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The Church Growth Movement and Lutheran Worship

Ernie V. Lassman

A Crisis in Worship

Although pastors may have different opinions about the value or the danger of the church growth movement, many, if not most, are aware of how divisive alternative worship styles have become in our midst. For some of us it is a crisis of worship, theology, and identity. This crisis is manifested in the dialogue between those who wish to use historic liturgical formats and customs and those desiring alternative formats. Many members sense that their Church is being taken away from them. Unfortunately, such concerns are sometimes belittled or minimized by telling those members that they must change if they want their congregation to grow. The worst case arises when guilt is heaped upon those who resist alternative worship forms. It is a grave mistake to ignore this crisis by assuming in a simplistic fashion that such opponents of alternative worship styles are simply set in their traditionalistic ways. It is an even graver mistake to dismiss much needed evaluation and discussion of alternative forms with the cry of "adiaphora!" as if there are no principles of or parameters for Scriptural worship.

In Lutheran circles, Lutheran Church—Canada (LCC) and the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) have not been alone in raising concerns about certain church growth movement principles and assumptions that affect worship format. There have been individual voices in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America expressing concern, as well as independent Lutheran journals such as "Lutheran Forum."¹ This is also a topic of discussion in the Wisconsin Synod.

¹David A. Gustafson, *Lutherans in Crisis: The Question of Identity in the American Republic* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

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It is also incorrect to think that this crisis is simply another parochial squabble in the LCMS or LCC. It involves most North American denominations. Already in 1970, Dietrich von Hildebrand warned of the dangers of secularism changing the Church and its worship.² In more recent times Thomas Day has chronicled the negative effects of secularism on Roman Catholic worship.³ This crisis of worship format is also found among those within the Reformed and Evangelical traditions. Among Evangelical theologians, writers such as Os Guinness, David Wells, and Charles Colson have published books critical of certain elements of the church growth movement.⁴

This is only by way of introduction. There is a growing body of literature across Christian traditions that expresses grave concerns about church growth movement theology and its resultant worship styles. It is therefore imprudent to ignore the concerns of fellow Lutherans in the LCC and the LCMS.

The Worship Crisis and Culture

This crisis, however, must be put in the larger context of our culture. What we are dealing with is the relationship of the Church to the culture in which we live. The Church has always had this tension with culture. But an increasing number of observers of culture talk about a "Post-Christian society." It seems that many segments of the Church are trying to

²Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Trojan Horse and the City of God* (Manchester, New Hampshire: Sophia Institute Press, 1967).

³Thomas Day, *Why Catholics Can't Sing: The Culture of Catholicism and the Triumph of Bad Taste* (New York: Crossroad, 1990); Thomas Day, *Where Have You Gone, Michelangelo: The Loss of Soul in Catholic Culture* (New York: Crossroad, 1993).

⁴Os Guinness, *Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts with Modernity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993); *No God but God: Breaking with the Idols of our Age*, edited by Os Guinness and John Seel (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992); David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994); Charles Colson, *Against the Night: Living in the New Dark Ages* (Minneapolis: Grason, 1989); Charles Colson, *The Body* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1992).

accommodate to culture at a time when that culture appears not only to be more hostile to the Church as an organization, but even to the Gospel message. Roger Lundin writes, "If the danger two centuries ago was that of a Christian faith become irrelevant, the present risk is that Christ may become so completely identified with the concerns of the present age that his person is rendered superfluous and his authority denied."⁵

There are two sources of the problem. One is our society/culture in general. The whole of western civilization is at a turning point. It is true that since the Enlightenment there has been a slowly unfolding crisis in Western civilization, which intensified in the 1960s and has taken on a new urgency. There are different nuances to this phenomenon. Some of its elements include an exaggerated individualism, consumerism, pragmatism, popularism, emphasis on technology, statistics and methods (including management), focus on experience at the expense of truth, an ahistorical view of life (with emphasis on the present at the neglect of the past and indifference to the future), and stress on the psychological well-being of man as facilitated by a therapeutic mind set. Three terms seem to capture the essence of all these different traits: modernity, secularization, and narcissism. Os Guinness defines modernity as ". . . the character and system of the world produced by the forces of development and modernization, especially capitalism, industrialized technology, and telecommunications."⁶ Concerning secularization he says ". . . the sharpest challenge of modernity is not secularism, but secularization. Secularism is a philosophy; secularization is a process. . . . The two most easily recognizable hallmarks of secularization in America are the exaltation of numbers and of technique."⁷ Narcissism describes a personality that is shaped by the forces of modernity and secularization. Christopher Lasch described the relationship of

⁵Roger Lundin, *The Culture of Interpretation: Christian Faith and the Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 79.

⁶Guinness, *Dining*, 16.

