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The Great Thanksgiving of the ILCW

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MORE AND MORE I am convinced that the world's great literary productions must be the work of individuals working by themselves rather than committees working collectively. Theories of collective authorship for individual Biblical writings are absurd. Our Lutheran Confessions too have individual authors. This is not to deny the historic fact that others have made contributions through editing and additions, but the basic fact is that one person provided the genius behind the actual writing. The Declaration of Independence was adopted by the Continental Congress in 1776 and signed by the individual members. Still, the basic genius behind the work was the mind of Thomas Jefferson.

The Great Thanksgiving, a eucharistic prayer to be used in the celebration of the Lord's Supper, shows the marks of being a composite mosaic production and not the work of a single individual. It is not great. This prayer, sent to pastors in the major Lutheran bodies, is intended to be incorporated in the eucharistic liturgy being offered to the three major Lutheran synods in the United States by the Inter-Lutheran Commission on worship (ILCW). Behind this and its companion liturgies there are committees with representatives from the church bodies involved. *The Great Thanksgiving* shows all the marks of a committee production, and perhaps the impression of a pieced-together production was unavoidable. For Herman Sasse has written extensively on the relationship of liturgy and theology, showing that the former reflects the latter. If, therefore, a committee has diversified theologies in its midst, it can be expected that diversified theological expressions will be found in the liturgy which it produces. The theology of the *Great Thanksgiving* takes quite diverse forms. The Missouri Synod will seriously have to raise the question as to whether its position has really received adequate representation, since no Missouri Synod pastor is listed on the drafting committee.

In the first place, one cannot overlook in the introduction to the *Great Thanksgiving* the failure to mention, much less answer Luther's objections to any type of eucharistic prayer. Luther removed the canon of the mass with gusto, and the practice in our churches of giving a simple statement of the *verba* can be traced to him. Surely if we are to break with this custom to revert to a eucharistic prayer, some presentation of Luther's view and an intelligent refutation of it would have been appropriate. It would have been the polite thing to do, especially for Lutherans. A related point is that the invocation of the Holy Spirit is included in this eucharistic prayer. It is important that this sacrament be associated with the proper person of the Trinity. It is Jesus, God the Son, who gave us His body and blood. ~~Certainly any suggestion should be avoided that the Eucharist is the Holy Spirit's supper.~~ Historically an appeal to the Spirit was used to circumvent the doctrine of the real presence. In recent times the Holy

Spirit has been misused to provide a way out of the nasty problem of asserting that it was the historical Jesus who instituted this supper. Sommerlath in objecting to the Arnoldshain Theses pointed out that Paul, the author of the earliest record of this sacrament's institution includes the words "on the night on which he was betrayed" in his preface. At this time, however, I shall pass over the probable impropriety of having any eucharistic prayer at all and shall confine my remarks to the text proper.

For some time I have been reading and writing in the area of the theology of hope. Robert Jenson of the LCA seminary in Gettysburg has opted for this theological trend, at least for the present; he is also listed as a member of the drafting committee of the *Great Thanksgiving*. There are certain phrases, especially in Preface Dialogue I of the *Great Thanksgiving*, that have all the marks of having been contributed by a person wrapped up in this futuristic theology. We note the strange phrase, "Therefore, with the Church that is and the Church that will be . . ." Dividing the church into chronological segments is unnecessary and confusing, except in the thinking of the theology of hope. But "hope" is the key word in this futuristic theology, and in one sentence in the *Great Thanksgiving* God is called "hope." "You are the Holy Father, the hope at the beginning of all things." Now it is true that Christians have hope as a virtue along with faith and love. And God is love—but He is not faith or hope. Hope is not one of God's attributes; possibilities do not exist for an infinite God. To predicate hope of God is to imply that He finite in some respect. God is, to be sure, *our hope* (the object of hope), but He Himself is not hope. Shortly thereafter we find a phrase of similar tone, "We praise you for the new world to come, . . ." Superficially, this line might refer to the new heaven and earth of orthodoxy. In the theology of hope, however, "the new world" refers to an occurrence within the dimensions of this time, something akin to the Marxist paradise. The freedom motif, also essential to the theology of hope, can be seen in the phrases, "rescue from Egypt" and "after calling to him the slaves of all nations." This is more than the theology of hope; it is the theology of revolution. God is referred to as "enthroned before the Tribes, going free into the desert." One cannot escape the opinion that the pen behind these words belongs to a man who is well steeped in the writings of Jürgen Moltmann, the great theologian of hope himself.

