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Six Theses on Liturgy and Evangelism

John T. Pless

If it is true that “what happens or does not happen in the pulpit and at the altar determines whether a church is still the church of the pure Gospel,”¹ then it is essential to give careful and devout attention to the relationship between the liturgy and evangelism. We approach the topic by way of six theses.

I. *The proper relationship of liturgy to evangelism is established by the fact that the doctrine of justification is the chief article (der Hauptartikel) upon which both rest.*

At the heart of the evangelical Lutheran understanding of the liturgy is the Gospel. Liturgical forms are not to be evaluated by merely aesthetic principles or historical precedent. Likewise, liturgical practices are not to be judged by pragmatic standards (e.g., “Did the people like it?”) Rather, the Lutheran Confessions understand the key criterion for judging particular liturgical forms to be a doctrinal standard: How does the doctrine of the justification of the ungodly fare in the liturgy?

It has been in vogue in some circles recently to be highly critical of Luther’s liturgical revisions, especially his insistence that the *verba testamenti* not be embedded within a eucharistic prayer. The charge is often made that Luther was unaware of the grand and glorious history of such a prayer and thus lacking proper historical awareness he performed, rather blindly, liturgical surgery on the mass, leaving it deformed and barren.

I would suggest that the opposite is true. Luther was a liturgical surgeon, but he was a skilled surgeon using the double-edged scalpel of Law and Gospel. He did not dismember the patient; rather, he administered the evangelical remedy of justification by grace through faith. Neither did he abandon the patient to die as an aged servant that had outlived his usefulness. Luther did not create a Wittenberg Mass in opposition to the Roman Mass. The Roman Mass, that is, the liturgy of Western Christendom, was filtered through the chief article (justification) and thus purified of the virus of works-righteousness. Cleansed by the Word of God and invigorated with the Gospel, this liturgy was resurrected as a newborn servant of Word and Sacrament.

For Luther and the Confessions, the distinction between *beneficium* and *sacrificium* is crucial for, when this distinction

is blurred, the gift character of the Gospel itself is lost. A theology of worship shaped by the doctrine of justification exalts and magnifies God as the actor and donor in the liturgy; the worshiper is the recipient. This emphasis is a constant refrain in Article IV of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession:

It is strange that our opponents make so little of faith when they see it praised everywhere as the foremost kind of worship, as in Psalm 50:15: "Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will glorify me." This is how God wants to be known and worshiped, that we accept his blessings and receive them because of his mercy rather than our own merits [Apol. IV:59; Tappert, p. 115].

The woman came, believing that she should seek the forgiveness of sins from Christ. Nothing greater could she ascribe to him. By looking for the forgiveness of sins from him, she truly acknowledged him as the Messiah. Truly to believe means to think of Christ in this way, and in this way to worship and take hold of him [Apol. IV: 154; Tappert, p. 128].

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. We cannot offer anything to God unless we have been first reconciled and reborn. The greatest possible comfort comes from this doctrine that the highest worship in the Gospel is the desire to receive forgiveness of sins, grace, and righteousness [Apol. IV:310; Tappert, p. 155].

Faith comes by hearing the Word of the Lord (Romans 10:17) and not by the ritual action of the worshiping congregation or the persuasive techniques of the evangelist. Both liturgy and evangelism fail when severed from the article upon which the church itself stands or falls, the doctrine of justification.

II. *Catechesis is the necessary link between evangelization and liturgy. The apostolic work of evangelization is grounded in and sustained by the Divine Service and thus leads the catechumen into the Divine Service.*

Those brought to faith through Peter's preaching on the Day of Pentecost were baptized. Joined to the Body of Christ, they "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). The Divine Service is the liturgy of the baptized. In the liturgy, the baptized are served with God's Word and the body and blood of Christ and are sent back

into the world to render priestly service to the neighbor.