⁷Guinness, *Dining*, 49.

our culture and the narcissistic personality.⁸ David Wells summarizes Lasch's description of the narcissistic personality:

He means a person who has been hollowed out, deprived of the internal gyroscope of character that a former generation sought to develop, and endowed instead with an exaggerated interest in image as opposed to substance. Efforts to build character have been replaced by efforts to manage the impression we make on others. Behind this constant game of charades, this shifting of cultural guises, is a personality that is typically shallow, self-absorbed, elusive, leery of commitments, unattached to people or place, dedicated to keeping all options open, and frequently incapable of either loyalty or gratitude. This, in turn, produces a strange psychological contradiction. On the one hand, racked by insecurity, this personality is driven by a strong desire for total control over life. This accounts for the modern mania for technology. . . . On the other hand, this kind of person often proves unwilling to accept the limitations of life and hence is inclined to believe in what is deeply irrational. Thus primitive myths and superstitions are now making their appearance side by side with computer wizardry and rampant secularization.⁹

The influence of modernity and secularization is pervasive in our society. Unfortunately, many churches are accommodating these movements by incorporating some aspects of the church growth movement under the guise of "needs" (without questioning the validity of these "needs"). Many in the church growth movement seem to have forgotten that the culture we live in is not neutral to the message of the Church.¹⁰

⁸Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979).

⁹Wells, *Wasteland*, 217.

¹⁰Wells notes (*Wasteland*, 35): "It is ironic that there are those in the church who view culture as mostly neutral and mostly harmless . . . while there are those in society who recognize that culture is laden with values, many of which are injurious to human well-being. . . . The church may choose to disregard many of today's cultural critics who are raising the alarms about

Os Guinness makes the remarkable statement that “. . . modernity simultaneously makes evangelism infinitely easier but discipleship infinitely harder. . . . The problem is not that Christians have disappeared, but that Christian faith has become so deformed. Under the influence of modernity, we modern Christians are literally capable of winning the world while losing our own souls.”¹¹ Then he goes on to state five ironies:

First, Protestants today need the most protesting and reforming. Second, evangelicals and fundamentalists have become the most worldly tradition in the church. Third, conservatives are becoming the most progressive. Fourth, Christians in many cases are the prime agents of their own secularization. Fifth, through its uncritical engagement with modernity, the church is becoming its own most effective gravedigger.¹²

Guinness does not merely diagnose the problem, however. He a serious challenge to American Evangelicals: “It is time once again to hammer theses on the door of the church. . . . Christendom is becoming a betrayal of the Christian faith of the New Testament. To pretend otherwise is either to be blind or to appear to be making a fool of God.”¹³

There are many who fear that the church growth movement shows characteristic signs of modernity and secularization in trying to meet the needs of a narcissistic culture. Lutheranism has also been influenced by the church growth movement, including its concept of worship. In view of this influence, it seems that certain questions demand an answer if we are to be able adequately to evaluate worship forms. The form that

the drift of western culture and its internal rotteness . . . but it does not have the luxury of disregarding what Scriptures says about our world. And today, what Scripture says about the ‘world’ and what these critics are seeing in contemporary culture are sometimes remarkably close.”

¹¹Guinness, *Dining*, 43.

¹²Guinness, *Dining*, 62.

¹³Guinness, *No God but God*, 290.

worship takes will to a large extent depend on the answers given to six specific questions. These questions are all closely related to one another and have other ancillary questions intertwined with them. It is hard to answer one question without reference to the others. But these six questions are at least a starting point to evaluate the present crisis. And the answers to these questions will not only determine what we do on Sunday morning; they will determine our future (and our children's future) as a confessional Lutheran Church. Let us, then, consider these six critical questions.¹⁴

Worship and Evangelism

One important question involves the relationship between worship and evangelism. Do we use worship to evangelize people or do we evangelize people so they can worship? Is worship *primarily* for believers or unbelievers? Is worship *primarily* for the "churched" or the "unchurched"? How one answers this question has significant implications. If worship is primarily for believers who already belong to the Church, then one would expect the worship form to reflect this. This would mean that language, concepts, symbols, and music would have an "insiders" feel. Such an approach would have an "alien" feel to an "outsider," that is, one who is not yet a believer and a member of the Church, because it would result in a form that reflects knowledge of Jesus Christ and the Christian faith. The form/style would be in keeping with Paul's exhortation to be mature and to put away childish things (1 Corinthians 13:11;

¹⁴Until recently, these questions were not being asked, especially in official gatherings of Lutherans. I, at least, have not heard them being asked in any formal presentation at conferences. Experience has proven to this writer that certain church growth movement principles have simply been stated as givens—as if the validity of these principles is obvious and thus beyond debate. Fifteen years ago I was on the road of the church growth movement because I wanted my congregation to grow and because I did not know at the time where the road was leading. Thus, I speak as one who has read church growth books and attended church growth seminars and conferences. I slowly changed course because I could not in good conscience maintain a Scriptural and confessional position and utilize church growth principles.