There might be some who would raise no objection to having the theology of hope represented in a Lutheran liturgy. But I, for one must protest, because for the theology of hope God does not exist; He will exist. That is not good enough, however. Let us call it contemporary atheism, even if it is future theism. Terminology associated with such a blatantly false theology should be kept out of the liturgy with the same enthusiasm that the Council of Nicea (325 A.D.) kept Arianism out of the worship life of the church. All the Arian-tainted phrases were condemned. This is a matter of historical record. Indeed, phrases reflecting contemporary theologies should be avoided in general when it comes to the liturgy. Sermons, and not the liturgy, should be timely. Liturgy provides a timeless and hence unifying ele-

ment to the church's life. The basic parts of the Communion Liturgy in our present hymnal are not unique to the Missouri Synod or even to Lutheranism. The Gloria, the Kyrie, the Gloria in Excelsis, and the rest are hardly Lutheran inventions, but expressions in which Christians worshipped for centuries before the Reformation. Thus our liturgy has provided a continuity in time with the past and so is a true expression of the church catholic. Fifteen years ago the theology of hope was not with us and fifteen years from time it may well be gone. Thus, if the *Great Thanksgiving* is accepted by us, we will be stuck a long while with time-dated phrases. The theology of hope should pass from the scene as quickly as possible, and we should make it our Christian duty to hasten its exit. Why should our liturgy help perpetuate a theology that was born lame? Let us keep the trends out of the liturgy. False ideas may creep into the sermon, but why enshrine them in the liturgy?

The hand of an existentialist can also be seen squirming behind the liturgical curtains. One prayer in the *Great Thanksgiving* goes like this: "We praise your holiness that calls all things from nothingness to take the chance of life. We praise your holiness that calls from false security in sin to risk the gift of love." Those ideas are rooted more in the works of Soren Kierkegaard than in the Bible. Is life, whatever its form, really a chance? Somehow such a phrase contradicts the doctrine of God's providence; everything is upheld by His mighty hand. Then too Abraham is painted as the grand existentialist hero of faith. "We praise your holiness that called our father Abraham to leave his safety and wander by precarious ways of faith." The author of this phrase should know that faith is not precarious, but is certain because it finds its foundation in God's word, which is absolutely certain. Unbelief and not faith is uncertain. The church's concept of faith should be informed by Paul and Luther, and not by Kierkegaard through Barth and his disciples among the Lutherans.

A prayer for Christmas in the *Great Thanksgiving* is a masterpiece in confusion. "Lord, Holy Father, almighty and ever-living God; for the sudden beauty of the embodied Word has cleared our minds, that as we see God born as Mary's child, we may see mankind reborn in God." Yes, the Scriptures speak about universal redemption, but where is there any reference to universal regeneration? John 1 teaches that some are reborn and others not. Yet here the preface dialogue teaches universal regeneration; the hand of the committee's theologian of hope is clearly seen again. The phrase "sudden beauty" is theologically and linguistically meaningless. When it is attached to "the embodied Word," meaninglessness is compounded with confusion. Does the quality of "beauty" (which is called "sudden") belong to "Word" or "embodied Word"? Can the "disembodied Word," the second person of the Trinity, really be described by the words "sudden beauty"? Or can "the embodied Word" be called beautiful? Is the liturgy trying to make in an awkward way the horribly sentimental point that the Baby Jesus was cute? Then we are told that "the sudden beauty of the embodied Word has cleared our minds." Is this mind-clearing experience a reference to recovery from an existential or other sort of hangover?

Great trouble is caused by suggesting that “we see God born as Mary’s child.” We believe in the incarnation, but we certainly do not see it. The hand of the existentialist is at work again. Physical seeing and existential believing are merged into a kind of hazy faith-seeing. Read this section carefully and you will find that there is no equation between God, the embodied Word, and Mary’s child. This equation is found in John 1. And why was the reference to a virgin omitted when the Biblical accounts of “Mary’s child” make emphatic the point that she was virgin.

The *Great Thanksgiving* is, in fact, a half-finished jigsaw puzzle, a crazy-quilt of theologies. I cannot but conclude, for one thing, that someone who had an appreciation for the Roman Canon of the Mass also put his hand into this liturgy. In the Roman liturgy it is the custom to mention the saints in the confession of sins or right in the canon of the mass. Mary and Peter are favorites. Sure enough, they show up in the *Great Thanksgiving*. “Therefore, with the holy Church of all the world, with John and Mary, and all witnesses to the cross, and with Cherubim and Seraphim, we praise and glorify your Name, forever . . .” In a prayer for Easter the saints are Magdalene and Peter. Then there is someone who has trouble with the resurrection who also made a contribution to the *Great Thanksgiving*. Of Jesus’ resurrection it is said that He “rose beyond the bounds of death.” A person who does not accept the empty tomb and the resuscitation of the dead body of Jesus could say such a phrase without difficulty. Long ago, moreover, the church rejected the phrase “born of the Holy Spirit and of the Virgin Mary” in favor of “conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary.” What the church once rejected is reintroduced in *The Great Thanksgiving*. The rejected phrase carried with it the suggestion that the Holy Ghost and Mary were married. Those in the ancient church who were responsible for the revision showed great wisdom in eliminating the phrase. Why bring it back? Yes, the conception of Jesus was by the Holy Spirit, but where do we find that the Holy Spirit was responsible for the birth of Jesus? The conception was miraculous, but not the birth. The descent of Christ into hell after death and in connection with His resurrection is likewise mutilated in the proposed liturgy. It is referred to as “his descent among the dead.” Years ago I raised all sorts of Biblical, historical, and liturgical objections to the dropping of the descent into hell from the Creed in the *Worship Supplement*. All these objections still stand.

