

*The Unchanging Feast*

**The Nature  
and Basis of  
Lutheran  
Worship**

A. L. Barry



## **The Unchanging Feast**



# *The Unchanging Feast*

**The Nature and Basis of Lutheran Worship**

**A. L. Barry**



© 1995  
The Office of the President  
The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod  
1333 South Kirkwood Road  
St. Louis, Missouri 63122





---

## Preface

---

**I**N JULY OF 1994 I WAS PRIVILEGED TO GIVE A PAPER AT THE FIRST REAL Life Worship Conference sponsored by The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod’s Commission on Worship. Since that time I have continued to receive requests for copies of the paper I gave there. I have been encouraged to make this paper more widely available and so with the generous support of an anonymous donor, I am able to send this paper to the pastors of our beloved Synod.

I believe that the interest in this paper is a reflection of the more general interest in our synod today concerning the whole subject of the liturgy and worship practices. My prayer is that the pastors of our synod may find this paper helpful as they reflect on the nature and basis of Lutheran worship. My even more fervent prayer is that our good and gracious God would keep our synod always faithful to His Holy Word and Sacraments. We join with fellow Lutherans down through years in singing the prayer:

*In these last days of sore distress,  
Grant us, dear Lord, true steadfastness,  
That pure we keep, till life is spent,  
Thy Holy Word and Sacrament. Amen!*

— Dr. A. L. Barry  
Jude 24–25  
Reformation 1995



---

## Introduction

---

**G**RACE, MERCY AND PEACE TO EACH OF YOU FROM HIM WHO WAS, WHO is and who is to come, Jesus Christ our Righteousness. Let me begin by thanking the Commission on Worship for sponsoring this series of special seminars on worship and the liturgy. This is an important beginning for what I hope will continue to be an excellent opportunity for our synod. We need these sorts of events and I am glad to see the Commission taking a strong leadership role in providing this seminar series for our Synod.

Secondly, let me also thank the Commission on Worship for their invitation to me to be a presenter at this first Real Life Worship Conference. It is a genuine privilege to be with you today. I am pleased to have this opportunity to share thoughts and observations with you in regard to the whole matter of worship and liturgical practices in our Synod.

My assignment today, specifically, is to speak on the subject, “The Unchanging Feast in a Fast-Changing World.” I suppose one could present a paper devoted only to the Lord’s Supper under this theme, but I would like to broaden it a bit more to include the more general subject of our Evangelical Lutheran worship practices. Repeatedly, as we read through the Old and New Testament Scriptures, we find references to God’s relationship to His people and their relationship to Him compared to a marvelous feast, a banquet. The worship practices of the people of God down through the years have been connected to feasting and celebration, so I believe the idea of an “unchanging feast” includes not only the Lord’s Supper but the entire subject of the worship of our good and loving God.

First, we will take a look at how we as a synod need to discuss all these issues. Secondly, we need to take a look at what the Scriptures have to say about these things. Thirdly, we will comment on the unchanging feast in the history of the Church. Then we will discuss the

unchanging feast in the present day, with a specific emphasis on trends we notice in our synod today when it comes to worship practices. Finally, we will ask ourselves, “Where are we headed in regard to worship practices?”

I do not need to tell you that there is a lot of discussion presently going on within our synod when it comes to the subject of worship, or perhaps I should say, “styles” of worship. Unfortunately, some of this discussion has been marked by more heat than light. For no matter what the concern may be, the way *not* to address it is to line up the troops on both sides, load the muskets, aim, fire, and then watch as one after another “soldier of the cross” drops to the ground. As one falls to the ground, and still another and still another—this is not the way to address these issues. That is why a conference like this is such an excellent idea. To be able to hear presentations on a variety of subjects having to do with our Lutheran worship heritage is a very valuable learning experience for us all.

What I would like to do today is to assess in a clear and positive way where we have been in days past when it comes to this entire matter of worship and liturgy. I will identify the bright spots, and I will also identify the less-than-bright spots in our history, noting the potholes that we need to avoid as we journey together as co-workers in Christ, all to the glory of God. And I will be expressing some very genuine pastoral concerns I have in regard to these issues.

### **Our Fast-Changing World and Its Challenges**

As the title of this presentation suggests, we need to recognize that when we discuss the whole subject of Evangelical Lutheran worship we are doing so in the context of a fast-changing world. We hear about change happening in communities all across our country. We hear about change when it comes to the aging of our population. We hear about change on the television, radio, in news magazines and on and on. Change seems to be one of our Missouri Synod’s favorite words these days. We hear about change as we talk about how our congregations will respond to the pressures of society. We hear talk about

## INTRODUCTION

---

change when it comes to values, morals, and even when it comes to what truth is all about these days. Our synod is concerned about dealing with a fast-changing society. Change, change and more change—it seems sometimes the only thing which does not change is the fact that everything seems to be changing!

### **Our Unchanging God and His Unchanging Feast**

In the midst of all this change there is one unchanging truth and that is the truth that God is God and He does not change. His mercy is from everlasting to everlasting. As we read in the prophet Malachi, “I the LORD do not change...” (Mal. 3:6). In the midst of the hustle and bustle all around us our Lord must speak to us these words from the Psalms, “Be still and know that I am God” (Ps. 46:10). In the life of the church there remains one unchanging event, one unchanging, timeless gift of God to us which we are privileged to receive: the forgiveness of our sins through Jesus Christ. We receive this forgiveness through God’s proclaimed Word and through the Lord’s Supper. As I kneel to receive the Lord’s Supper, I can’t help but say a prayer of thanks to Him for the privilege of once again hearing the Word of forgiveness proclaimed and receiving the very body and blood of Jesus Christ who suffered and died for my sins.

In the unchanging feast of the Lord’s Supper our Lord’s power and promise of forgiveness are always new and fresh. It is something we can absolutely count on. It is as sure and certain as His Word is sure and certain. In this feast of love we receive from our good and gracious God the very body and blood of the One sent into this world—this changing, confused and fallen world—to cleanse us, renew us and forgive us all of our sins. Christ’s sacrifice on the cross was the fulfillment of the unchanging promise made to Adam and Eve. By the preaching of the Gospel and through Christ’s feast, the Lord’s Supper, our Lord unites us to Himself.

From the earliest days of the apostles, this unchanging feast has been at the center of the church’s existence. This unchanging feast is one constant in a sea of change. The Christian worship service has

## THE UNCHANGING FEAST

---

always had two emphases: Word and Sacrament. Where preaching is neglected the church suffers. Where the Lord's Supper is neglected, the church suffers. The Word of God is *the* heart of Christian worship and the Sacrament is the Word made visible, as many of our old Lutheran fathers say. Word and Sacrament, the means of grace, are the marks of the church's existence, according to our Lutheran Confessions (AC VII).

But how do we go about celebrating this unchanging feast? What format of worship do we use to hear the Word proclaimed and to receive the Lord's Supper?<sup>1</sup> Here we think of a whole host of items: worship, liturgy, orders of service, variety in worship, new forms, new styles—all these thoughts come to mind when we think of the unchanging feast in a fast-changing world. I would like to spend some time with you today discussing a number of points as they relate to the unchanging feast and the worship practices and traditions associated with it. Therefore we begin by taking a look at the unchanging feast in the Old and New Testament Scriptures.

---

1. This is the issue which is discussed by Peter Brunner in the third part of his excellent book on Lutheran worship, *Worship in the Name of Jesus*. He writes, "The Reformation has demonstrated impressively that far-reaching dogmatic decisions are involved in the manner in which we appraise the form of worship and especially in the concrete form in which we conduct worship. Consequently, there must be a doctrine of the form of worship. The task of such a doctrine is not to fix the order of worship in detail; it is, rather, to establish the critical boundaries within which every concrete form must be contained, lest the purity of the Gospel be impaired." Peter Brunner, Translated by M.H. Bertram, *Worship in the Name of Jesus* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), p. 217.