Ephesians 4:13; Hebrews 5:14). But if one uses worship to evangelize the non-Christian there could be a temptation to have a format that is lower in its expression of Christianity – the lowest common denominator, so to speak. For example, we hear these days of “seeker services.” For whom are such services designed? If they are designed for non-Christians, there can be no worship format at all since they cannot worship God without faith in Jesus Christ. This is carried out to its logical conclusion in Bill Hybels’ Willow Creek Community Church, which purposefully omits the cross from the building, striving instead to look like a concert hall or movie theater lobby. However, if most of the attendees are already professed Christians, what is the purpose of offering a “seeker service” to them? And if these services are held on Sunday morning, will not such services actually confuse what worship is for the “seeker” and for many members of the congregation? Indeed, George Barna, a close friend of Hybels, makes this very point:

The concept of worship has no meaning to many people. A study among Baby Boomers who are lay leaders in their churches found that less than 1% said they participated in the church out of a desire to worship God. . . . The research also points out that we operate on the basis of assumptions – many of which are unfounded. One startling discovery from a survey among young adults who are lay leaders in their churches was that the very reason for attending church on Sunday mornings (that is, what we *assumed* was the “reason” for attending church) was but a foreign concept to 99 out of 100 of those individuals. Worship? These leaders readily admitted that they were involved in the church for a myriad of reasons *other than worship*. The problem was not that they rejected the idea of worshipping God, but rather that they were not clear what that meant. This absence of clarity did not stop them from pursuing what they thought their role in the church was.

That role simply had little, if anything, to do with worshiping God, or encouraging others to do so.¹⁵

In addition, the phrase “seeker services” has the sound of revivalism, which is foreign to the Scriptures and to the Lutheran Confessions. Revivalism was one aspect of American Lutheranism as promoted by Samuel Schmucker. Revivalism is a distinct American phenomenon shaped by the culture of the nineteenth century. Speaking of the negative consequences of revivalism Mark Noll says “the combination of revivalism and disestablishment meant that pragmatic concerns would prevail over principle. What the churches required were results—new adherents—or they would simply go out of business. Thus, the production of results had to override all other considerations.”¹⁶ And this is part of the problem for these same forces are loosed in the church growth movement. Thus, a part of our current crisis is “Americanization.”¹⁷

If one shapes the worship format according to the lowest common denominator, one is not only restricted in the use of the best of Christian expression, but opens the door for secular ideas and concepts to shape the worship service apart from God and his Word. I have been at pastors’ conferences and heard Lutheran speakers say that the problem is our members who resist change because they do not want to grow. Church growth experts tell us we should be more concerned about meeting the

¹⁵George Barna, *The Church Today: Insightful Statistics and Commentary* (Glendale: The Barna Research Group), 37, 39.

¹⁶Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 66.

¹⁷In other words the battle with Samuel Schmucker and the American Lutherans is repeating itself. David Gustafson, an ELCA theologian, writes (*Lutherans in Crisis*, 170): “The American Lutheran controversy [of the nineteenth century] is an example of an Americanization struggle, one that involved Lutheranism’s very identity. The debate regarding the form Lutheranism is to take in America is not finished. It is as alive among Lutherans in America today as it was in the mid-nineteenth century. Unfortunately, Lutherans do not always realize that the issues of Americanization and religious identity are ever-present and are a part of the various decisions they make.”

needs of the unchurched person than meeting the needs of the very people who believe in Jesus Christ and support the Church with their faithful and regular involvement and monies. It is true that our democratic society is unfriendly to the idea of “outsiders” and “insiders,” yet this is inherent in Christianity. Jesus made the distinction between “outsiders” and “insiders” when he was telling parables. In Mark’s Gospel Jesus tells his disciples (the “insiders”): “The secret of the Kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables” (Mark 4:11). And Paul refers to “outsiders” and “insiders” in at least four different texts: 1 Corinthians 5:12-13; Colossians 4:5; 1 Thessalonians 4:5; and 1 Timothy 3:7. The very name “Church,” *ekklesia*, means “those called out” and implies this outsider/insider tension, as does Paul’s familiar phrase “When you come together” (1 Corinthians 11:18).¹⁸

An unfortunate result is that faithful Christians – members of congregations, the believers, the insiders – are spoken of as if they (the baptized children of God) are the enemy, while the unbelievers – non-members, the “outsiders,” people who are presumably spiritually dead – are considered the appropriate people to determine the worship practices of the Christian congregation. If these “seekers” are not spiritually dead, then they are already Christian. How, then, does this relate to “outreach”?