Lutherans have been hesitant to pinpoint the exact moment of the effectuation of the Real Presence in the Sacrament. Such trepidation is not present in the new liturgy. God is asked to send the Holy Spirit to act upon the elements in a kind on-again-off-again prayer: “. . . your Spirit, the Spirit of life and blessing. Let him bless and vivify this bread and cup.” If this sentence is actually a request rather than a pious wish, then what exactly is the request? What does vivifying bread involve? Hopefully, it is not a request for some type of **magical sacramental action inside the bread**. How does the Spirit vivify bread? The Spirit is prominent in this new liturgy. He comes across in many shapes and forms. He is referred to as “the Spirit,”

“the Spirit of our Lord,” “the Spirit of our eating and drinking,” and “the Holy Spirit.” If these terms in some way explain one another, we have a natural equation between “the Holy Spirit” and “the Spirit of our eating and drinking.” Does this latter phrase really have any substantive meaning at all? And if it does have any meaning, could “Spirit” just as well be written as “spirit,” denoting a general feeling of good will? Schleiermacher is ever with us.

The most prominent innovation in the *Great Thanksgiving*, at least according to a Lutheran perspective, is the introduction of the idea of sacrifice. Christians make sacrifices of their money, time, and even their lives. Jesus' discipleship demands the offering up of oneself. However, the Christian never offers Jesus as sacrifice to God, as is suggested by the new liturgy. Let the reader himself ponder these words: “. . . we recall before you the whole sacrifice of our Lord's life for us.” In traditional Roman theology the sacrifice offered by the priest is the offering up of the host, which has become the body of the crucified Christ. In the *Great Thanksgiving*, the minister together with the congregation reenacts the sacrifice of Jesus' life. Students of liturgy will recognize a similarity between the *Great Thanksgiving* and a contemporary Roman Catholic understanding of the mass. The mass is no longer a repetition of the sacrifice but a representing of a past event in the present. The words of *The Great Thanksgiving* suggest that the work of Jesus is again being brought to the attention of God. We respond that any hint that the atonement is not complete should be avoided, especially in the light of Luther's objections to the mass. What is more startling in the ILCW liturgy is the concept of our Lord's sacrifice. Where do the Scriptures speak of “our Lord's life” as “sacrifice”? In the five prayers used in this connection there is not one mention of our Lord's death as the sacrifice (*lytron*) for sins. This is the heart of the Christian faith. Our Lord's death as sacrifice for sins is so basic to the New Testament and Lutheran theology that one is simply aghast at its absence from this liturgy.

Throughout *The Great Thanksgiving* there are phrases that must be scored. “Therefore, with the Church of Jews and Gentiles, and with all the choir of adoring spirits . . .” Who are the “adoring spirits”? If angels are intended, the word “angel” would have been preferable as we all know what it means. Or is the concept of angels too archaic for one reason or another? “Therefore, with the holy Church of all the world” would better read “throughout the world,” unless, of course, the meaning is that all the world is in the church, an acceptable thought for a theologian of hope. The reference to Jesus' ascension as His having “entered the hidden places of your power” has no basis in Scripture or tradition. Why not use the phrase “right hand,” as David did around the year 1000 B.C. and as Jesus did a thousand years later. Three thousand years after David most of us still know what the phrase “my right hand man” means and the rest of us can easily find out. One shudders at the thought of using this phrase in reference to the Lord's Supper: “We are not worthy to gather the crumbs under your table.” The ancient church spoke of the heavenly manna and deified the bread—an objectionable act, but

less so than speaking of the Sacrament as crumbs. And something is lacking when we say, "Blessed be the Recreator of love from hatred." If the Creator is responsible for creation, is the Recreator responsible for recreation? One of the concluding prayers has this piece, which is said to be the product of ecumenical endeavor:

God is born a baby,
 the cripples dance their joy.
A carpenter reigns,
 the Son of God dies,
Enemies claim his body,
 friends acclaim their living host.

Sound reason has been replaced by a disjointed sentence whose meaning, so far as it exists is startling. Where do we find the slightest suggestion in the Scriptures that "a carpenter reigns"? The last two lines speak of resurrection joy but never affirm the resurrection.

I myself have served on a liturgical committee and realize that there must be a lot of compromising to meet everyone's needs and avoid as many objections as possible. Such a production almost rules out a work uniform in thought. *The Great Thanksgiving* of the ILCW is simply not capable of correction on a few points because the thing has been pieced together like a puzzle. Like a puzzle it might look good until one tries to do something with it, like hang it on the wall. I do not think that I have dismembered it. I have just tried to show where I saw the pieces fail to fit together.