---

## Worship in The Old and New Testament

---

**T**HE LORD OUR GOD HAS ALWAYS BEEN A GOD WHO IS PRESENT WITH HIS people. God is described as “an ever-present help in time of trouble” in the Psalms (Ps. 46:1). At the very beginning of the world He was the God who walked with His dearly beloved children in the cool of the evening (Gen. 3:8), being present with them, where they were and where they lived. God is always a constant source of peace and strength. Our Lord has demonstrated repeatedly throughout the Old Testament His desire to be with His people. He visited Abraham and ate with him, promising that generations would be blessed by the seed of Abraham, our Lord Jesus Christ (Gen. 18). The Lord our God was ever present with His people, accompanying them through the wilderness, leading them as a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud by day (Ex. 13:21–22)—always leading them and present with them.<sup>1</sup>

In the days of the judges, our Lord was present with His powerful arm of protecting mercy. He was present in ways which His people could hardly comprehend. His presence was powerful and miraculous. We think of the conquest of Canaan under Joshua’s leadership. The people of God were led across the Jordan by the priests carrying the Ark, the visible sign of God’s presence with His people (Josh 3). In the

---

1. Peter Brunner summarizes worship in the Old Testament by stating, “This entire sacrificial worship of Israel must be conceived as a gift of God to man, the proper acceptance of which first enabled man to serve God truly. In this connection, it is of secondary importance that men took an active part in this sacrificial worship. The real protagonist in this worship was God Himself. Therefore there was hardly a stronger sign of Israel’s inner violation of the covenant than its supposition that God was the one dealt with by man in the sacrificial worship, that God through His presence in the temple had unmistakably given Himself into the power of man, that man now enjoyed free disposition over himself, since he had God at his disposal in the cultus.” Brunner, p. 57.

## THE UNCHANGING FEAST

---

midst of the Jordan stood the priests holding the Ark, while before them the whole nation of Israel passed by on dry ground. And with the conquest of Jericho, again, God was with His people. As Joshua prepared to do battle, he looked up one day and, as we read in the Scriptures:

Behold a man stood before him with his sword drawn in his hand; and Joshua went to him and said to him, "Are you for us, or for our adversaries?" And he said, "No; but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come." And Joshua fell on his face to the earth, and worshiped, and said to Him, "What does my Lord bid his servant?" And the commander of the Lord's army said to Joshua, "Put off your shoes from your feet; for the place where you stand is holy!" (Josh. 5:13–15).

Repeatedly throughout the history of God's people, God wanted to be with them and to bless them in a very special way. Walking through the rest of the Old Testament, we could talk about the victory of Gideon when he saw the messenger of the Lord (Judg. 6:22–23). God was very present with him, and throughout all the days of the kings and prophets. We think of David and Solomon's mighty deeds in the presence of the Lord. We remember the great prophets of old like Elijah, Elisha and the rest. And through it all the worship of the Lord continued, patterned after the instruction given by God in the book of Exodus (Ex. 24). There we read of the construction of the tabernacle, with its precise design and plan for the presence of the Lord. For in all the world, the true God chose to reveal Himself only there in that tent-like structure, above the Ark, in the Holy of Holies. There and nowhere else did He make Himself known as the God of Israel, the One True God. The people of God were constantly reminded of God's presence with them as the tabernacle was in the midst of them, constantly with them as they journeyed.

Their worship was a regular, established order, what we today would call a liturgy. They devoted themselves to praising the God of their salvation and receiving His promised forgiveness. Constantly they

were reminded of the sacrifice to come in the person and work of the Messiah. Through the sin offerings, the guilt offerings, the thank offerings and all the rest, they were reminded that a substitute for them was necessary, a go-between, One who would shed blood for their sins. God's Word made this very clear for the people: "For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life" (Lev. 17:11). Isn't it interesting that the Lord commanded His people to eat a portion of many of the sacrifices offered? Some have even seen in this eating of the sacrifices offered a foreshadowing of the Lord's Supper. Do you recall the time that God called the leaders of Israel up to be with Him, in His presence on Mount Sinai? We read in Holy Scripture:

Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the 70 elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Under His feet was something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear as the sky itself. But God did not raise His hand against these leaders of the Israelites: they saw God, and they ate and drank (Exod. 24:9–11).

God sealed His covenant with His people through this special meal held in His presence on Mount Sinai. Again, we note how often God revealed Himself to His people in the context of a meal in the Old Testament. The worship practices of the Old Testament were constant reminders of God and His gifts—given through the promises of the Lord in His Word. God continued to be with His people in the construction of the temple in 1 Kings 5. Again, meticulous and exacting standards of excellence in the worship of God was the rule. No expense was spared in the worship of the Lord God—all for the purpose of reminding and assuring the people of God of the presence of God and of His constant, unchanging love.

And through these years, the yearly feast of the Passover was yet another unchanging event which reminded the people of the unchanging love of God. We read of the Institution of the Passover in Exodus:

## THE UNCHANGING FEAST

---

You shall observe this rite as an ordinance for you and for your sons forever. And when you come to the land which the Lord will give you, as He has promised, you shall keep this service. And when your children say to you, “What do you mean by this service?” you shall say, “It is the sacrifice of the Lord’s passover, for He passed over the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt, when He slew the Egyptians but spared our houses.” And the people bowed their heads and worshiped (Exod. 12:24–27).

The Passover meal was celebrated from one generation to the next as a constant sign and memorial of the great work of salvation which God accomplished when the blood of an innocent lamb was shed for the people of God in Egypt. The blood of that lamb, spread on the doorposts, was the sign by which the Angel of Death knew to pass over the people in that house. On that night the people were commanded to eat unleavened bread and the flesh of the lamb, whose blood on the doorposts of their home caused the Angel of Death to pass them over. And so, from one generation to the next, the unchanging feast of the Passover was the constant reminder to the Old Testament people that in a changing world, God’s love, mercy and His promises were unchanging, sure and certain.

### **Worship in The New Testament**

As we move into the New Testament we have the fulfillment of all God’s promises and the fulfillment of all the prototypes of Christ and His work from the Old Testament. The whole history of God’s dealings with His people is brought to bear in the opening verses of the Gospel of St. John where we read, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). The word translated into English as “dwelt” is actually the Greek word ἐσκήνωσεν which means “tabernacled” or “tented.” This immediately reminds us of the Old Testament tabernacle. As the Lord God dwelt among His people in the tabernacle, revealing Himself in a fiery and cloudy pillar, so now in the very real person of Jesus of Nazareth, the God of the universe was present. He “tented” Himself not in a structure, but in the actual body and blood of our

Lord Jesus Christ, the true Son of God and true son of the Virgin Mary.

We think of the very first miracle performed by Jesus, the changing of water into wine at the marriage feast in Cana. Our Lord was present with His people at an ordinary wedding, but produced extraordinary wine with a simple word of command. As God spoke the word of creation in Genesis, creating all things out of nothing, so here Jesus, speaking a word of command, changes ordinary water into very special wine. Repeatedly through the New Testament we read of our Lord's healing and saving presence among His people, performing mighty deeds as signs of His divine person and His divine mission. We look for instance at John 6 where Jesus miraculously fed thousands, as the Lord did in the Old Testament. After feeding the huge crowd of people Jesus said:

I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this Bread will live forever (John 6:53–58).

Again, the Lord referred to a meal, a miraculous meal in the desert, and told His disciples that this was a sign pointing to the True Bread from heaven, our Lord Jesus Christ, whom we receive by faith. Our Lord would have us know and believe that He truly is the Unchanging Feast of salvation in a fast-changing world.

And then, on the night in which He was betrayed, our Lord took bread, broke it and gave it to His disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body" and then taking the cup after He had supped He gave it to His disciples saying, "Take and drink of it all of you, this cup is the New Testament in my blood, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." This meal, this sacred meal, was instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ for all times as an unchanging feast for a fast-changing world. So

## THE UNCHANGING FEAST

---

often during His ministry our Lord portrayed heaven as being similar to a great feast where all are invited to sit and dine with Him. All the promises of the Old Testament find their perfect fulfillment in Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup> St. Paul wrote in his second letter to the church of Corinth, “For all the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us” (2 Cor. 1:20). The writer of the letter to the Hebrews explains how all the sacrifices of the Old Testament were foreshadowings of the ultimate sacrifice of God’s own Son, our Lord Jesus Christ:

The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve a living God! For this reason Christ is the Mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that He has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant (Heb. 9:13–15).