¹⁸Charles Colson writes (*Against the Night*, 98-99): “Recently a neighbor told me how excited she was about her church. When I tried to point out diplomatically that the group was a cult, believing in neither the resurrection nor the deity of Christ, she seemed unconcerned. ‘Oh, but the services are so wonderful,’ she said. ‘I always feel so good after I’ve been there!’ Such misguided euphoria has always been rampant among those seeking spiritual strokes rather than a source of truth. But what about the church itself, that body of people ‘called out’ to embody God’s truth? Most of the participants in Robert Bellah’s study saw the church as a means to achieve personal goals. Bellah notes a similar tendency in many evangelical circles to thin the biblical language of sin and redemption to an idea of Jesus as the friend who helps us find happiness and self-fulfillment. These ‘feel gooders’ of modern faith are reflecting the same radical individualism we discussed in earlier chapters. . . . The new barbarians have invaded not only the parlor and politics but the pews of America as well.”

Do we use worship to evangelize people or do we evangelize people to worship with us? If new Christians are properly instructed, worship makes much more sense.¹⁹ Historic Christianity, including Lutheranism, has a long practice of catechetics for “outsiders” to help them make the transition to being “insiders.” This is the process of learning the language of Christ’s culture, that is, his Church. Indeed such evangelism and catechesis have been the norm throughout the Church’s history.

Michael Green examines the various methods of early Christian evangelism under two heads: public evangelism and personal evangelism.²⁰ Under the category of public evangelism he includes the following methods: synagogue preaching, open air preaching, prophetic preaching, teaching (catechesis), and household evangelism. Under personal evangelism he includes: personal encounters, visiting, and literary evangelism (apologetics).²¹ He does not mention evangelism (as primarily reaching the unbeliever) as a part of worship. Rather, his account is in keeping with Peter Brunner, who writes: “It is already becoming evident that the worship of the Church must, in its essence, be more than a missionary proclamation of the Gospel.”²² We must have a clear image of worship in our mind. Do we come together on Sunday mornings primarily to evangelize the unchurched (and why should they want to come if they are not Christian) or do we evangelize with the result that newly baptized believers join us in worship?

Entertainment and Worship

A second crucial question concerns the difference between entertainment and worship. Entertainment is man centered while worship is God centered. This too is a cultural

¹⁹It is not uncommon for new members who have gone through the Adult Information Class to tell me how the sermons and the liturgy have become more meaningful with a fuller understanding and appreciation.

²⁰Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970).

²¹Green, *Evangelism*, 194-225.

²²Peter Brunner, *Worship in the Name of Jesus*, translated by M. H. Bertram (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), 86.

phenomenon that is affecting the Church and its worship. Neil Postman lays the responsibility for this development at the feet of television, which “speaks in only one persistent voice—the voice of entertainment.”²³

Postman also devotes an entire chapter to television’s affect on Christianity. He writes:

Religion, like everything else, is presented, quite simply and without apology, as an entertainment. Everything that makes religion an historic, profound and sacred human activity is stripped away: there is no ritual, no dogma, no tradition, no theology, and above all, no sense of spiritual transcendence. On these shows, the preacher is tops. God comes out as second banana.²⁴

Postman refers to such broadcasts as the Trinity Broadcasting Network, hosted by Paul and Jan Crouch. But the religious programming so common on television is often duplicated in parts of the church growth movement. An entertainment mindset can also creep into local congregational worship. Entertainment focuses on what is pleasing and pleasurable to me—it is self-centered.

Entertainment comes into the Church through such concepts as pragmatism, meeting needs, and the role of the therapeutic

²³Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 80. Postman goes on to demonstrate the negative effects of entertainment on education and journalism. Television, he says, presents everything (even serious subject matter) in such a way that “the overarching presumption is that it is there for our amusement and pleasure” (87). This was apparent in a dramatic way in CNN’s coverage of the O. J. Simpson trial, with its melodramatic lead-in music and format that was hard to distinguish from a fictional murder drama. This idea is also related to an exaggerated emphasis in the church growth movement on the immanence of God and a neglect of his transcendence. God is often presented in ways that make him and his Son appear more like friends, at the expense of his “otherness” and holiness. God’s transcendence cannot find expression in celebratory, user friendly worship formats.

²⁴Postman, *Amusing*, 116-117.

in American Culture. Entertainment does not involve a Law and Gospel, sin and grace approach to worship. The Law is often missing (such as confession of sin), or if it is included, it is trivialized by the therapeutic approach to worship.

In *The Culture of Narcissism*, Christopher Lasch writes, "The contemporary climate is therapeutic, not religious. People today hunger not for personal salvation . . . but for the feeling, the momentary illusion, of personal well-being, health and psychic security."²⁵ In this therapeutic model each individual is portrayed as a victim of someone or something. Confession of wrong doing is unnecessary – we are simply victims who need comforting words to soothe our wounds. Thus, people come to church to feel good, to be soothed and comforted therapeutically. This is passed off as gospel, but is, in fact, no gospel, in the biblical sense, at all. And if this other gospel is not offered, people will seek and find it somewhere else. An entertainment approach to worship, which exaggerates the immanence of God, has forgotten God's transcendence, his holiness.²⁶

The danger of much of contemporary worship is that it makes God so comfortable so common that our Heavenly Father is changed into a Sugar Daddy who spoils us with all that we want. Further, his Son becomes simply our "friend," whom we

²⁵Lasch, *Culture of Narcissism*, 33.

