrate*, a series of throw-away liturgies by the LCA which provides a new confession of sins for each Sunday! The essentially anthropocentric character of the ILCW rite is eloquently brought out in the subsequent ceremony of shaking hands.
5. The weaknesses of the form of confession in the ILCW mass are criticized by Walter R. Bouman in his perceptive article, "Confession-Absolution and the Eucharistic Liturgy," in *The Lutheran Quarterly*, *op. cit.* (note 2), pp. 204-220; see especially pp. 213-219. Bouman also calls attention to the danger that the bids become a form of religious pressure (p. 216). He calls for a return to a fuller understanding and use of confession and absolution.
6. The ILCW seems to have problems with using the English language; some of the published materials utilize language which is ineffective or even tasteless, while the interpretive statements are often confusing and unclear. An example of the latter follows: "The new book will reveal our first official move beyond the language, the diction, of the 16th century. After 400 years, many believe the time has come to make

liturgical language conform to long-standing English usage. This means substituting 'you' for 'thee' and 'thou' and omitting the 'eth' ending on verbs." (Eugene Brand, "A new hymnal for Lutherans—when, what, and why?" in *The Lutheran Standard*, new series, XV, 10 [May 20, 1975], p. 7.) Each sentence of this important announcement presents problems of exegesis. What is meant by "our first official move . . ."? The author surely is not saying that this is the first transition from Luther's German, Petri's Swedish, or Tausen's Danish or Norwegian. In the second sentence he announces that after four hundred years, the time has come to make liturgical language conform to "long-standing English usage," and yet in the third sentence he proposed to abolish the "long-standing English usage" reflected by the Authorized Version of the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer in favor of a relatively modern usage. The intimate pronouns "thee" and "thou" are easy enough to understand; not so, the statements of the ILCW.

For a telling exposure of the incompetence of the language of much that passes for "contemporary worship" material, see Gracia Grindal, "Language: A Lost Craft Among Hymnwriters," in *Church Music* LXXV, pp. 59-62. She produces some amusing examples of recent hymns and points back to the superiority of true "long-standing English usage."

The ILCW feels that the innovations which it heralds will, in repudiating the liturgies of Luther and the Confessions, remove Lutheranism from the status of a sect and bring it into the mainstream. A spokesman writes: "The new book of 1978 will take a decisive step beyond the 16th century Orders. We will take this step because the people who have been directed to prepare this book embrace thoroughly the declaration of the Lutheran Confessions that we are not a sect. Instead, we are in the mainstream of the one holy catholic and apostolic church. The riches of the whole church's heritage are ours too" (Brand, *loc. cit.*) Need we exclude our own heritage?