After His resurrection He appeared to the two disciples of Emmaus and made Himself known to them in the breaking of bread. Jesus met His disciples one day on the shore of Galilee, prepared a meal for them, and broke bread and served it with fish to His wondering disciples. He told the Apostle Peter, “Feed my lambs... Shepherd my sheep... Feed my sheep” (John 21). It is interesting that our Lord spoke of shepherding the sheep and feeding the sheep. This reminds us of the nature of the Holy Ministry, truly a Word and Sacrament ministry in the church, that is, a ministry of shepherding and feeding. Through the preaching of His Word and the administration of His Sacraments, the church is

---

2. It is actually quite remarkable that the institution of the Lord’s Supper is recorded four separate times in the New Testament Scriptures. No other words of Jesus, or event in His life, receive this sort of written confirmation from the inspired writers. We read of the Lord’s Supper from Matthew, Mark, Luke and Paul: Matthew 26:26–28, Mark 14:22–24, Luke 22:19–20, 1 Corinthians 11:23–25.

nourished by her Lord and Savior. He is truly the Bread of Life which comes down from heaven to give life to the world—to a fast-changing world. Jesus Christ, therefore, is Himself the Unchanging Feast in a fast-changing world. We are called to His banquet through our baptism by which we are given the garment of His perfect righteousness and made to sit at table with Him in His kingdom. We have a foretaste of what heaven will be like when we gather for His unchanging feast. What a blessing and privilege to be His people, and to be invited to His banquet of love, the Lord's Supper, the unchanging feast in a fast-changing world.

Paging through the rest of the New Testament, we find instances which reveal what the early church did regularly and faithfully. We read in Acts that the Christians, “Devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers” (Acts 2:42: ἦσαν δὲ προσκαρτεροῦντες τῇ διδαχῇ τῶν ἀποστόλων καὶ τῇ κοινωνίᾳ, τῇ κλάσει τοῦ ἄρτου καὶ ταῖς προσευχαῖς). The worship pattern established here is strikingly similar to that which continues to this very day in our churches: devotion to the apostles’ teaching, that is, devotion to the Word of God, given through the apostles; and then devotion to the fellowship which God establishes through the faith which is a gift to us; and then devotion to the Lord’s sacred meal, referred to in Luke as the “breaking of bread”; and then finally, devotion to an ordered life of prayer and worship.

The New Testament does not parallel the Old Testament in terms of regulations and requirements for worship. These specific regulations were all designed to point to Christ. The Old Testament was fulfilled by the life and work of Jesus Christ, so the specific requirements for worship and sacrifice no longer apply. But what principles are at work even in the New Testament and down to our day? A very important principle is enunciated clearly in Hebrews 12:28 where we read, “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe....” This sense of awe and reverence marked the worship of the New Testament people of God as they gathered regularly for Word and

Sacrament, following a pattern of worship common in the synagogues throughout the Roman empire, a pattern of worship actually remarkably similar to our own. The early church's worship was marked by a set order of prayer, singing, reading, preaching and receiving the Lord's Supper.<sup>3</sup>

No other book in the Bible paints for us a more beautiful picture of the worship of God than the book of the Revelation of St. John. Here we find beautiful examples of heavenly worship. Constant worship of the Lamb of God is the description we receive in John's vision. The elders, falling down before His throne, worship Him. The countless host of heavenly choirs of angels and archangels, and all the company of heaven, all who have died in the faith, worship the Lord of Life, our Lord Jesus Christ. In heaven, right now, Jesus' prediction is being fulfilled: "I tell you, many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven..." (Matt. 8:1). The unchanging feast in a fast-changing world, the Christian worship service, mirrors what is happening in heaven where, by the grace of God, there have gone on before us many who await the great day of the Lord's second coming. This is why so often in the New Testament our Lord compares heaven to a great feast.

What themes do we notice in the Scriptures when it comes to our worship life? Reverence, awe, majesty, quality, rich ceremony, beautiful ornamentation, joyful singing, hymns focusing on the Lord and what He has done for His people, constant reminders of our status before God and our need for His mercy, the promise of God's mercy, and deep, contemplative prayers to the Holy One of Israel—all these elements are present in the worship life of the people of God as we see this portrayed throughout the Old and New Testaments. In the New Testa-

---

3. A liturgical scholar commenting on this verse notes: "The primitive Church was thus built up not only in the Eucharistic celebration of the breaking of bread and in the sharing of a common praise of and prayers to Christ; it was also built upon the teaching given by the apostles. Unity of mind and heart (Acts 4:32) presupposed a unity of doctrine. This teaching supplied food to souls. It made the Church grow by rooting it in the mystery of Jesus and inspiring it to reach outward in the mystery of brotherly love." Lucien Deiss, Translated by Matthew J. O'Connell, *Springtime of the Liturgy: Liturgical Texts of the First Four Centuries* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1979), p. 52.

## WORSHIP IN THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENT

---

ment we notice that the worship practices of the people of God were formed by Old Testament practices: devotion to the Word of God, to orderly patterned prayer, and to the frequent celebration of the Lord's Supper. How were these elements used and developed in the life of the church after the age of the apostles? To this question we next turn our attention.

THE UNCHANGING FEAST

---

---

## Worship in the History of the Church

---

**I**N THE MOST ANCIENT LITERATURE OF THIS PERIOD WE NOTICE ORDERS OF liturgy and worship strikingly similar to what we use today in our churches. There was a set order of liturgy, a pattern of worship which exposed the people to a rich variety of prayers, hymns, lessons and readings from Scripture. And there was the Lord's Supper, celebrated every Lord's Day.<sup>1</sup>

One of the earliest recorded descriptions of the ancient church's worship life is provided by Justin Martyr in his first writing defending the Christians against the slander and accusations against them by the non-Christian Roman society of their day. Justin describes the Lord's Supper and the worship practices of the Christians. He wrote this around 150 A.D.:

This food is called among us the Eucharist, the Thanksgiving, of which no one is allowed to partake but the man who believes that the things which we teach are true, and who has been washed with the washing that is for the remission of sins and unto regeneration, and who is so living as Christ enjoined. For not as common bread and common drink do we receive these; but in like manner as Jesus Christ our Savior, having been made flesh by the Word of God, had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so likewise have we been taught that the food which is blessed by the prayer of His word, and from which our blood and flesh by transmutation are nourished, is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh ....Afterwards we continually remind each other of these things...And on the day called Sunday,

---

1. The *Didache* contains this statement: "Come together on the Lord's day, break bread and give thanks, having first confessed your sins..." (Deiss, p. 77). Many scholars feel that the *Didache* was written before the end of the first century, perhaps even as early as 50 A.D.

all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and...when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought forth and the one who presides in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings...and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given....Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Savior on the same day rose from the dead...<sup>2</sup>

What is interesting to me as you walk through the history of worship in the early church is how similar so much of what they did in their liturgy is to what we today do in ours. Common elements are found throughout the history of the liturgy, as far back as we can trace it in the church's history: Scripture readings, sermons, singing of liturgical hymns and songs, orders of prayer and petition, and the Lord's Supper, celebrated at the Christians' service of worship. All these elements go into the unchanging feast in a fast-changing world.