²⁶David Wells writes (*God in the Wasteland*, 141, 145, 159): "In the church today, where such awe is conspicuously absent and where easy familiarity with God has become the accepted norm for providing worship that is comfortable and consumable, we would do well to remember that God is not mocked. . . . Until we recognize afresh the centrality of God's holiness . . . our worship will lack joyful seriousness . . . and the church will be just one more special interest pleading for a hearing in a world of competing enterprises. . . . The psychological fallout from this constant barrage of changing experiences, changing scenarios, changing worlds, changing world views, and changing values . . . is dramatic. . . . It greatly accentuates the importance of novelty and spontaneity, since each new situation, each new opportunity, each new alternative demands that we make a choice of some kind. We are, in fact, caught up in a furious whirlwind of choices that is shaking the foundation of our sense of stability."

introduce to others on "Friendship Sunday." God's immanence can be stressed to the point of neglecting his transcendence, his "otherness" and holiness.

The Means of Grace and Response

Another question that needs to be answered adequately is the relationship in worship between the objective (the Means of Grace—the Gospel—justification) and the subjective (our response—sanctification). What is this relationship? Does one try to get a fifty/fifty balance between these two elements? Or should one of these elements be purposely emphasized more than the other? And if so, which one? Clearly, even as the Gospel is to have a certain priority over the Law, likewise, the objective Means of Grace are primary in the worship life of a Christian. Not all Christians—specifically the Reformed Churches—agree on this Law/Gospel tension with the Gospel as priority. The Lutheran Confessions, however, have a very clear and definite understanding of worship as God's service to us by his Gospel in the Means of Grace (yet without falling into antinomianism). For example, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession says: "It is by faith that God wants to be worshiped, namely, that we receive from what he promises and offers."²⁷ Again, "Thus the service and worship of the Gospel is to receive good things from God, while the worship of the Law is to offer and present our goods to God. . . . [T]he highest worship in the Gospel is the desire to receive forgiveness of sins, grace, and righteousness."²⁸ Finally, "But the chief worship of God is the preaching of the Gospel."²⁹ There can be no appropriate response apart from the Means of Grace—the Gospel—justification. Human nature leads us to emphasize the subjective side of worship, human response. This is simply another aspect of Law and Gospel. By nature human beings are oriented not to the Gospel but to the Law. This means that unless consciously monitored worship will

²⁷*The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, translated and edited by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 114:49.

²⁸Tappert, 155:310.

²⁹Tappert, 221:42.

easily become dominated by the Law and our response with a focus on sanctification, not justification. This natural inclination toward the Law is reinforced and illustrated by our society's emphasis on entertainment and therapy. Left unchecked worship can be reduced to a purely human activity where man becomes the measure of all things. Confessional Lutheranism, however, has always held that, while Law and Gospel are both to be proclaimed, the Gospel is to predominate. As Walther reminds us: "The Word of God is not rightly divided when the person teaching it does not allow the Gospel to have a general predominance in his teaching."³⁰ Thus, in worship the Means of Grace—the Gospel—justification will predominate in relation to our response and sanctification.

In view of this inclination, a conscious effort must be made to emphasize the Means of Grace—the Gospel—justification — not at the expense of response, but in its proper proportion to the Gospel. The liturgy revolves around and takes its form from the Means of Grace and not our response, feeling, or experience. The driving force, then, behind concern for worship formats is not "traditionalism," or "maintenance ministry mentality," or other such things, but stems from a concern for the Gospel as given through the Means of Grace. The church growth movement does not have a strong Means of Grace theology. Among other things, the Sacrament of the Altar does not fit well into "user friendly" formats that are based on methods with roots in revivalism. Tim Wright, one of the pastors at the ELCA's influential Community Church of Joy in Phoenix, Arizona, comments on the practice of close(d) communion by saying: "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."³¹

³⁰C. F. W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, translated by W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1928), 403.

³¹Tim Wright, *A Community of Joy* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 122.

Style and Theological Substance

All of this leads us to another closely related question. Can worship style really be separated from theological substance? Can a Lutheran congregation worship with a Reformed or Pentecostal style and maintain its Lutheran identity in its teaching and worship over a period of time? No doubt a certain tension can be maintained by conscientious people, but what about when they leave? What if our theology and tradition are forgotten in certain circles and the foundation deteriorates? What will future generations build on?