In his treatise of 1533, "The Private Mass and the Consecration of Priests," Luther comments on the true mass:

For, God be praised, in our churches we can show a Christian a true Christian mass according to the ordinance and the institution of Christ, as well as according to the true intention of Christ and the church. There our pastor, bishop, or minister in the pastoral office, rightly and honorably and publicly called, having been previously consecrated, anointed, and born in baptism as a priest of Christ, without regard to the private chrism, goes before the altar. Publicly and plainly he sings what Christ has ordained and instituted in the Lord's Supper. He takes bread and wine, gives thanks, distributes and gives them to the rest of us who are there and want to receive them, on the strength of the words of Christ: "This is my body, this is my blood. Do this," etc. Particularly we who want to receive the sacrament kneel beside, behind, and around him, man, woman, young, old, master, servant, wife, maid, parents, and children, even as God brings us together there, all of us true, holy priests, sanctified by Christ's blood, anointed by the Holy Spirit, and consecrated in baptism. On the basis of this our inborn, hereditary priestly honor and attire we are present, have, as Revelation 4:4 pictures it, our golden crowns on our heads, harps and golden censers in our hands; and we let our pastor say what Christ has ordained, not for himself as though it were for his person, but he is the mouth for all of us and we all speak with him from the heart and in faith, directed to the Lamb of God who is present for us and among us, and who according to his ordinance nourishes us with his body and blood. This is our mass, and it is the true mass which is not lacking among us.²

The evangelical mass is for the priests of God. The service is a divine transaction between the Lord Christ and those whom He has made His holy people by the washing of the water with the Word.

Luther's comments in "The Private Mass and the Consecration of Priests" are entirely consistent with his exposition of the First Commandment in the Large Catechism. In the Large Catechism, Luther draws the distinction between true worship and false worship, faith and idolatry. The unbeliever cannot worship God because his faith is misdirected. Luther asserts (LC I: 2-3; Tappert, p. 365):

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

Perhaps it was for this reason that the early church, the church of the second century, made a sharp distinction between those who could attend the Divine Service and those who could not attend. Werner Elert writes:

Admission was not just for anybody. . . The gathering for worship in the early church was not a public but a closed assembly, while the celebration of the Eucharist was reserved for the saints with utmost strictness.³

As the Divine Service has to do with “the mysteries of God” (1 Cor. 4:1), it will not be readily understandable to the unbeliever. Indeed, the unbeliever cannot understand it. The solution is not to do away with “the mysteries of God” by transforming the Divine Service into a recruitment rally. Rather, the unbeliever is to be brought into the congregation through the washing of regeneration. In Matthew 28:19-20 teaching is connected with baptism. Disciples are made by baptism and teaching. I find it interesting that Robert Webber, a professor at Wheaton College, has suggested that the church reclaim the catechumenate.⁴

The catechism is the key to understanding the liturgy. That is to say, the liturgy is to be taught not simply as a collection of inherited forms, but as the rhythm of God’s speaking and doing and our listening and receiving. The very structure of the evangelical Lutheran liturgy is geared toward repentance and faith.

In the preface to the Small Catechism, Luther urges pastors to “take the upmost care to avoid changes or variations in the text and wording of the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, the sacraments, etc. On the contrary. . . adopt one form and adhere to it. . . for the young and inexperienced people must be instructed on the basis of a fixed text” (SC Preface:7; Tappert, p. 338). I would suggest that what Luther says regarding the texts of the catechism applies to the text of the liturgy as well. Even a quick reading of Luther’s “Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors” (1528) will reveal how closely the catechism and liturgy are joined together in evangelical pastoral practice.

III. *The question of the liturgy’s form is never merely an issue*

of adiaphora since the Word of God and sacraments are ultimately at stake.

A variety of liturgical forms may legitimately exist in the Church of the Augsburg Confession. Article VII of the Augustana states (VII: 3; Tappert, p. 32):

It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that ceremonies, instituted by men, should be observed uniformly in all places.

Likewise, Article X of the Formula of Concord maintains (FC-SD X:3; Tappert, p. 616):

...churches will not condemn each other because of a difference in ceremonies, when in Christian liberty one uses fewer or more of them, as long as they are otherwise agreed in doctrine and all its articles and they are agreed concerning the right use of the holy sacraments, according to the well-known axiom, "Disagreement in fasting should not destroy agreement in faith."

It would be a grave misreading of the confessional teaching regarding adiaphora to infer from Article X that everything liturgical is a matter of indifference as long as the Word of God and sacraments are somehow retained. This point needs especially strong emphasis in our present context as this article is sometimes used by Lutherans as a defense for adopting the popular worship forms and evangelistic programs of their Free Church and Reformed neighbors.