### **Worship in the Middle Ages and the Need for Martin Luther's Reforms**

As we continue our historical sketch of Christian worship down through the years, we come to the time of the Middle Ages. We notice that the worship practices of the church became very uniform and consistent across the Holy Roman Empire. The Canon of the Mass, as our Lutheran fathers in the faith knew it, took form and shape during this time. Some very unfortunate tendencies developed in the worship service. One of the most obvious tendencies which developed was to use

---

2. Justin Martyr, *The First Apology* in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Volume 1 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), pp. 185-186.

a language in the worship service people could not understand: Latin. Deeper issues were even more troubling. The unchanging feast of the Lord's Supper became a way in which people attempted to earn the forgiveness of sins. The main emphasis of the Lord's Supper was put on how the Lord's Supper was something the people did for God, rather than the gift which Christ gives to His people.

A theory about the Lord's Supper was firmly established, the theory that it is a sacrifice for sins, an unbloody sacrifice, but a sacrifice nevertheless. It is against this error that our Lutheran confessors had to speak out. Luther condemned the sacrifice of the Mass in no uncertain terms as a great abomination and perversion of our Lord's original intention. Worship as a whole became viewed by the people as an exercise in earning grace. Simply because they attended church, they believed God would count this as a credit to their account. Participation in the Lord's Supper no longer became all that important. Simply being present while the priest chanted the words of the Mass in Latin was considered by many lay persons to be "good enough." The church had to issue a command that all people take communion at least once a year, during Holy Week.<sup>3</sup>

Things continued, going from bad to worse in regard to the Christian worship practices common in the church of the Middle Ages. Because the worship service became so remote from the lay people,

---

3. Scholarly studies of the Sacrament of the Altar in the Middle Ages indicate how far from Christ's evangelical institution of the Sacrament things had actually come. "In a sermon for a Sunday after Epiphany 1375 Bishop Brinton of Exeter taught that after seeing God's body [in the elevation of the chalice] no need for food would be felt, oaths would be forgiven, eyesight would not fade, sudden death would not strike one, nor would one age, and one would be protected at every single step by angels. This is just one version of the ubiquitous list of *Merita missae*, the Merits of the Mass, which proliferated...from the thirteenth century on." And commenting on the frequency of communion attendance the same author writes, "John Belet explained that originally communion was taken daily, then only on Sundays, and ultimately thrice a year. Durandus explained that due to sinfulness the laity communicated only once a year since 1215, but that priests communicated daily for them." Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 63-64.

there developed an elaborate and extensive practice of worship of saints and veneration of relics. We recall that in Wittenburg, Luther's city, the Castle Church there contained one of the largest collections of relics available at that time. People were led to believe that by venerating saints and visiting holy relics they could merit their salvation and earn God's favor. What a terrible tragedy in the history of the church! Our Lord's unchanging feast was turned into a circus whereby people went through the motions in order to earn God's grace, thinking that they could "do" something to achieve their salvation.

### **Luther's Reform of Christian Worship**

Luther was concerned that the order of worship reflect a truly Gospel-centered approach to the liturgy and worship. Luther reintroduced the church of his day to our Lord's unchanging feast, and resurrected it from the works righteousness into which it had sunk. Luther encouraged frequent communion attendance. The Lutheran churches celebrated the Lord's Supper on every Sunday and every major festival day, for all who wished to partake of the blessings of the unchanging feast of our Lord. Luther emphasized the words: "Take eat, this is given for you." Those words, "Given for you," were the key to Luther's emphasis when it came to liturgy and worship. For Luther, the Divine Service was God's way of giving His people His marvelous gifts through the Word and Sacraments and then offering His people the opportunity to respond to these gifts through praise and thanks. This theological understanding explains why the Lutherans have understood the old German word for worship, *Gottesdienst* which is translated as "Divine Service," to mean God's serving us with His Word and Sacraments. The Lutheran worship service once again put the emphasis on the Word and exposition of the Word, combined with the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

Luther's reform of the Western Mass was conservative. He did not throw out the liturgy. He modified it to bring the Gospel to the front. Where necessary, he eliminated those portions of the Medieval Mass which explicitly denied the precious Gospel of forgiveness through

Christ, by God's grace alone, through faith alone. Luther wanted to make sure that the Gospel would predominate in the worship of the church.<sup>4</sup> An important contribution which Luther made to Christian worship was the singing of hymns in the vernacular of the people. These hymns were designed to permit the people to sing their faith, to sing doctrine and to sing the truths of Scripture. Luther's hymns were not simply light, fluffy, repetitious phrases of praise, but solid, substantial and meaningful doctrinal hymns praising the Holy Trinity for what He does in our lives through Word and Sacrament. Luther started the tradition of the great Lutheran chorales and others, like Walther, Spengler, Speratus, Gerhardt and Bach, capitalized on and developed tremendous liturgical music unique in the history of the Christian church. Lutheran hymns were intended to proclaim the Word and thus

---

4. Carl Schalk summarizes Luther's liturgical reforms nicely when he writes: "The basis for the developing worship practices of the 16th century Lutheranism might be summarized as follows. Basic to everything was Luther's view of the union of theology and music: music, first of all, was praise and worship *per se*; it could also serve as an aid to piety and devotion; and it was an important educational tool (in the most comprehensive sense of the term) for spreading the Gospel. There was a conscious attempt to preserve, as much as possible, the tradition received from the church of the past as a safeguard against the dogmatic impoverishment reflected in the worship practices suggested by many of the more radical reformers... There was freedom, within liturgical propriety, of congregations to develop church orders most suited to their own needs and traditions. That freedom, however, was tempered by Luther's clear view that the church of the Reformation was part of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, and that in its worship it dare never become sectarian... Ironically, it was this freedom, encouraged at least in part by Luther's hesitation to become prescriptive, that contributed toward the loss of a distinctively Lutheran worship practice in the 17th and 18th centuries. Under increasing pressures of pietism and rationalism in the centuries following the Reformation, Lutheranism succumbed more and more to the temptation to forget its catholic character and heritage. The new spirit was one with which Lutheranism would have to reckon both on the Continent as well as later in the New World. This new viewpoint was to have decided implications for both theology and music." Carl Schalk, *A Handbook of Church Music* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), p. 64. For a good summary of the development of the Lutheran chorale tradition see Dennis W. Marzolf, "That the Unlearned May Be Taught: The Legacy of the Lutheran Chorale," *Logia* 3:2 (Eastertide/April 1994), p. 4.

were always viewed as being very important parts of the Lutheran worship service.

Luther emphasized good order and that which would edify the people. For Luther, the liturgy must focus people's attention not on themselves, but on Christ, His death and resurrection for us, and the life to which Christians are called in Baptism. The Word was the important thing for Luther. It was the Word which made the Lord's Day truly a holy day. Faith in the forgiveness of sins through our Lord Jesus Christ is the highest worship of God. This is a repeated theme in both the theology of Luther and the Lutheran Confessions. Thus, the preaching of the Word was of extreme importance in Luther's liturgical reforms.<sup>5</sup> For Luther, preaching was the way in which God, through the called and ordained servant of the Word, the pastor, spoke the word of Law and Gospel, the word of judgment against sin and forgiveness in Christ. Good, solid, Biblically based preaching was a key emphasis which Luther reintroduced to the church's liturgy.

And finally, as we have mentioned, Luther reintroduced the Western church to a truly evangelical celebration of the Lord's Supper which emphasized what Christ does for us in His supper, and the tremendous blessing of the Lord's Supper. Luther made it clear that the Words of In-

---

5. Here we recall the words of Luther in the Large Catechism, "The Word of God is the true holy thing above all holy things. Indeed, it is the only one we Christians acknowledge and have. Though we had the bones of all the saints or all the holy and consecrated vestments gathered together in one heap, they could not help us in the slightest degree, for they are all dead things that can sanctify no one. But God's Word is the treasure that sanctifies all things. By it all the saints themselves have been sanctified. At whatever time God's Word is taught, preached, heard, read, or pondered, there the person, the day and the work are sanctified by it, not on account of the external work but on account of the Word which makes us all saints. Accordingly, I constantly repeat that all our life and work must be illuminated by God's Word if they are to be God-pleasing or holy. Where that happens the commandment is in force and is fulfilled" (LC Ten Commandments 91-92). We recall the comments in the Lutheran Confessions which teach clearly that it is faith which is the highest worship of God. For example, in the Apology we read: "God wants us to believe Him and to accept blessings from Him; this He declares to be true worship" (AC Ap IV.228).

stitution were to be loudly and publicly proclaimed by the pastor and heard clearly by the people, not simply mumbled in Latin like a magic formula. The result of Luther's reform of the Roman Mass was a renaissance in genuine, Evangelical Sacramental piety, which reached its high point during the age of Orthodoxy.<sup>6</sup>

### **Worship in the Lutheran Confessions and the Age of Orthodoxy**

Our Lutheran fathers in the faith incorporated Luther's thoughts on worship and liturgy into the official confessions of our church when the confessional writings contained in the *Book of Concord* were developed. Permit me at this point to read a few quotations from the *Book of Concord*. You will notice that the fathers of our church were concerned to identify with the ancient, historic orders of liturgical worship, as a sign of the orthodox confession of the Christian faith.

