

CONCORDIA
THEOLOGICAL
QUARTERLY

CTQ

Volume 42, Number 4

OCTOBER 1978

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Liturgical Commonplaces

Kurt Marquart

It is no secret that Lutheranism in America is in the throes of a profound crisis. But times of crisis must be seen as times of opportunity. When a tired old order breaks up, there results a state of flux which encourages a brisk competition of ideas. Decisions taken at such times, before the concrete hardens as it were, can set future courses for decades, perhaps centuries. These generalities find ready application in the whole liturgical sphere, and particularly in our Missouri Synod. On the one hand, deviations from past norms, embodied in *The Lutheran Hymnal*, of 1941, have assumed epidemic proportions and constitute what may well be described as a state of chaos. On the other hand, the rejection of the current inter-Lutheran efforts at liturgical consensus leaves Missouri quite free to consider the whole thing afresh. It seems obvious that something must and will be done. But what? Much depends on the answer, which should, therefore, not be given lightly or hastily. If the outcome is to be worthwhile, it must be solidly grounded in a careful clarification and re-appropriation of first principles. The observations which follow are respectfully offered simply as one small contribution in this direction. They are meant, moreover, to focus not on technical details—though these can be important—but on meat-and-potato issues. The choice between cranberries and horse-radish can always be made later.

I. Liturgical Substance

Most churches in the Western world are facing a decline in church-attendance. The trend may gallop here and creep there, but its direction seems relentlessly downward. It is our duty as churchmen to ponder deeply the reasons for this trend. Otherwise we may be tempted to respond with the absurd superstition of believing, in C. S. Lewis' words, that "people can be lured to go to church by incessant brightenings, lightenings, lengthenings, abridgments, simplifications, and complications of the service."¹ Let us take the bull by the horns and listen to a rather representative "Memo to a Parson, from a Wistful Young Man":²

Let me tell you the main reason I don't attend anymore, or at least not regularly. Since leaving home to go out on my own, I've visited all kinds of churches, but they all seem just about the same. All of them

strike me as being about as enervating as a cup of lukewarm postum. When I go to church, what do I hear? From the pulpit, a semi-religious version of what Kenneth Galbraith calls "the conventional wisdom." From the choir loft, incredible Victorian anthems—"the kind that Grandma used to love." From the pew, the attitude you discover at alumni reunions—"Where there's not a single dry eye, but nobody believes a word of it." And from the boutonniere ushers, the kind of mechanical handshake which makes me suspect that they would greet Jesus at the Second Coming by saying: "It was nice of you to come." In short. . .the average church stands as a perfect symbol of nearly everything I despise—false gentility, empty sentiment, emotional impoverishment, intellectual mediocrity, and spiritual tepidity. Maybe it's my pride speaking, but I just don't want to be identified with an institution like that.

We could of course comfort ourselves by saying that the Lutheran church is surely different, that the caricature is overdrawn, and that the young man in question was being not simply wistful but even silly in discarding gems of great price on account of shabby packaging. But that would only keep us from trying to understand the situation. Few experienced pastors will deny that in general, the young man's perception of church services is widely held, also in Lutheran circles, although it is not often consciously articulated. For many, services are uncomfortable formalities to be endured with Stoic resignation.

It is tempting at this point to rail against modern materialism and hedonism, golf, the media, Sunday outings, and fishing trips. No doubt these weighty matters offer not a few occasions for penitence, although we cannot pursue them here. Rather more relevant to our topic is a problem which is not often discussed: our Wistful Young Man probably has no clear idea at all of what a proper church service *ought* to be like. Nor, it seems, do the churches he visits have any compelling theory of what they are about on Sunday mornings. He and they may, indeed, cherish some misty vision of what ideal worship would be like, but they are not very clear in the head about it. This fuzzy-contoured vision, moreover, afflicts not only so-called "fringe-members." How else can one explain the fact that practising, otherwise well-instructed Lutherans seem to feel free to miss church for perfectly frivolous reasons, e. g., Sunday dinner guests—not to speak of pastors who do not attend church while on holidays because they are "resting"? In an age like ours, when weekends are full of the clamour of

secular trivia, and material delights beckon on every side, Christians require an unusually clear and compelling "theory" of congregational worship. "Hearing the Word of God" was once a weighty phrase, corresponding to an awesome reality. Today, in the thinking of many, the whole thing can be taken care of without inconvenience or loss of time, if need be, by tuning in to the "Lutheran Hour" while devoutly chewing Kentucky Fried Chicken on the way to Six Flags!