Even though ceremonies may differ from place to place and from one historical period to another, they may never be ignored. Werner Elert writes:

No matter how strongly he [Luther] emphasizes Christian freedom in connection with the form of this rite [the Sacrament of the Altar], no matter how much he deviates from the form handed down at the end of the Middle Ages, no matter how earnestly he warns against the belief that external customs could commend us to God, still there are certain ceremonial elements that he, too, regarded as indispensable.⁵

Since there is no such thing as an "informal service," that is, a service without form, the question of the form of the liturgy can be ignored only to the detriment of the pure proclamation of the Gospel and the right administration of the blessed sacraments.

The Lutheran reformers recognized this truth and thus retained the ancient liturgy once it had been purified of superstition. Article XXIV of the Augsburg Confession maintains that Lutherans keep the mass, making “no conspicuous changes” in the public ceremonies of the mass except that German hymns have been added. Article XV of the Apology is equally explicit and especially clear in focusing on the relationship of liturgical ceremonies to the doctrine of justification (Apol. XV:38; Tappert, p.38):

We gladly keep the old traditions set up in the church because they are useful and promote tranquility, and we interpret them in an evangelical way, excluding the opinion which holds that they justify. Our enemies falsely accuse us of abolishing good ordinances and church discipline. We can truthfully claim that in our churches the public liturgy is more decent than in theirs, and if you look at it correctly we are more faithful to the canons than our opponents are.

The polemic of the confessors is not against the ancient liturgical forms but against the opinion that these forms merit the forgiveness of sins. It is the doctrine of justification that is the measuring rod for liturgical forms.

IV. The attacks on the liturgy spawned by Pietism, Rationalism, and American Evangelicalism are not so much a rejection of an inherited, ordered form of worship as they are a denial of the efficacy of the Word and Sacrament.

To create and sustain saving faith God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided His church with the Gospel and the sacraments (see AC V). The liturgy is derived from and exists to serve this external word. Our Lord says that His words are “spirit and life” in John 6. The Word of God, says Isaiah, will not return empty but will accomplish the purpose for which God sent it (see Isaiah 55:11). Through the Word of God and the sacraments “as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given to create faith, where and when it pleases God” (AC V:2; Tappert, p. 31). Apart from the external word, there is no faith (SA III: VIII: 3; Tappert, p. 312):

In these matters, which concern the external, spoken Word, we must hold firmly to the conviction that God gives no one his Holy Spirit or grace except through or with the external Word which comes before. Thus we shall be protected from the enthusiasts—that is, from the spiritualists who boast that they possess the Spirit without and before the Word and

therefore judge, interpret, and twist the Scriptures according to their pleasure.

Luther goes on just a few lines later to conclude that this enthusiasm is the work of “the old devil and the old serpent who made enthusiasts of Adam and Eve. He led them away from the external Word of God to spiritualizing and their own imaginations, and he did this through other external words” (SA III: VIII: 5; Tappert, p. 312).

Enthusiasm, sometimes in rather subtle forms, has always crouched near the door of Lutheranism, seeking to replace reliance on the external words of the Gospel and sacraments with a trust in the religious ego. Such enthusiasm has appeared in a number of fashions, both pietistic and rationalistic. Such enthusiasm has always launched an attack on the liturgy, often in the name of greater evangelistic effectiveness. Such was the case in American Lutheranism over a century ago. Samuel S. Schmucker (1799-1873) of the old General Synod, along with his colleagues Benjamin Kurtz and Samuel Sprecher, were dedicated to adapting Lutheranism to the cultural context of North America. In 1855 Schmucker and his friends issued the “Definite Platform,” which advocated the acceptance of an edited version of the Augsburg Confession which came to be known as the “American Recension of the Augsburg Confession.” The introduction to the “Definite Platform” stated that the Augustana contained five errors: (1) the approval of the ceremonies of the Mass; (2) the approval of private confession and absolution; (3) the denial of the divine obligation of the Christian Sabbath; (4) the affirmation of baptismal regeneration; and (5) the affirmation of the body and blood of our Lord in the Holy Supper.⁶

A changed theology resulted in a changed liturgical life. The liturgical piety shaped by the sixteenth-century church orders, the great chorales of the Reformation and Lutheran orthodoxy, and the catechism were exchanged for the excitement induced by revivalistic songs, personal testimonies, and especially the “anxious bench.” Kurtz writes:

If the great object of the anxious bench can be accomplished in some other, less obnoxious, but equally efficient way—be it so. But we greatly doubt this. We consider it necessary in many cases, and we believe that there are circumstances when no measures equally good can be substituted. Hence we are free to go after this method with all our heart. . .The

Catechism, as highly as we prize it, can never supersede the anxious bench, but only, when faithfully used, renders it more necessary.⁷

Schmucker and his associates did not see themselves as opponents of Lutheranism. Schmucker was steadfast in his opposition to the rationalistic president of the Lutheran Ministerium of New York, Frederick Quitman. Schmucker confessed the inerrancy of Holy Scripture. He was serious in his commitment to evangelism and mission. Intrigued by the revivalistic success stories of his Free Church and Reformed contemporaries, Schmucker sought to import their methods into Lutheranism. Much more was lost than the liturgy!