Is worship so much an adiaphoron, as many people say, that the style of worship is insignificant or indifferent? Common sense, experience, and church history would say that such a view is naive and misguided. Can it really be true that there is *no* relationship between theology and worship style? If this is true, then why would there be even a need for alternative worship styles? The history of the Christian Church shows that there is a relationship between style and substance. To deny this shows the influence of our culture, which sees everything in neutral terms. In the fifth century Prosper of Aquitaine summarized the practice of the early church with his saying *Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi* (the rule of praying [that is, worshiping] is the rule of believing). This principle existed long before Prosper articulated it for posterity. "The way in which Christians worshiped served to shape their understanding of the faith just as powerfully as reading the Bible."³²

During the time of the Reformation style and substance in worship first became an issue between Lutherans and Roman Catholics and then between Lutherans and the Reformed. During the time of the Leipzig Interim Lutheran Churches were under pressure to return to certain forms of the Roman Mass. What Lutherans had deleted or changed in the received Roman Mass reflected the theological differences between Rome and Wittenberg. Clearly our Lutheran forefathers knew that style

³²Carl Volz, *Faith and Practice in the Early Church: Foundations for Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1983), 148.

and substance went together. This is one of the main reasons for including Article X in the Formula of Concord, "The Ecclesiastical Rites That Are Called Adiaphora or Things Indifferent."

We believe teach, and confess that at a time of confession, as when enemies of the word of God desire to suppress the pure doctrine of the Gospel, the entire community of God, yes, every individual Christian, and especially the ministers of the Word as the leaders of the community of God, are obligated to confess openly, not only by words, but also through their deeds and actions, the true doctrine and all the 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 of chicanery.³³

The cry of "Adiaphora" too easily and too frequently obscures the discussion of worship forms. Too often those who try to raise some red flags about certain worship practices in our midst are tuned out with the cry of "maintenance ministry," "traditionalism" or "adiaphora."³⁴ However, David Wells strikes a similar note:

³³Tappert, 612:10.

³⁴Peter Brunner (*Worship*, 227) reminds us that: "The legitimate historical change of the form of worship takes part in the legitimate historical change of the form of testimony. The legitimate change of form is not a matter of convenient accommodation to the questionable needs of a certain era. The history of worship in the Evangelical [Lutheran] church since the era of Enlightenment demonstrates so clearly how the form disintegrates and its service of testimony is rendered doubtful and impossible by such a wrong adaptation of the form of worship to the pattern of this world (Rom. 12:2). Secularization is assuredly not adapted to the form of worship. Just as the witness of the Gospel faces the world vested in a peculiar and singular strangeness, so also the form of worship dare not surrender—precisely in view of its testimonial service—its singularity and strangeness, which is well-nigh incomprehensible to the world."

The important contrast lies not so much between those who define themselves theologically and those who do not but between two different theologies by which people are defining themselves. Those who voice dissent with classical evangelicalism at this point do so not because they have *no* theology but because they have a *different* theology. Their theology is centered on a God who is on easy terms with modernity, who is quick to endorse all of the modern evangelical theories about how to grow one's church and how to become a psychologically whole person.³⁵

Such differences are manifested in worship practices. David Luecke's *Evangelical Style and Lutheran Substance*³⁶ evokes comparison with Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, with its terms "accident" and "substance." Briefly put, this doctrine teaches that bread and wine are no longer a part of the supper but only have the appearance of bread and wine, while the substance is the body and blood of Christ. To these Lutherans respond: "If it looks like bread, it is bread. If it looks like wine, it is wine. The body and blood of Christ are surely present, but there is also the substance of bread and wine and not simply the appearance, the "accident" of bread and wine. A rose by any other name is still a rose. If a Lutheran worship service takes on the appearance of a non-Lutheran service, that is exactly what it is—non-Lutheran. The format of a worship service will reflect some kind of theology.

Worship and Music

Closely related to worship style is the question of music. Is music neutral? Is some kind of music more suited to the worship of God than other kind of music? Both common sense and studies have shown that music is not neutral. Both television and the movies use music to call forth the desired emotions to fit the action on the screen. If one gets scared while watching a movie on television, all one has to do is hit the

³⁵Wells, *No Place for Truth*, 290.

³⁶David Luecke, *Evangelical Style and Lutheran Substance: Facing America's Mission Challenge* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1988).

“mute” button and the anxiety immediately goes away. Postman notes the powerful ways in which television uses music:

All television news programs begin, end and are somewhere in between punctuated with music. I have found very few Americans who regard this custom as peculiar, which fact I have taken as evidence for the dissolution of lines of demarcations between serious public discourse and entertainment. What has music to do with the News? Why is it there? It is there, I assume, for the same reason music is used in the theater and films – to create a mood and provide a leitmotif for the entertainment. If there were no music – as is the case when any television program is interrupted for a news flash-viewers would expect something truly alarming, possibly life-altering.³⁷

Regardless of the music that is used in worship, no music should dominate the Word of God, but serve the proclamation of the Word.³⁸

³⁷Postman, *Amusing*, 102-103.