The notion of "worship" in popular Protestantism does not seem to suggest anything so formal as a church service. It is more likely to be associated with rousing choruses of "How Great Thou Art," either at a Billy Graham rally or in a rugged setting out of doors, preferably round a campfire, holding hands. Mawkish gimmickry of various kinds is marketed as making for "effective" worship. Church services themselves, however, are seen as rather drab and dreary on the whole. They tend to be viewed not as banquets but as menu-reading sessions. (This impression, by the way, is reinforced by the lavish distribution of printed matter.) How many people would bother to go to a restaurant just to read the menu? Here, it seems to me, lies the heart of the difficulty. It is not as if people thought they should have dinners but grumblingly accepted menus instead. They expect only menus—with flowers, candles, and musical settings perhaps—but still only menus! Richard Wurmbrand, having noted the frequent refrain in church-bulletins that refreshments will be served after the service, asks pointedly: "Why do you not provide refreshment *in* the service?" On this point at least those outside and many inside the churches are agreed. It is just that the insiders have learned to derive a sense of satisfaction and mutual approval from uncomplaining performance of the menu-reading duty. Repelled by this bloodless, Law-oriented, moralizing religiosity, multitudes seek solace in the murkiest mumbo-jumbo and readily fall prey even to celluloid absurdities like "Close Encounters of the Third Kind," of which a recent reviewer wrote:

The thoroughness of the film's surrogate spirituality is revealed in the final scene, depicting the appearance and "landing" of the UFO's. The huge "mother ship" looks less like a space vehicle than a vast city of light descending from the heavens. Whether the parallel is deliberate or not, Spielberg's offer of this ersatz New Jerusalem (cf. Revelation 21) as the answer to Mankind's spiritual longings is a slick con-job indeed. Roy Neary's "conversion" under a beam of bright light while on the road to Crystal Lake is said to have been consciously modeled after St. Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus.⁸

As Chesterton observed: If people don't believe in God, they will not believe in nothing—they will believe in anything!

Advancing now from menus to soups, let us consider C. S. Lewis' pertinent argument:

We may *salva reverentia* divide religions, as we do soups, into "thick" and "clear". By Thick I mean those which have orgies and ecstasies and mysteries and local attachments: Africa is full of Thick religions. By Clear I mean those which are philosophical, ethical, and universalising: Stoicism, Buddhism and the Ethical Church are Clear religions. Now if there is a true religion it must be both Thick and Clear: for the true God must have made both the child and the man, both the savage and the citizen, both the head and the belly. And the only two religions that fulfil this condition are Hinduism and Christianity. But Hinduism fulfils it imperfectly. The Clear religion of the Brahmin hermit in the jungle and the Thick religion of the neighbouring temple go on *side by side*. The Brahmin hermit doesn't bother about the temple prostitution nor the worshiper in the temple about the hermit's metaphysic. But Christianity really breaks down the middle wall of the partition. It takes a convert from central Africa and tells him to obey an enlightened universalist ethic: it takes a twentieth century academic prig like me and tells me to go fasting to a Mystery, to drink the blood of the Lord. The savage convert has to be Clear: I have to be Thick. That is how one knows one has come to the real religion.⁴

Christianity is "Thick" in Lewis' sense in two closely related respects. First of all, there is the redemptive mystery of the Incarnation itself: God made Man for our salvation. Or, in J. B. Phillips' memorable phrase, God has "come into focus" for us in Jesus Christ. Holy Scripture sets before us not vague wafflings about an anonymous cosmic Blur—the great Mush-God, as he has been called, for born-again politicians of all world-religions—but the concrete, historical, yet eternal Person in Whom "the fulness of the Godhead dwells bodily" (Col. 2:9). So much so that, as Luther comments on this text, whoever will not find God there in Christ, will never find Him anywhere else, even if he were to go above Heaven, under Hell, or into space!

Secondly, just as God is "focused" for us in Christ, so Christ in turn is effectively "focused" in His life-giving Gospel, including Holy Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar. These blessed Means of Grace are not mere pictures, symbols, or reminders—as our whole Reformed environment suggests—but

real and powerful communicators of all the redemptive riches of Christ. This life-giving, faith-creating, "dynamic of God for salvation," as St. Paul calls the Gospel in Romans 1:16, can never be reduced to a mere menu; it is the Messianic Feast itself. Indeed, one might distinguish within the Gospel yet two further modes of "Thickness": the washing of regeneration in Baptism and the Real Presence of Christ's Body and Blood in the Holy Supper. Of the latter Charles Porterfield Krauth has written:

The principles of interpretation which relieve us of the Eucharistic mystery take from us the mystery of the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Atonement. . . . Christ is the Centre of the system, and in the Supper is the centre of Christ's revelation of Himself. The glory and mystery of the incarnation combine there as they combine nowhere else. Communion with Christ is that by which we live, and the Supper is "*the Communion.*"⁵

Both the God-in-Christ and the Christ-in-the-Gospel themes are united in the profound simplicity of the words of St. John: "This is He Who *came* by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood. . . . And there *are* three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one" (I Jn. 5:6,8). These great and mysterious realities define, constitute and shape the whole nature of Christian worship. That worship is concrete and sacramental, not vague and spiritualizing. It is not a pseudo-occult mysticism seeking by means of devotional techniques and exertions to penetrate and conquer the barrier between heaven and earth. All such man-made attempts, with all their impressive psychic fireworks, cannot escape from the gravitational field of sinful creatureliness. They deal only with human projections and demonic mirages. The whole point of the Incarnation and of the Means of Grace is that fellowship with God takes place on His terms alone, and that means for the present here on earth, on our level. It is He Who has broken through the Great Divide from His side, in order to give Himself to us graciously on ours.

Even at this point, however, the Lutheran understanding of worship can still be aborted by means of a facile doctrinaire schematism which thinks abstractly of "Means of Grace" or "Word and Sacraments," rather than concretely of Baptism, preaching, absolution, and Eucharist. It is a Calvinistic doctrine that all sacraments must be alike. This idea is developed by the *Admonitio Neostadiensis*, for example, in its attempt to refute the Formula of Concord's confession of the Real Presence in the Eucharist. Replying to this Calvinistic attack, the Lutherans Chemnitz, Selnecker, and Kirchner point out with

almost tedious repetitiousness in their *Apology or Defence of the Christian Book of Concord* (see especially Chapter V) that the unique nature of each Sacrament must be determined not by appealing to theoretical generalizations, but by paying attention to the actual biblical texts, particularly the respective words of institution. If the Means of Grace were mechanically interchangeable, rather than organically ordered, it would make sense to say: "Today we have Baptism and, therefore, we do not need Communion." Such an argument, however, is quite impossible. It should be equally impossible to argue: "As long as we have preaching regularly, and the Lord's Supper occasionally, the Means of Grace are in action, and all the rest is adiaphora." What must be seen is that in the Lutheran Confessions as in the New Testament the Eucharist is not an occasional extra, an exceptional additive for especially pious occasions, but a regular, central and constitutive feature of Christian worship. Preaching and the Sacrament belong together not anyhow, or helter-skelter, by statistical coincidence, but as mutually corresponding elements within one integrated whole.

Of the practice in apostolic and sub-apostolic times Oscar Cullmann has written in his book, *Early Christian Worship*, as follows:

The Lord's Supper is thus the basis and goal of every gathering. This corresponds to all that we have already determined about the place and time and basic character of the primitive Christian gathering. . . . Accordingly, it is not as though early Christianity had known three kinds of service, as we are in the habit of imagining, following the modern example: service of the Word and, alongside of it, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. It is rather so: in the early Church there are only these two celebrations or services—the common meal, within the framework of which proclamation of the Word has always a place, and Baptism . . . The *Lord's Supper* is the natural climax towards which the service thus understood moves and without which it is unthinkable, since here Christ unites himself with his community as crucified and risen and makes it in this way one with himself, actually builds it up as his body (Cor. 10:17).⁶

In respect of the Lutheran Confessions an extraordinary development seems to have taken place. Even those sections of world Lutheranism which have cultivated a strong consciousness of Article X of the Augsburg Confession and its Apology, are hardly aware of its practical implementation and ramifications in Article XXIV. The tendency has been to maintain the Sacramental Presence as a matter of doctrine, but

to let the practice of the Sacrament drift from its central position in the church to a more peripheral, supplementary status, as in the Reformed pattern. The strong corporate, communal implications (I Cor. 10:17) have been largely lost. This is not the view of the Lutheran Confessions. Article XXIV of the Augsburg Confession and of the Apology sees the Mass or Liturgy as consisting of preaching and the Sacrament, and as something to be done every Sunday and holy day. Nor is this merely a temporary accommodation. Luther himself, for instance, in his Latin Mass of 1523, defined the mass as consisting, "properly speaking," of "using the Gospel and communing at the Table of the Lord." In fact, he rejects, in the same work, the Roman custom of omitting the Consecration on Good Friday, and says that this is "to mock and ridicule Christ with half of a mass and the one part of the Sacrament."⁷ To the city of Nuremberg he recommended, upon request, under date of August 15, 1528,

that one or two masses be held in the two parish churches on Sundays or holy days, depending on whether there are many or few communicants. . . . During the week, let mass be held on whatever days it would be necessary, that is, if several communicants were there, and would ask and desire it. Thereby no one would be forced to the Sacrament, and yet everyone would be sufficiently served therein.⁸