The revivalism of the last century has its heir in present day forms of church growth and evangelism which focus on “technique” and “methodology” rather than on the power of the Gospel which God Himself has packaged in His Word and sacraments. Man with his “decision for Christ,” his “felt needs,” his thoughts, emotions, and experiences is the focal point. God’s Word, baptism, absolution, the body and blood of Christ become incidental and perhaps even a stumbling block to an effective evangelism program.

The real point of conflict, it seems to me, is not merely over whether we shall retain the historic Lutheran formularies, vestments, and the like, but rather the place of the Word of God and sacraments themselves. In his classic study of the liturgy in the Lutheran churches of Germany, Paul Graff has documented the fact that, where the liturgy is laid aside, the pure preaching of the Word and the right administration of the sacraments is ultimately the victim. Whether we like it or not, the form of the liturgy will shape its content. Reformed or Free Church “styles” of worship are simply incapable of communicating the pure preaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the sacraments.

V. The Old Adam is never quite so energetic and destructive as he is in evangelism and worship. Israel’s worship in the desert was both creative and culturally relevant, but it was judged by the Lord God as idolatry.

Idolatry and synergism are actually two sides of the same coin. Both displace the Lord Christ and His Word. As his exposition of the First Commandment in the Large Catechism aptly demonstrates, Luther’s chief criticism of the Roman Mass was that it was idolatrous. Self-chosen forms of worship are set in the place of the Word of

God and the sacraments. In evangelism and worship God is the actor. It is the Word of the Lord that brings men and women to faith, not the power or personality of the evangelist. Likewise, in worship God is at work to serve His people with His Word and sacraments. Evangelical worship is *Gottesdienst* (subjective genitive), Divine Service. When the Old Adam takes charge of evangelism, synergism results as sinners are led to believe that they can participate in obtaining salvation by “making a decision for Christ.” When the Old Adam takes charge of worship, the words, thoughts, or emotions of man replace or supplement the Word of God and sacraments. Worship then becomes either a pious sacrifice that man renders to God to secure some benefit or else a means of catering to or entertaining the Old Adam. In his commentary of 1535 on Galatians Luther comments:

Whoever falls from the doctrine of justification is ignorant of God and is an idolator. Therefore it is all the same whether he returns to the Law or to the worship of idols; it is all the same whether he is called a monk or a Turk or a Jew or an Anabaptist.⁸

One has only to recall that well-attended “worship experience” created by the children of Israel in the Sinai desert. Moses was delayed in coming down from the mountain. In true worship, God gathers His people by His Name and Word. In the false worship that took place in the desert, “the people gathered themselves together” (Ex. 32:1) and made a god to their own liking. It was creative and culturally relevant. They made for themselves a golden calf like the idols of their pagan counterparts. They sat down to eat and drink. It was exciting and meaningful. “They rose up to play” (Ex. 32:6). Or as Luther said of the fanatics of the sixteenth century, they “made Christ’s Supper into a parish fair.”

VI. Far from being unnecessary baggage, the liturgy serves the evangel of our salvation by keeping the worship of the congregation securely anchored in the “pattern of sound words” so that the faith-creating Gospel may be heard in all of its divine fullness.

As God is not a God of chaos and confusion (see 1 Corinthians 14:33), so His Divine Service to the congregation is both ordered and orderly. The liturgy of the Evangelical Lutheran Church reflects this orderliness as it serves the Word of God and sacraments which give and bestow the gracious gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation. The liturgy provides the congregation with an orderly way of listening

to God speak, of receiving the body and blood of Christ, and responding to Him in prayer, praise, and thanksgiving, using words which God Himself has given us in His inspired Scriptures. The orderliness is reflected in the various parts of the liturgy drawn from the Scriptures: the Introit, Kyrie, Gloria, Old Testament Reading, Epistle, Gospel, Offertory, Sanctus, Verba, Agnus Dei, Nunc Dimittis, and Benediction. All of these are taken from Scripture. Such orderliness is also found in the church year with its pericopal system.