---

6. "These uncommonly high numbers of Communion guests, which over the decades remained quite constant, infallibly prove that the liturgical life even in late orthodoxy was still full of lively strength. To preclude misapprehensions, we must emphasize that this intensely active participation in Holy Communion was on a voluntary basis...This needs to be emphasized because the service of Orthodoxy has again and again been criticized as an undertaking based on government and police procedures...This active participation in Holy Communion was in the final analysis a palpable fruit of that genuine Lutheran realization still alive and effective in late orthodoxy that knows that the sacraments in a peculiar way transmit the presence of Christ. We may even say that this vigorous use of Holy Communion is a clear indication that there was still a close connection between theological reflection and practical application, for the Lutheran dogmaticians were in the habit of treating especially the theology of Holy Communion very thoroughly in their dogmatical systems, and this was completely in accord with their high regard for the sacraments...The prattle about dead orthodoxy that is constantly being revived...Must also be shattered by the warm Communion piety of these orthodox theologians that blazes up in the so-called *usus*, that is, the practical applications of dogmatics, especially in the doctrine of the Lord's Supper...as in the primeval church, Holy Communion is again thought of as the anticipation of eternal salvation, for only then will what is here begun be completed." Günther Stiller, translated by Herbert Bouman, Daniel Poellot and Hilton C. Oswald, ed. by Robin A. Leaver, *Johann Sebastian Bach and Liturgical Life in Leipzig* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1984), p. 134-137.

## THE UNCHANGING FEAST

---

Those usages are to be observed which may be observed without sin and which contribute to peace and good order in the church, among them being certain holy days, festivals and the like (AC VII.1).

The Mass is observed among us with greater devotion and more earnestness than among our opponents...no conspicuous changes have been made in the public ceremonies of the Mass (AC XXIV.8).

No novelty has been introduced which did not exist in the church from the ancient times (AC XXIV.40).

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 that they justify...We can truthfully claim that in our churches the public liturgy is more decent than in theirs (AC Ap XV.38–39).

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. (AC Ap XXIV.1).

Martin Chemnitz, the leading architect of the Formula of Concord, felt strongly about the need for uniformity in worship practices. Chemnitz was deeply involved in the so-called “adiaphoristic” controversies in the 1550s. We recall that during this period the Lutheran church was struggling with imposition of Roman Catholic ceremonies during the Augsburg and Leipzig interims. In 1561 Chemnitz wrote a defense of the Augsburg Confession and a treatise on the various controversies which had arisen in the Lutheran church since the time of Martin Luther. His work, called the *Judicium*. In many respects the *Judicium* is a preview of Article X of the Formula of Concord. In discussing ceremonies to be used in the Lutheran church Chemnitz wrote:

...the point in this locus is not whether all churchly ceremonies, which by nature are not matters of adiaphora and preserve order, should be despised as barbaric or should be universally abolished. Nor is the issue in this matter that, when pious consensus in the purity of doctrine is retained, when faith is kept inviolate, and when Christian truth is kept in those rites which by nature are matters of adiaphora there can be diversity without the occasion for scandal for the sake of the edification of each church.<sup>7</sup>

Given this very worthy principle, reflected in Article X of the Formula, it is particularly helpful for us to note here Chemnitz's work in regard to the "Church Orders." These were collections of church ceremonies and liturgical structures. He stated a principle for the clergy of the territory of Braunschweig which we today would also do well to heed:

We must all stick together, as we have in the past, and retain the practice that each does not build up himself or act as lord in his congregation and do what he pleases in preaching, administration of the sacraments, liturgical practices, discipline and other aspects of his office, acting only according to his own ideas, but rather all these things shall be and remain the business of the entire ministerium. And because the conference meets regularly every two weeks, matters of this kind should be brought there and discussed, matters which are problems of the whole church which require our mutual concern or consolation.<sup>8</sup>

After being installed as the superintendent in 1567, Chemnitz carried out a thorough visitation of the territory of Braunschweig. He wanted to establish uniform church practices and ensure the purity of doctrine and life among the pastors. In all, a total of 278 pastors were

---

7. Quoted by Matthew Harrison, "Martin Chemnitz and the Origin, Content and Meaning of the Tenth Article of the Formula of Concord" (Paper for Th.D. course, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, 1994), p. 17.

8. J.A.O. Preus, *The Second Martin* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1994), p. 133.

examined. In the Braunschweig Church Order Chemnitz makes it very clear that even while the Lutheran church has attacked and rightly rejected the wrong use of ceremonies in the Roman Catholic church it has not abolished the liturgical practices of the church. Thus we read in Chemnitz's Church Order:

The people should be instructed as Paul teaches in 1 Cor. 14, that it is God's will that when the congregation comes together to deal with God's Word, the Sacrament and prayer, that all things should occur very honorably, orderly and for the betterment of all. And for this reason the churches of the reformation have and maintain certain free ceremonies which are indifferent, not with the opinion by which the pope has forced his regulation upon the church...rather, only to this end, that in such assemblies everything may occur honorably, orderly and for the betterment of all; namely that there be a certain order regarding which place, which time, which persons, and what sort of form and manner shall be maintained, when dealing with the Word, the Sacrament and prayer; what shall precede, what shall follow, and that there be such ceremonies which give the external indication that in the congregation great, high, serious dealings are present, that thus the ceremonies lead, stimulate, admonish and move the people to join together their thoughts, lift up their hearts in all humility, that there be in the congregation heartfelt devotion to the Word, the Sacrament and prayer; for this is what Paul means when he says: "Let all things be done in such assemblies completely honorably and orderly and for the betterment of all."<sup>9</sup>

Thus, it was Chemnitz's position that for the good of the church it was best if the congregations of a church use the same liturgical orders. Without the external authority of papal authority, the Lutheran Church needed to determine if it would be best for every pastor to structure the liturgy in his church as he felt was most appropriate or if there should be uniformity in worship practices. Here is Chemnitz's explanation and finally, his directive to his pastors:

---

9. *ibid.*, p. 20.

While indeed the Christian is not bound everywhere to one certain form of ceremony, rather Christian freedom has its place in this matter, as the ancients said: Disagreements in rites does not take away agreement in faith; but because it still brings all sorts of benefits that in ceremonies, so much as it is possible, a uniformity be maintained, and that such ceremonies serve to maintain unity in doctrine, and that common, simple, weak consciences be all the less troubled, rather strengthened, it is therefore viewed as good, that as much as possible a uniformity in ceremonies with neighboring reformation churches be effected and maintained.<sup>10</sup>

Based on this desire for uniformity, Chemnitz then issues this instruction to his pastors:

For this reason, henceforth all pastors in the churches of our realm, shall emphatically follow this written church order, and not depart from the same without specific grave cause...and the common people may be instructed in such ceremonies; how they are matters of Christian freedom, for what purpose they are maintained and used, and this so that they are not again caught up in the old papistic delusion regarding ceremonies.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, then, it is interesting to note the statement signed by every pastor in Chemnitz's territory. They promised to abide by the following statement: "Let him retain the rites in use and received ceremonies of this church, and not presume to change anything by private decision without a common decree."<sup>12</sup>

Werner Elert notes that a desire for liturgical uniformity was a concern shared by both theologian and ruler during the formative years of Lutheranism. Elert write:

---

10. *ibid.*, 21–22.