Significant for the corporate understanding of the Sacrament is this paragraph of the Apology (XXIV,35):

We are perfectly willing for the Mass to be understood as a daily sacrifice, provided this means the whole Mass, the ceremony and also the proclamation of the Gospel, faith, prayer, and thanksgiving. Taken together, these are the daily sacrifice of the New Testament; the ceremony was instituted because of them and ought not be separated from them. Therefore Paul says (I Cor. 11:26), "As often as ye eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death."

This, too, was the understanding of the classical Lutheran theologians. Gerhard, for instance, is quoted in Dr. C. F. W. Walther's expanded edition of Baier's *Compendium* to the effect that one of the "less principal purposes" of the Sacrament is "that we might preserve the public assemblies of the Christians, the strength and bond of which is the celebration of the Lord's Supper (I Cor. 11:20)."⁹ Elsewhere Gerhard wrote:

Because it has been accepted as a practice in the Christian church that in the public assemblies of the church after the preaching and hearing of the Word this Sacrament is celebrated, therefore, this custom must not be departed from without urgent necessity . . . it

is . . . clear from Acts 20:7; I Cor. 11:20,33, that when the Christians did gather at one place, they were accustomed to celebrate the Eucharist.¹⁰

This deeply sacramental understanding of worship is also expressed quite explicitly in the literature of the early Missouri Synod, e.g., F. Lochner's *Hauptgottesdienst*. Eckhardt's *Reallexicon* (1907-1917), an ambitious topical summary of the Synod's published theology, makes the following points under "Abendmahl" (Lord's Supper):

The Lord's Supper ought to be administered publicly and corporately, because

- (a) Christ and the apostles did it that way;
- (b) The Lord's Supper is a public confession, proclaiming the Lord's death (I Cor. 11), but a proclamation does not usually happen in a corner;
- (c) It is a tie of fellowship. Communion. I Cor. 10,17: One Body.

Note (a) The place of the celebration is therefore the Church, the corporate worship (*Versammlungsgottesdienst*) of the Christians.

Note (b) It is just in the celebration of the Lord's Supper that the Main Service finds its culmination point (*Gipfelpunkt*).

The same source says under "*Gottesdienst*" (Divine Worship) that for the Lutheran Reformation there were

various services: Preaching services, Catechism services, Vesper services.—A Main Service (*Hauptgottesdienst*) was a service with the Lord's Supper. All others were minor services (*Nebengottesdienste*) . . .

Minor services were: Matins, early on Sundays before the Main Service; Vespers on Saturday afternoon (Catechism sermon) . . .

There follows a separate section on "The Lutheran Order of Service," enumerating the various parts, beginning with the Introit and ending with the Lord's Supper, which "is the seal of the Word and therefore follows the sermon." Of this specific order it is stated: "The Lutheran Order of Service is a unit with a fine integration of its parts" (*ein Ganzes in feiner Gliederung*). This Service was "corrupted. . . (1.) by the Thirty Years War; (2.) by those of Spener's persuasion [Pietists] . . . ; (3.) by Rationalism."

The foregoing clearly suggests that the most urgent liturgical need is not for this or that ceremonial detail; what is needed is the restoration of the Lutheran understanding of the close bond between sermon and sacrament. "The sacrament and the sermon belong together," wrote Sasse, "and it is always a sign of the decay of the church if one is emphasised at the expense

of the other."¹¹ This is clearly not a question of tinkering with fussy bits and pieces of the liturgical machinery, but one of regaining a sense of the organic whole. Where the Service is understood not as a central sermon-core surrounded by fluffy festoons of trivia, but as the church's awesomely objective participation in the very life-giving Mystery of Salvation, there not only will penitent sinners gladly throng the courts of the Lord, but pastors themselves will understand their sacred office more clearly and will be less tempted either to abandon that office altogether or else to escape into all sorts of secondary roles and functions in search of identity and "fulfilment."