Luther was well aware of the importance of such an ordered liturgy. Certainly liturgical forms do not commend sinners to God. Nevertheless, Luther was very conservative in his reform of the liturgy. One has only to recall his reaction to Karlstadt's legalistic and hasty liturgical reforms at Wittenberg in 1521-1522.

Finally, at the urging of his friend, Pastor Nicholas Hausmann, pastor at Zwickau, Luther prepared "An Order of Mass and Communion for the Church at Wittenberg" in 1523. This document is descriptive of the Evangelical Mass in Latin. Luther is very cautious:

Nor did I make any innovations. For I have been hesitant and fearful, partly because of the weak of faith who cannot suddenly exchange an old and accustomed order of worship for a new and unusual one, and more so because of the fickle and fastidious spirits who rush in like unclean swine without faith or reason, and who delight only in novelty and tire of it quickly, when it has worn off. Such people are a nuisance even in ordinary affairs, but in spiritual matters they are absolutely unbearable.¹⁰

In 1526 Luther prepared the *Deutsche Messe*. A number of German liturgies had been produced prior to this time by various Lutheran clerics. The multiplicity of orders threatened to produce liturgical chaos and confusion in Germany. With some hesitation, Luther finally prepared a German order in 1526. In the preface to the liturgy of 1526 Luther writes:

As far as possible we should all observe the same rites and ceremonies, just as all Christians have the same baptism and the same sacrament [of the altar] and no one has received a special one from God.¹¹

Luther did not see the German Mass as a replacement for the Latin Mass of 1523. The German Mass was something of an

“emergency measure” for the training of the young and unlearned. The German Mass does not abolish the liturgy, but simply casts the various parts of the liturgy in hymnic form. It seems that, after 1528 (the year of the Saxon visitations), Luther became even more guarded in his advice regarding the production of new liturgical forms. The majority of his efforts are devoted to urging pastors to teach the people how to use the liturgy, especially the Lord’s Supper. The Service of Word and Sacrament remains intact. Luther did not create additional liturgies. Luther was not in disagreement with Article XXIV of the Apology (XXIV:1-2; Tappert, p. 249):

We must repeat the prefatory statement that we do not abolish the mass but religiously keep and defend it. In our churches mass is celebrated every Sunday and on other festivals, when the sacrament is offered to those who wish for it after they have been examined and absolved. We keep traditional liturgical forms, such as the order of the lessons, prayers, vestments, etc.

Conclusion

While Christians certainly have the freedom to create new liturgical forms, this freedom must be exercised with the greatest degree of care. Consensus in the pure preaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the sacraments and not uniformity in liturgical practices is the basis for the unity of the church (AC VII). However, this truth does not mean that “anything goes” in matters of worship. Lutherans must remain evangelical catholics in worship and mission. The words of Wilhelm Loehe, perhaps the greatest missiologist of nineteenth-century confessional Lutheranism, stand as a challenge for us in our own day:

We must beware of misusing our liturgical freedom to produce new liturgies. One should rather use the old forms and learn to understand and have a feeling for them before one feels oneself competent to create something new and better. He who has not tested the old cannot create something new. It is a shame when everybody presumes to form his own opinions about hymns and the liturgy without having thoroughly looked into the matter. Let a man first learn in silence and not act as though it were a matter of course that he understands everything. Once a man has first learned from the old he can profitably use the developments of recent times (in language and methods of speech) for the benefit of the liturgy.¹²

Endnotes

1. W. Nagel, "Justification and the Discipline of Liturgics," *Lutheran Quarterly*, 7 (February, 1956), p. 43.
2. *Luther's Works*, 38, pp. 208-209.
3. Werner Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, trans. by Norman Nagel (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), pp. 75-76.
4. See Robert Webber's *Celebrating our Faith: Evangelism Through Worship* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986). Webber is now a member of the Episcopal Church.
5. Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, trans. by Walter Hanson (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), p. 325.
6. E. Clifford Nelson, *The Lutherans in North America* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 224.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 215-216.
8. *Luther's Works*, 26, pp. 395-396.
9. *Luther's Works*, 37, p. 141.
10. *Luther's Works*, 53, p. 19.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
12. Wilhelm Loehe, *Three Books about the Church*, trans. by James Schaaf (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), p. 178.

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