³⁸Thomas Day (*Why Catholics Can't Sing*, 73-74) comments on the impact that an informal, non-liturgical style with folk type music has had on the Roman Catholic Church: “GLORY AND PRAISE [a song book] and the whole reformed-folk repertory have been responsible for a radical redistribution of power. What power the liturgical event once contained is now handed over to individuals who take turns showing off their newly acquired strength. *Priest*. The reformed-folk repertory creates a casual ambiance which permits the priest to spend every moment of a liturgy trying to manipulate a congregation with the power of his charm. *Congregation*. That ‘now’ repertory in GLORY AND PRAISE and similar books – virtually untouched by any indebtedness to the past – reassures the congregation that the Catholicism of history, church authority, experts, and authorities of all kinds have no power over them. *Musicians*. Folk musicians are big winners in this redistribution of power. The music itself allows them to pull a large portion of the liturgical ‘time’ to them. If all the music in GLORY AND PRAISE and derivative publications could be stretched out and measured by the inch, you would find that several hundred feet are for the congregation but miles and miles belong to the special performers, the local stars, who must always be placed where everyone can admire the way they feel the meaning of words. The congregation, awestruck, merely assists.”

Has the question about music become too important? We cannot escape our cultures' view of music, which includes such songs as "I believe in Music" (with its spiritual overtones about the value and worth of music), or the idea that music is the international language that can unite the world, or its emphasis on emotion.³⁹ Is the concern in many churches about up-beat music another example of the influence of the culture on the Church that is not entirely good? Is there a danger of exchanging a Word and Sacrament ministry for a Word and music ministry? Richard Resch summarizes the early church's attitude toward music:

Music was respected as a power (even without a text). Music was regarded as one of the best teachers available for both good and bad. Music was expected to serve the glorification of God and edification of man. Music was feared as a carrier of pagan influences to young and old. Music required and received vigilance by church authorities, and concerns were addressed decisively by modifying the practice of the church.⁴⁰

It is clear the one danger of music in the Church is that it can easily fall into the category of entertainment, with the goal or result that feeling good about the music overshadows the message of the music and the glory of God. There is a danger that worship will not be about truth, but having an experience, and that the *words* of the music will become secondary to the beat, the sound, or the feeling produced. The practice of having Gospel songs prior to the beginning of the worship service is designed to "prepare our hearts for worship." Why is such singing *preparation* for worship and not worship itself? What is the role/purpose of this music? It may be nothing more than emotional manipulation. Two powerful forces combine to denude worship of its theological content: one is the role of

³⁹ One of the Seattle's Rock n' Roll, Golden Oldies, stations advertizes itself as the "feel good station."

⁴⁰Richard Resch, "Music: Gift of God or Tool of the Devil?" *Logia* 3 (Eastertide 1994): 35.

pragmatism over truth and theology. The other is the therapeutic model of our society which is not concerned with theology but our psychological well-being—experience over truth.

All of this leads to not only a diminution of the value of words, but of theology in order that the music may produce the desired therapeutic affect. A Word and Sacrament ministry calls for a different form than a Word and music ministry. In 2 Corinthians 10:5 Paul says, “We take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (NIV). Everything is obedient to Christ, including music, which is to serve the Word of Christ and not compete with it or dominate it. This subjection to Christ is true not only of the music but of those who are playing the music—they are servants in a corporate setting, not individuals entertaining. In Philippians Paul says, “Finally brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things” (4:8, 9 NIV). These are the standards that are to be applied to the use of music in the Church. The music of worship is to be noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy.

The danger is that the anti-intellectual currents in our culture will gravitate toward weaker texts and music. We must be aware of this element of anti-intellectualism that accompanies “user friendly” formats and a stress on feelings and emotions.

It is this kind of evangelicalism of the church growth movement that wants us to modify our worship and our music. Many fear that we are in danger of giving up our intellectual heritage, our theology, for emotional pottage. Emotions have a place in worship—no credible person would deny this. But emotions are secondary and are monitored by the intellect. The place and role of emotion in worship is an important part of the current debate on worship styles.

Worship and Meeting Needs

All of the above mentioned questions come from one of the most basic principles of the church growth movement—meeting

the “needs” of people. As Robert Schuller is fond of saying: “Find a need and meet it.” This principle needs to be evaluated carefully in view of the Scriptures and our society. There are differences between wants and needs. The Church in some sense has a responsibility to meet genuine needs, but not wants and whims. In a culture that has an extreme view of individualism and a society “consumed” with consumption, how does the Church make distinctions between valid needs as compared to whims and wants? Through marketing techniques and other methods the Church is being heavily influenced by the consumer mentality of our society, which exists on a narcissistic level.⁴¹ The consumer mentality is based on individualism gone rampant.⁴²

By treating culture and the things of culture as if they were neutral, the church growth movement opens the door to marketing the Gospel as just another product to be sold. This is characteristic of “American Christianity” as it has been shaped by culture and revivalism. “American evangelicals never doubted that Christianity was the truth. . . . What they did do, however, was to make most questions of truth into questions of practicality. What message would be most effective? What do people most want to hear? What can we say that will both convert the people and draw them to our particular church?”⁴³

In the concern for marketing and meeting the needs of the hearers when does one cross over the line so that the “audience” has replaced the message as the driving force in the service? Tim Wright expresses a familiar church growth movement theme

⁴¹Wells (*Wasteland*, 61) writes: “Malls are monuments to consumption-but so are mega-churches.”