It is not, of course, to be expected that simply publishing a new liturgy and hymnbook will achieve all this. But it could certainly help. A new hymnbook could, for instance, follow the example of the Missouri Synod's official *Kirchen-Agende* published by Concordia Publishing House in 1902, in offering only one main Sunday service, the Order of Holy Communion, which then ends after the Sermon with prayers, blessing, and hymn, in case the Communion is not celebrated. At least this would avoid the false impression created by the "Page Five" form, that the main service of the church is complete without the Sacrament. If such a denatured form, a Communion Order without Communion, must be given independent status, then let it, at the very least, appear last, not first. Also, the close and indissoluble connections between liturgy and dogma make it highly desirable that the Small Catechism and the Augsburg Confession be printed in full in any future hymnal.

II. Liturgical Form

One hesitates to enter the whole field of external forms, where tastes and habits are so easily roused to furious combat. Yet the following four sets of "commonplaces" suggest themselves as particularly relevant to our modern Lutheran situation:

(1) On the one hand, in the matter of genuine adiaphora one must cultivate a truly evangelical and ecumenical breadth of perspective (FC SD X, 31). If the Lutheran Church is serious about representing, not sectarian whims, but the pure Gospel of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church of Christ, then she cannot in principle wish to squeeze the devotion of Zulus and Spaniards, Chinese and Americans, Brazilians and New Zealanders, all into one narrow sixteenth century Saxon groove! In this sense, there cannot be such a thing as "*the* Lutheran Liturgy." The unchanging content must be the Gospel of God, but the form must of necessity be colored by the Christian history of each of the world's nations, tongues, cultures, and continents. Here and now we must concentrate not on liturgies

in general, or on some pseudo-cosmopolitan hotchpotch, but on a form or forms suitable to an English-speaking specifically North American, environment.

Granted the substance, then, form is relatively indifferent. But only relatively. "Surely," asks C. S. Lewis, "the more fully one believes that a strictly supernatural event takes place, the less one can attach any great importance to the dress, gestures, and position of the priest?"¹² The argument holds only for a choice among equally acceptable alternatives. For surely nobody would care to complete C. S. Lewis' sentence like this: "The more fully one believes that a strictly supernatural event takes place, the less one can attach any great importance to whether the celebrant is dressed in jeans or smokes cigarettes at the altar." Obviously it does matter a great deal whether the words and actions of celebrant and people are in harmony with the sacred transactions which they must express and convey. It is, indeed, an adiaphoron whether the Introit is spoken or chanted. It does not follow, however, that the Introit may, therefore, be spoken or chanted indifferently, negligently, or perfunctorily. *That* can never be an adiaphoron.

The trouble is that actions do often speak louder than words. If either words or actions do not express the sense of the Liturgy, the Service of Word and Sacrament, or even run counter to it, then they are no longer adiaphora. A traditionalist Roman Catholic observed very perceptively of the post-VaticanII liturgical changes that a doctrine like the Real Presence can be materially altered and even surrendered without any explicit pronouncement, simply by a more permissive ceremonial (e.g., heedlessly dropping particles of consecrated bread to the ground). Even in daily life words, actions, and situations are perceived as jarring or even grotesque if they are not in keeping with one another. To plead for mercy before a human court, for instance, while remaining seated, hands in pockets, and chewing gum, would be insufferable. It seems even more incongruous for a clergyman to sit down comfortably during the Kyrie or the Gloria in Excelsis, legs crossed so as to give maximum exposure to canary-coloured socks, and gaze into the congregation to see who is there. Or consider the disruptive effect of hackneyed "traffic-directions" being given every few minutes: "We now continue our so-and-so with this or that found on page such-and-such, in the front, middle, back, etc., of your hymnbook!" Imagine what a total disaster it would be if a stage manager were constantly to interrupt a gripping drama by appearing on stage to make announcements like these: "Ladies and gentlemen, will you now please turn to page 285 of your paperback edition of *Four Great Plays by Henrik Ibsen*. . ." "As it is very hot

today, please skip pages 158 to 176. We continue with Act III of 'An Enemy of the People,' line three, at the top of page 177." If even the presentation of mere fiction and make-believe forbids all sorts of disruptive rehearsal chatter, how much more the very embodiment of the living, eternal truth? Verily there is here One greater than Shakespeare or Ibsen! His minister, therefore, who leads the People of God in the celebration of the mysteries of His New Covenant (I Cor. 4:1), has no right to sound as if he were announcing Walt Disney mummeries to tired tourists for the twenty-millionth time!