11. *idem.*

12. *idem.*

In the foreword to the Hamburg church ritual of the preceding year Bugenhagen declared that if a way of ‘commemoration’—that is, the aforementioned representation of Christ in the divine service—can come about throughout the ‘whole German land,’ ‘This we will gladly and heartily accept.’ And even the church ritual of Duke August of Saxony of 1580 would ‘have liked to see nothing more’ than a completely uniform order maintained in ‘all churches of the Augsburg Confession.’ These wishes stem from the very same desire for form that demands order in an individual congregation.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, during the age of Lutheran Orthodoxy a unique liturgical heritage was developed which combined the Scriptural theology of the Reformation with the very best liturgical traditions which had been used throughout church history. This was worship as it was known during the Age of Lutheran Orthodoxy, a time in our church’s history which some mistakenly label as a time of “dead orthodoxy.” Here is what one scholar in the field has to say about the claim that Lutheran orthodoxy was “dead”:

“Whoever...looks on orthodoxy as an epoch that in its zeal for Lutheran orthodoxy finally shows an interest only in dogmatic formulas and in controversies but has almost entirely lost contact with practical life, simply ignores reality. We cannot repeat too often what Simon Schöffel in his studies of Lutheran Orthodoxy in Hamburg has stated with great emphasis, ‘Nothing is more foolish and more ridiculous than to speak of “dead” orthodoxy, which has only brought forth letters but has not promoted life. Only monumental ignorance gives a person the right to reject it as “dead.”’<sup>14</sup>

---

13. Werner Elert, Translated by Walter A. Hansen, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, Volume I, *The Theology and Philosophy of the Life of Lutheranism Especially in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), p. 334.

14. Günther Stiller, translated by Herbert Bouman, Daniel Poellot and Hilton C. Oswald, ed. by Robin A. Leaver, *Johann Sebastian Bach and Liturgical Life in Leipzig* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1984), p. 142.

In Lutheran towns and communities the worship service looked in many ways as it always had, but it was reinvigorated and reformed to emphasize God's grace in Jesus Christ. Singing was heard throughout the lands of Lutheranism. Frequent Communion (in most areas every Sunday) was the norm, not the exception.

Thus, in the Age of Orthodoxy, Lutheran worship developed along the lines set for it by Luther. Emphasizing the beauty, dignity and helpfulness of the ancient liturgy, the Lutheran church used it effectively as a marvelous tool for the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments.

### **Worship in the Time of Pietism and Rationalism**

Gradually in the lands of Lutheranism there developed two movements which impacted Evangelical-Lutheran worship practices: Pietism and Rationalism. Pietism was a movement which developed in Lutheran Orthodoxy and wished to move away from the centrality of the means of grace in the life of the church.<sup>15</sup> Instead of the Christian worship service, orthodox sermons and weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper as a high point in people's spiritual lives, Pietism emphasized small-group gatherings. These small groups considered themselves to be "true Christians" as opposed to the larger groups of people who only attended church. These small groups became viewed as the most important aspect of Christian life. Pietism put too much emphasis on emotion and feelings. Pietism overemphasized the individual at

---

15. "We can hardly overestimate the Communion piety of Lutheran orthodoxy, and that is even more true because Pietism contributed practically nothing to enliven sacramental piety. Preuß makes the point that 'in looking for samples of pietistic Communion piety he was impressed' to learn 'how relatively unimportant a role this sacrament actually plays in Pietism.'...Gottfried Arnold went so far as to say that the more perfect a Christian is, the less he is in need of Holy Communion, and that it is only an aid to the weak....In Leipzig immediately after the inroads of Pietism on the people, the Leipzig clergy complained that attendance at worship and participation in the sacred acts was no longer as regular as before among the adherents to Pietism." *ibid.*, p. 141.

the expense of the biblical concept of the church as the Body of Christ. When faith was reduced like this to a purely subjective “encounter” with God, the means of grace became less and less important. Church became less and less important. Here is how one Lutheran described Pietism:

They scorned pure doctrine, orthodoxy, and the means used to preserve pure doctrine. They scoffed at church ordinances and usages, and slandered and nullified sermons, baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and the preaching ministry. They dared to abstain from the public worship, as well as from the use of the Lord’s Supper along with fellow Christians...They have the audacity to maintain that they alone, as true disciples and followers of Christ, are holy and pious, and hence they despise all others. Since they insolently judge the Lutheran church ceremonies and assemblies to be an accursed Babel, they are not ashamed to instigate private worship and special secret conventicles...Without the necessary distinctions, they confuse the spiritual priesthood with the public ministry, the use with the abuse of adiphora, the ministry with the person, and God’s order with man’s disorder; they reject the one with the other, the gold with the dross...They despised and slandered the public worship services, the assemblies in the churches and the regular preachers. Instead, they endeavored to include everything in their private assemblies....<sup>16</sup>

The Pietists viewed the Lutheran liturgy as cold and lifeless and too formal for genuine faith. Consequently, people escaped into a world of private religion. From this “privatization” of the faith there followed full-scale Rationalism.

The generation following Pietism not only questioned what they perceived to be the cold, unfeeling orthodoxy of historic Lutheranism, but began simply to question Christian truth itself, calling into ques-

---

16. Ernst Valentin Loescher, Translated by James Langebartels, *Complete Timotheus Verinus Or A Presentation of Truth and Peace in the Present Pietistic Controversies Also A Christian and Forced Defense of His Doctrine, Ministry and Person Especially Against a Writing of Joachim Lange*, Part One, Printed at Wittenberg by Samuel Hahnauer in 1726 (Unpublished translation, 1992), p. 55–56.

tion the teachings of the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions. This movement was known as Rationalism. Rationalism came about as a result of the movement known as the Enlightenment. At this point in time, scholars emphasized man's autonomy, freedom and self-sufficiency. Doubts were raised concerning the truthfulness of God's Word and the correctness of historic doctrines of the faith. In many respects Rationalism was helped along by Pietism. Along with both Pietism and Rationalism there came indifference toward doctrine; thus the differences between the Reformed and Lutheran churches were no longer perceived to be of all that much significance and were minimized. Werner Elert summarizes the impact of Pietism and Rationalism on the church:

There arose a disruption and an impoverishment which kept increasing until well into the eighteenth century....The number of services decreased steadily. For the most part independent liturgical celebrations, matins, and vespers disappeared. There is a belief that within the services the church is obligated to increase the "Protestantizing" of the liturgy. The alb, which is certainly not many colored, must yield sole dominion to the puritanical darkness of the everlasting black clerical robe. Even the beauty of the green branches at the festival of Pentecost is forbidden...The time came when the nobility no longer wanted to partake of the Lord's Supper together with the commoners; when, like the rulers of the land, it withdrew to the "authentically Protestant" boxes in the church...Pietism demands that in this way religious life be made private for the "believers." But assaults were made on the only institution for which the church had created the form in which the individual could find expression—on private confession. To take the place of this, Zinzendorf then created his own style for worship, his pretty things (*Niedlichkeiten*) and his societies for the promotion of Christian intimacy (*Schätzelgesellschaften*). That was the end in this field. Not until the nineteenth century was there a reawakening of early Lutheranism's sense of the forms appropriate to the church....Lutheranism's contact with the Reformed Church hastened the dissolution of the liturgical sense and its impregnation with motifs characteristic of the Enlightenment... Frederick William

I, the Reformed “chief bishop,” compelled the Lutheran Church of his land to do away with all the church vestments, altar decorations, and liturgical singing that remained...The Reformed Church enriched divine service only to the extent of providing hymn boards.<sup>17</sup>

### **Confessional Revival and the Beginning of the Missouri Synod**

Needless to say, during the era of Pietism and Rationalism the church’s worship suffered. In some congregations and churches, pastors preached sermons on how best to feed cattle or grow crops and other such non-Biblical material. Doctrine was no longer as important for the church. In reaction to both Pietism and Rationalism, there arose a movement in the 19th century known as Confessionalism. People began to wonder if there was more to Lutheranism than the hopelessly subjective Pietism which led ultimately to a disregard for the church and resulted in unionistic Rationalism. Because of the influence of Pietism and Rationalism, differences between Reformed and Lutheran theology were minimized, ignored or overlooked for the sake of “union.”