⁴²Charles Colson (*Against the Night*, 103) captures the essence of the problem when he says: “I don’t want to generalize unjustly or be overly harsh, but it’s fair to say that much of the church is caught up in the success mania of American society. Often more concerned with budgets and building programs than with the body of Christ, the church places more emphasis on growth than on repentance. Suffering, sacrifice, and service has been preempted by success and self-fulfillment.”

⁴³Noll, *Scandal*, 67.

when he says: "in preparing a message, the question is not, 'What shall I preach?' but, 'To whom shall I preach?'"⁴⁴ Without careful evaluation of our culture and how it affects the Church how can we guard against an ever increasing secularization of the Church as it becomes more and more defined and formed by secular images, concepts and techniques? Good intentions are not enough. Many well-intentioned activities can have negative consequences. What is the purpose of the Sunday morning worship service? To entertain? To be therapeutic? To give one a break from a busy, hectic week? To meet wants that pass off as needs? Or is the purpose to preach the Word and administer the Sacraments that result in a godly response of corporate praise and thanksgiving and in holy living for God?

Conclusion

Whether we like to admit it or not we are in the midst of an ecclesiastical crisis. The crisis extends beyond our denomination. My personal position is not one of liturgical fundamentalism that says there is only one right way to do liturgy. Perhaps in years past it was proper to make fun of ourselves for not deviating from page five and fifteen in the Lutheran Hymnal. Those were the days when there was a greater consensus about liturgical forms. But we live in a new era where the opposite is the case. Because of our general culture and because of the church growth movement, the historic liturgies are often dismissed and criticized to such an extent that anyone who does the historic liturgy runs the risk of being labeled a traditionalist, interested not in a growing church but in maintenance ministry. Indeed, our current struggles with worship questions associated with the church growth movement have no doubt helped us to come to a better understanding of liturgy and worship. We can learn a great deal from our struggles over these issues. But what has been lacking is a willingness for Lutheran proponents of the church growth movement to consider seriously and respond to constructive criticism based on legitimate theological concerns. By its own admission the church growth movement is heavily

⁴⁴Wright, *Community of Joy*, 86.

indebted to sociology and popular culture. There is a certain naivete that thinks that such things are neutral and can be used indiscriminately. Jesus warns us that while we are *in* the world we are not to be *of* the world. Motivated by the sincere desire to makes disciples of Jesus Christ the church growth movement has been incredibly naive about using the things of the world in service to the Church. It seems rather ironic that at the very time Western civilization is becoming more pagan and hostile to Christianity, the church growth movement would have us try to meet its needs and standards. Based on the premise of being relevant and meeting the needs of people, the Church is in danger of becoming more and more worldly and becoming nothing more than a mirror copy of society itself.⁴⁵

Toward the end of the Scriptural crisis in the 1970's someone from Seminex said that liberalism would not kill the Missouri Synod – Fundamentalism would. Missouri's superficial tie with Fundamentalism seems two-fold. One is the belief in a trustworthy Bible. And the other is a concern for evangelism. But the Fundamentalist/Evangelical camp is in disarray. This historically conservative group of Christians is heavily influenced by our culture, and Lutherans are experiencing the same phenomenon via the church growth movement. Such cultural realities as therapy, individualism, and pragmatism come into our Churches by two channels. One source is less organized and informal: the people sitting in the pews who, consciously or unconsciously are affected by the culture in which they live. And the other source is more organized and formal: the church growth movement. In order to respond to all the calls for changes in our Churches, and especially changes in

⁴⁵Guiness outlines the process as follows (*Dining*, 57): "The fourth step toward compromise is assimilation. This is the logical culmination of the first three. Something modern is assumed (step one). As a consequence, something traditional is abandoned (step two), and everything else is adapted (step three). At the end of the line, Christian assumptions are absorbed by the modern ones. The gospel has been assimilated to the shape of culture, often without a remainder."

worship, we need to be more profound in our evaluations and less simplistic.

In the early eighties when the Christian right was the dominant trend, criticism of the movement was often treated as treason. Today, when the trail of its debris-strewn illusions is all too obvious, many former enthusiasts wonder why they did not recognize its shortcomings earlier. Could it be that the church-growth movement in its present expansionist phase is also a movement waiting to be undeceived? It would be wise to raise our questions now.⁴⁶

And this is the whole point of this paper—to raise these questions now—for the future of confessional Lutheranism, our identity as Lutherans, and the kind of Church which we give to our children and our grandchildren will depend on how we answer these questions.

⁴⁶Guinness, *Dining*, 89.