In the choice of equally suitable forms, then, let mutual tolerance and accomodation prevail. We must, indeed, beware of the misguided zeal with which St. Augustine of Canterbury forced his Roman rite on the representatives of a more ancient form of British Christianity. But once a fitting form has been chosen, it needs to be filled not with casual indifference, but with awe and reverence, with that fear and trembling which befit the presence not only of angels and archangels and of all the company of Heaven, but of the Adorable Divine Majesty Himself. It is in this sense that we must understand the Augsburg Confession's paradoxical admonition about adiaphora: "Nothing contributes so much to the maintenance of dignity in public worship and the cultivation of reverence and devotion among the people as the proper observance of ceremonies in the churches" ("Of Abuses," Introduction, 6).

(2) The worship of God is not a means to an end (e. g., "evangelism"), but is an end in itself. It is in fact *the* ultimate purpose of the church (Eph. 1:12,14; Phil. 1:11; 2:10,11; I Peter 2:5), and must give meaning, direction, and impetus to all particular functions and activities of the church, including the great missionary task (Matt. 28:19,20). This means that the church's public liturgy, that is, the Service of Word and Sacrament, dare not be treated as a public relations exercise, as these words are usually understood. The idea, for instance, that the Service should be "meaningful," that is, clear and obvious to any casual visitor who might pop in from the street, is short-sightedly pragmatic. A "service" tailored to such a misguided ideal would comprise a *melange* of threadbare banalities, which even the casual visitor is likely to find unbearable after the third time—not to speak of the faithful who attend regularly for threescore years and ten. People who come to the church seeking divine truth do not expect it to be huckstered like soap or soft drinks, with mindless jingles. Indeed, they respect the church's uncompromising celebration of mysteries which are not at once transparent to the uninstructed. A few years ago, for instance, an American lady walked into a Russian Orthodox monastery in New York State,

and was so impressed by the service in church Slavonic, of which she did not understand a word, that she promptly willed all her wealth to that monastery, saying that here alone had she found people who really prayed!

By far the greatest missionary magnetism in the Service, however, has always been exerted by good evangelical preaching. This dare never be forgotten, least of all in that church which confesses in the *Apology* (XV, 42,43):

. . . the chief worship of God is the preaching of the Gospel. When our opponents do preach, they talk about human traditions, the worship of the saints, and similar trifles. This the people rightly despise and walk out on them after the reading of the Gospel. . . In our churches, on the other hand, all sermons deal with topics like these: penitence, the fear of God, faith in Christ, the righteousness of faith, prayer and our assurance that it is efficacious and is heard, the cross, respect for rulers and for all civil ordinances, the distinction between the kingdom of Christ (or the spiritual kingdom) and political affairs, marriage, the education and instruction of children, chastity, and all the works of love.

And again we assert (XXIV, 50, 51):

Practical and clear sermons hold an audience, but neither the people nor the clergy have ever understood our opponents' teaching. The real adornment of the churches is godly, practical, and clear teaching, the godly use of the sacraments, ardent prayer, and the like. Candles, golden vessels, and ornaments like that are fitting, but they are not the peculiar adornment of the church.

Liturgy is the worship and distribution of Christ in Word and Sacrament. Using outward forms and aesthetic appeal as excuse or cosmetic for vapid, incompetent, dogmatically wobbly preaching is an empty parody; it is mere ritualism. Good, sound, solid preaching is by far the most important and the most demanding task of the ministerial office. It is in fact *the* apostolic work *par excellence* (Acts 6:2,4; II Cor. 3; I Tim. 5:17). Who indeed is sufficient for these things? Only God can make able ministers of the New Covenant (II Cor. 2:16; 3:6). Pastoral competence, however, requires spiritual and theological exercise, growth, and progress (I Tim. 4:7,15). Proper pastors' conferences (not insipid "church-workers" and families kaffeeklatsches) are vital in this process, and growth in the quality of preaching ought to have top priority on the agenda. This means continuous concentration not primarily on techniques but on content. The electronic media particularly

are so effective in shaping a secular mentality, even among church-people, that Christian preachers must labour strenuously to counter and exorcise these demons. They must constantly build and reinforce a soundly, uncompromisingly Christian perspective. Preaching is this sort of spiritual battle for men's minds and souls. It is not an anaemic recitation of pat formulas and cliches. That is merely sermonizing. Preaching is the ever-fresh exposition and application of God's living Word for today. The point, as someone has well said, is not to illuminate the obscure biblical text with the light of clever scholarship, but to let the light of the text (Ps. 119:105) illuminate our lives!

People do hunger and thirst for authentic proclamation. When the Soviet priest Dimitri Dudko included a question and answer session in his celebration of the Liturgy, the church could scarcely hold the crowds that gathered. These sessions proved so popular that the KGB arranged an automobile "accident" which, fortunately, Father Dudko survived, though with broken legs. The craving for the Bread of Life is not limited to the Soviet Union. Westerners are more jaded, it is true. But the hunger is there nevertheless.