Those searching for genuine Lutheranism found their answers when they returned to the writings of Luther and the Lutheran Confessions and the orthodox fathers of Lutheranism. They rediscovered the power of the Holy Scriptures and therefore rediscovered once again the Gospel itself and then, to their absolute delight, found in the Lutheran Confessions the same teachings and the same regard for the Gospel. One of the men who had come under the sway of Pietism only to be convinced that it was in deep error was Dr. C.F.W. Walther, responsible in large part for the formation of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

One consequence of Walther’s intense interest in Luther and the Lutheran Confessions was a growing appreciation for the older orthodox Lutheran orders of worship. In Germany, from where they had come, the political and church leaders had imposed on the Lutheran

---

17. Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, pp. 335–336.

church a union of Reformed and Lutheran worship practices. The confessional Lutherans considered this imposition of Reformed customs and practices on the church a great offense to the Gospel. The Lutherans who migrated to America wanted to reintroduce and re-establish the solid worship principles of Luther and orthodox Lutheranism.<sup>18</sup> Walther worked carefully with his fellow Missouri Synod pastors to prepare an order of worship which would reflect true Scriptural and Confessional Lutheranism here in America.<sup>19</sup> This collaboration produced the Missouri Synod agenda of 1856. The situation for Walther and company was what is described by Bo Giertz when he wrote:

Awakening needs liturgy. An awakening that shall have lasting value must nurture a devotional life that will live on through many a long year and that will become a heritage to be passed on from generation to generation. A sound awakening should therefore move in the direction of leading people into regular worship life and a faithful use of the sacrament of Communion, showing them how to celebrate the common worship in a proper way and to use aright the churchly books of devotion.<sup>20</sup>

---

18. In what may be his most significant work of theology, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, Walther speaks of his own personal experience with Pietism: "I know the awful effect of this teaching from experience. A Pietistic candidate of theology had instructed me in the manner which I have described. I did everything to become truly penitent and finally fell into despair. When I came to him to tell him my condition, he said, 'Now it is time for you to believe.' But I did not credit his advice; I thought that he was deceiving me because his last direction was out of keeping with the marks of penitence which he had described to me previously. Accordingly, I said to him: 'If you knew my condition, you would not comfort me. What I want is rules for my further conduct.' He gave me them too; but it was useless." C.F.W. Walther, Translated by W.H.T. Dau, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel: Thirty Nine Evening Lectures* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1928, Reprinted 1980), p. 253.

19. C.F.W. Walther's brother-in-law, Pastor Friedrich Lochner, was the leading liturgical scholar among the Missouri synod Lutherans. His classic work on the liturgy was *Der Hauptgottesdienst der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche*.

20. Bo Giertz, Translated by Clifford Nelson, *Liturgy and Spiritual Awakening in Real Life Worship Reader* (St. Louis: The Commission on Worship, The Lutheran Church—Missouri synod, 1994), p. 3.

Walther had to struggle with how to maintain a distinct Lutheran identity in America where the Lutheran church was surrounded by various denominations, mainly Reformed denominations. How best to cope with this situation? That was the question which Walther had to consider as he prepared Lutheran orders of worship for the young Missouri Synod. Walther was concerned that as a confessional Lutheran Synod in the United States, the Missouri Synod needed to preserve a distinct Lutheran identity in the midst of the various Protestant denominations in this country. In Walther's day, and in our time as well, many Reformed denominations were able to trace their roots back to Arminianism and other variations on Calvinistic theology. Arminianism emphasizes personal choice in matters of salvation and, as a result, plays down God's appointed means of giving us His grace, the Word and Sacrament. Arminianism became very popular in America which was swept by so-called "revivals" using coercive techniques to "convert" people to Christianity. Charles Finney and others like him were very influential in what eventually became known as "Evangelicalism." It was against the background of the various sects in America that the young Missouri Synod had to decide how it would best retain and preserve a distinct, confessionally orthodox Lutheran identity. The solution was not found in compromise, as other Lutherans chose to do, going even so far as in the case of Samuel Simon Schmucker of rewriting the Augsburg Confession! Rather, Missouri Synod Lutherans chose to retain their strong commitment to the doctrines and practices of historic, orthodox Lutheranism and to do so without apology. But how did this commitment work itself out in Walther's view of worship and liturgy?

As you look through Walther's writings to find references to worship and liturgy, you will often encounter a quotation from the Formula of Concord, Article X. Article X of the Formula of Concord is concerned with what is called *adiaphora* or "indifferent things," that is, those things which the Bible does not command or forbid. Christians are free to use or not use various forms, customs and traditions in the church. It is a crucial principle of Christian liberty. It is interesting to

me to note that Walther used the following quotation often, not to argue that we should move *away* from the historic liturgy of the Lutheran church, but that we are free to use the historic worship practices of our church in this country.

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 holy 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 that 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 (FC SD X.10).

You may be wondering how Walther used this quotation to defend the historic worship practices of the Lutheran church. At this point, I would like to share with you a quotation from an essay Walther delivered to a district convention. It is a very significant and meaningful insight into the issues involved in how we as Lutherans conduct our worship services. Walther said:

We refuse to be guided by those who are offended by our church customs. We adhere to them all the more firmly when someone wants to cause us to have a guilty conscience on account of them....It is truly distressing that many of our fellow Christians find the difference between Lutheranism and Papism in outward things. It is a pity and dreadful cowardice when one sacrifices the good ancient church customs to please the deluded American sects, lest they accuse us of being papistic! Indeed! Am I to be afraid of a Methodist, who perverts the saving Word, or be ashamed in the matter of my good cause, and not rather rejoice that the sects can tell by our ceremonies that I do not belong to them?...We are not insisting that there be uniformity of perception or feeling or of taste among all believing Chris-

tians—neither dare anyone demand that all be minded as he. Nevertheless it remains true that the Lutheran liturgy distinguishes Lutheran worship from the worship of other churches to such an extent that the houses of worship of the latter look like lecture halls in which the hearers are merely addressed or instructed, while our churches are in truth houses of prayer in which the Christians serve the great God publicly before the world.... The objection: What would be the use of uniformity of ceremonies? was answered with the counter: What is the use of a flag on the battlefield? Even though a soldier cannot defeat the enemy with it, he nevertheless sees by the flag where he belongs. We ought not to refuse to walk in the footsteps of our fathers. They were so far removed from being ashamed of the good ceremonies that they publicly confess in the passage quoted “It is not true that we do away with all such external ornaments.”<sup>21</sup>

Do you notice how Walther makes his point in this quotation? Walther is concerned that the Lutheran church be very sensitive *to what it confesses* in its worship practices. He was keenly aware of the fact that all around us are other church bodies with differing confessions, confessions which do not accurately reflect the teachings of the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. Further on in this same essay Walther makes this point very clear when he says:

For “at a time of confession” the Formula of Concord says quite correctly, “one dare not yield.” Now, however, that “time” is for us “always,” because we are everywhere surrounded by Reformed and other sects.<sup>22</sup>

I would like to encourage our synod to consider seriously the important theological point Walther is making. I feel that Walther is really on to something which we perhaps have not thought enough about. The question really is, “What are we confessing before the world by how we

---

21. C.F.W. Walther, *Essays for the Church*, Volume I (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), p. 194.

22. *ibid.*, p. 197.

worship and through the liturgy we use, the songs we sing, the way we conduct our worship services and so forth?”<sup>23</sup> The confessional nature of Lutheran worship is why in his book, *The Form of a Christian Congregation*, Walther could write: “The congregation shall see to it that only doctrinally pure books, approved by the orthodox church, are introduced and tolerated in church and school and that confessional ceremonies are not discontinued.”<sup>24</sup> Further on, Walther quotes Balthasar Meisner approvingly:

Although a church which is not exposed to the plots of heretics and tyrants may use true adiaphora freely and according to its convenience and profit, or may refrain from using them and change them for the edification of the weak, as it sees fit, nevertheless, when the enemies of the truth in their fight against ceremonies aim at the heart and life of the heavenly doctrine and evangelical truth and so against Christian liberty, it dare not institute or abolish anything in their favor, but it must fight for all traditional ceremonies that are God-pleasing and useful as for house and home.<sup>25</sup>

It would be good for our synod to consider very seriously these comments from our first president. We now turn in our paper to a consideration of the Lutheran worship in our present day.