(3) A third set of commonplaces has to do with what C. S. Lewis called the "Liturgical Fidget." I can do no better than to quote Lewis directly:

Novelty, simply as such, can have only an entertainment value. And they don't go to church to be entertained. They go to *use* the service, or, if you prefer, to *enact* it. Every service is a structure of acts and words through which we receive a sacrament, or repent, or supplicate, or adore. And it enables us to do these things best—if you like, it "works" best—when, through long familiarity, we don't have to think about it. As long as you notice, and have to count, the steps, you are not yet dancing, but only learning to dance. A good shoe is a shoe you don't notice. Good reading becomes possible when you need not consciously think about eyes, or light, or print, or spelling. The perfect church service would be one we were almost unaware of; our attention would have been on God. But every novelty prevents this. It fixes our attention on the service itself; and thinking about worship is a different thing from worshipping. . . . There is really some excuse for the man who said, "I wish they'd remember that the charge to Peter was, Feed my sheep, not, try experiments on my rats, or even teach my performing dogs new tricks."

Thus my whole liturgical position really boils down

to an entreaty for permanence and uniformity. I can make do with almost any kind of service whatever if only it will stay put. But if each form is snatched away just when I am beginning to feel at home in it, then I can never make any progress in the art of worship. You give me no chance to acquire the trained habit—*habito dell'arte*.¹³

What then shall we make of the idea that “the youth” get bored with sameness and therefore require constant innovations to keep them interested? The sentiment is well-meaning enough but is essentially misguided. It is true that initially some silly youngsters (by no means all) may enjoy having the service turned into a variety show, especially one that is flattering to the inane Youth Cult images promoted by the media for profit. In the long term, however, such an approach is bound to produce conscious or subconscious contempt for the church. Who, after all, could respect an institution which is, after two thousand years’ experience, so confused about its functions as to say, in effect: “Dear children, help us! We are no longer sure about what we ought to be doing. Perhaps you might have some good ideas?” Who could possibly take seriously the play-worship prefixed with that horrid word, “experimental”?

The fact is that no healthy, viable society lets its children arbitrate its values. It is for the elders of the tribe to guard its cultural heritage and to transmit it solemnly to the younger generation—never *vice versa*. Also in our society the problem is not with the youth but with their elders. If youth are confused about values, it is mainly because their parents are. If the liturgy is boring to children it is usually because the parents do not find it very interesting either. If children saw adults treating the Sunday Service as the most important activity of their lives, they would respect it too, and would never dream of treating it as a pop-event, to be tinkered with by every Tom, Dick, and Harry. A church which has won the conscientious loyalty of parents—particularly fathers (Eph. 3:15; 6:4)!—will have the devotion of their children too. But a church which abjectly capitulates to the whims and tastes of adolescents will have, and deserve, neither.

Finally, there is a variety-principle built into the liturgy, and that is the rhythm of the church-year. The basic units of this gentle, natural rhythm are the week and the year. This cycle is virtually broken by forcing onto it the alien drum-beat of “monthly emphases” based on the activist, organizational imperatives of the financial year. It is also broken by the false off-on or even off-off-off-on *staccato* of “Communion Sundays” and “non-Communion Sundays.” The proper change from Sunday to Sunday should be in the specific meaning and application of the Sacrament, not in having or not having it. The

Eucharist is the whole Gospel in action. This one Gospel, like a precious diamond, has many facets or aspects, of which one or two are especially highlighted in each Sunday's or festival's Gospel pericope. And through whatever concrete facet the full Gospel is celebrated on a given day, that is the specific meaning, or the mode of application of the Sacrament on that day. The Sacrament is always the full Gospel-gift, of course. But on Christmas Day we receive it under the aspect of the Lord's Nativity, on Epiphany in celebration of His Baptism, on Laetare Sunday as the Divine Bread of Life revealed in the miraculous feeding of the multitude, and so on. In other words, the Sacrament, like the Gospel itself, must never be seen as some one narrow aspect or some unvarying "standard ration" in the feast that is Christianity. It is rather the whole reality, under many wonderful aspects, each especially observed and celebrated at various times. Each time it is as new and fresh as are the daily mercies of God. We have here the Kaleidoscope of God, which, at each weekly or seasonal tilt, exhibits the same divine generosity in ever new and exciting configurations.

(4) In conclusion, something should be said about the twofold requirement that liturgical and musical forms be (a) solemn and fitting and (b) congregationally singable. The early church studiously avoided the music characteristic of the ostentation and voluptuousness of pagan state religion and mystery cults. Sobriety, not frenzy, was the mark of Christian worship, I Cor. 12:2; Eph. 5:15-20. In our own time it is difficult to imagine a more appalling travesty than a "service" or "hymns" reeking of the pagan debaucheries and obscenities of the "rock"-cult. It is sheer mockery to turn the Christian mysteries into raucous night-club acts. What has Light to do with Darkness, Christ with Belial, or the Agnus Dei with the Beatles, Monkees, and their ilk? The solemn celebrations of the church (I Cor. 5:8; Heb. 13:10) must not be defiled with the modes and manners of Canaanite fertility religions (I Cor. 10:7,8) and of their modern counterparts.

A fitting reverence, however, is one thing; a snobbish stuffiness is quite another. Good church music must be singable. And what was singable once is not necessarily singable today. Moreover, what sounds majestic when sung by thousands in a Gothic cathedral, may sound merely ludicrous when attempted by seventeen people to the funereal wailings of an electronic organ-simulator. The church must cultivate living devotion, not exquisite museum-pieces to delight sophisticated musical palates. It is better, therefore, to sing "My Faith Looks Up To Thee" with zest and gusto, than to devastate a great hymn like "Isaiah Mighty Seer" by stumbling painfully

and clumsily about its craggy grandeur. This is not to suggest by any means that the old treasures should now be abandoned. The question must, however, be handled with some discretion. Congregations can and should learn to sing the great Christian classics of the past. But the Sunday Service is not the time or the place for practice and rehearsal. It is discouraging for a congregation to be compelled to sing five unfamiliar hymns in a row. Most of the hymns sung on a given Sunday should be sufficiently well-known to be sung truly corporately and with fervour. It is sufficient to cope with one or two unfamiliar hymns per service. This allows for the necessary training without destroying the congregation's joy in worship. It should also be borne in mind that, given a fitting and stable liturgical framework, there is considerable scope within it for popularly expressive hymns (CA XXIV,2). One would be hard put to suggest a more perfect embodiment of these principles than the practice of the great Bishop St. Ambrose of Milan. During Holy Week of the year 386, a year before the conversion of St. Augustine, the dowager empress Justina, who was a fanatical Arian, tried to compel Ambrose to surrender one of his churches to the Arians. This the bishop refused steadfastly to do. Various pressures were brought to bear, including the dramatic encirclement of Ambrose's church by Arian soldiers, who had orders to allow people in but not out. Thus Ambrose and many of his people were forced to spend several days in the church buildings under virtual siege. To encourage his congregation in the true faith, Ambrose composed beautiful hymns exalting the Blessed Trinity and the true Divinity of Our Lord. These hymns were then chanted antiphonally by clergy and people. Augustine reports that this chanting was so compelling that it was taken up even by Arian soldiers outside! In the sixteenth century, likewise, the Reformation was often sung into people's hearts and minds. Ought not the celebration in our churches today be similarly contagious?

FOOTNOTES

1. C. S. Lewis, *Letters To Malcolm: Chiefly On Prayer* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1964), p. 4.
2. Roy Larson, "Memo to a Parson, from a Wistful Young Man," *Religion in Life*, XXXI (1961), p. 356, cited in E. W. Janetzki, "Where Is The Church?" *Basic Studies in Christianity* (Adelaide: Lutheran Publishing House, n. d.), p. 71.
3. *Spiritual Counterfeits Project Newsletter*, Berkeley, California, January-February 1978.
4. C. S. Lewis, *Undeceptions* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1971), p. 76.
5. Charles Porterfield Krauth, *The Conservative Reformation and Its Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1963), pp. 650,655.
6. Oscar Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship* (London: SCM Press, 1966), pp. 30,31,34.
7. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, eds. *Luther's Works* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955-1976), 53, p. 24.

8. J. G. Walch, ed., *Dr. Martin Luther's Saemmtliche Schriften* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House), 10, cols. 2256-2258.
9. C. F. W. Walther, ed., *Johanni Gülielmi Baieri Compendium Theologiae Positivae* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1879), p. 529.
10. Martin Chemnitz, Polycarp Leyser, and John Gerhard, *Harmoniae Quatuor Evangelistarum* (Frankfort and Hamburg, 1652), II, p. 1085.
11. H. Sasse, *This Is My Body* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1959), p. 2.
12. C. S. Lewis, *Letters To Malcolm*, p. 9.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.