---

23. To this point, commenting on the principle of adiaphora, Brunner notes: “If someone presumes to invest with the cloak of compulsion and constraint any act of worship, outside the elements of form instituted by Christ, and accordingly makes legal demands in its behalf, the church is duty-bound to reject this demand, demonstrating its freedom in this matter, even though it were otherwise at liberty to adopt the act in question. But also the reverse is here true! If a ceremony which does not offend against the Gospel and is a matter of Christian liberty is interdicted with the same coercion and constraint, the congregation may feel called upon to give proof of its liberty and, in a given case, retain and practice this ceremony, which it might otherwise omit.” Brunner, p. 221.

24. C.F.W. Walther, Translated by J. T. Mueller, *The Form of a Christian Congregation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), p. 105.

25. *ibid.*, p. 109.

THE UNCHANGING FEAST

---

---

## The Unchanging Feast in Our Times

---

**T**HE WHOLE AREA OF WORSHIP AND LITURGY IS VERY CONTROVERSIAL AT this point in our synod's history. To raise the issue is to risk incurring the irritation of a whole host of people. I certainly do not want to be part of simply increasing the level of tension on this point. As I travel throughout the synod, time and again people tell me that they sense that I am communicating to them in a pastoral way, as a pastor would speak to his beloved congregation. I do hope and pray this is so, for I have a deep love for our Missouri Synod—a very genuine pastoral love for her and for her people.

I have lost count of the numbers of church workers and lay people who have expressed concerns to me about this issue. Lay people are troubled when their pastors lead them down paths away from their traditional worship practices. They are also sometimes troubled by a pastor who imposes on them customs and ceremonies they have never been exposed to before. Pastors are concerned by erosions in our strong, confessional principles of Christian worship and are troubled by various aspects of these issues. My concern for our synod is what prompts me to offer a very genuine word of concern on this matter of worship and liturgy. I have concerns about using worship forms and styles which are not in line with the historic worship practices of our church. I also have pastoral concerns about how we use our historic, Lutheran worship practices.

### **Concerns in Regard to Moving Away From Historic Lutheran Worship Practices**

I am concerned by what I notice happening in various parts of our synod when it comes to our worship and liturgy. There are those who want to move away from our historic worship practices. They wish to use worship styles which they feel are more “informal” or “contempo-

rary” or “user-friendly.” I notice that there are those who are not saying that they want to modify the hymnal, but are advocating simply not using a hymnal at all. As I express concerns about various trends along these lines, I need to make it clear, very clear, that in many ways I respect the motivations of those who are calling on our synod to adopt worship styles along these lines. They are concerned about reaching the lost with the precious message of the Gospel. They are concerned that the church needs to communicate in a way which reaches unchurched people effectively. We certainly agree with these feelings. These concerns are very, very understandable. However, embracing worship forms alien to our Lutheran confession is unwise, to say the least.

There are some strong words of warning being sounded even from non-Lutheran Christians as they notice worship tendencies within their own denominations. I was given an article which appeared in the publication *The American Organist* which sounds a firm, yet important, warning to us as we evaluate various trends in Christendom, and trends we find within our own church body as well. Let me share a portion of this article with you:

Today’s culture tells us that we deserve whatever we want whenever we want it, and that mentality is rapidly invading the church. The ultimate blasphemy of a consumerist culture is its desire to consume God. Though not church-growth advocated, televangelism has turned religion into magic instead of the mystery we may all need. If the church roots itself in marketing and consumerism, it will always seek to please the customer. Worship planners will seek to use the “immediately familiar.” The result will be the “tyranny of the familiar” that changes every few years even while we ignore our own traditions. The long-term implication will be that we can cut ourselves off from deeper and longer lasting Christian roots and even our own unique denominational roots....In a “Get and Go” culture, and in one which says, “Don’t worry, be happy,” how are we to proclaim that we depend upon God rather than having God depend upon our ceaseless activities that may masquerade as gospel? The focus of worship has moved from God almost exclusively to the people, and the product has shifted from God to the activity of the institutional

church...if church growth pushes the idea that the church can make you feel better than anyone or anyplace else, then we may do all in our power to make it so. Are we finding ourselves in the middle of a gospel of success, a lopsided gospel, to say the least, that seeks to avoid the cross or any cost of discipleship? Where is the prophetic edge? Where is our willingness to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable? Bonhoeffer's "cheap grace," is forever with us, but some eras reveal larger doses of it than others. The gospel of "feeling good" doesn't have much to do with what Jesus said early in his ministry. Jesus did not say, "Repent and feel good," but he did say, "Repent and believe in the gospel."<sup>1</sup>

These are strong words, but they are words which we as a synod need to take to heart. We have much to be thankful for when it comes to worship practices among us, but we must be on our guard lest we too fall prey to false and misleading trends. When I notice the sorts of practices being adopted in some congregations when it comes to the liturgy and worship practices, I find myself asking a whole host of questions. I will share some of these questions with you. For instance, what are we confessing when we do not have a confession and absolution at the beginning of our services? What signal are we sending when our confessions of sin are not genuine confessions of sin or when our absolutions are not really absolutions? What are we confessing when we do not use the historic creeds in our worship service, or the Lord's Prayer? What signal are we sending when we use hymns which come clearly from a Reformed or Pentecostal type of worship context? What are we confessing when we adopt styles of prayer which are more common among, for example, Pentecostal types of church bodies? What are we confessing when our pastors do not wear the historic vestments during a worship service? What are we confessing when mission congregations do not use the name Lutheran? What are we confessing when we no longer follow the church year and use the appointed read-

---

1. Richard F. Collman, "The Tyranny of the Familiar: Critical Reflections on the Church Growth Movement," *The American Organist* 29:3 (March 1995), p. 39.

ings, prayers and other historic forms of worship? What are we confessing when we move away from historic liturgical forms of worship?

These are some of the genuine pastoral concerns I continue to have when I notice what is happening in our church body in regard to worship practices. I believe Walther was correct in his opinion that in this country it is especially important that the Lutheran church be clearly distinguished from the whole variety of Reformed denominations which surround us. We recall that our Lutheran church did not throw the baby out with the bath water when the liturgy was reformed at the time of the Reformation. We use the best of the liturgical traditions of the Western church, because we recognize that we are part of that living history of God's activity through Word and Sacrament among His people.

I notice that when we begin to make the sorts of changes which move us quite far away from our historic worship practices, we risk embracing man-centered (anthropocentric) styles of worship rather than the Christ-centered (Christocentric) worship forms and styles which have marked the Lutheran church down through the years. And when we say "Christ-centered worship," we do not mean merely worship which refers to Jesus, but worship which is shaped by the actual, specific proclamation and application of the Gospel and the Gospel's sacraments, keeping the focus on the specific teaching of the Gospel and with its emphasis on the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. While I suppose that there may be nothing wrong with clapping hands and waving arms during a worship service, when we import this style of worship into our congregations where this has not been the practice, again, I wonder, "What are we confessing?" In many Pentecostal churches, a highly emotional, highly subjective style of worship flows from their theology that God works through such emotional experiences and not through His appointed means of grace, the Word and Sacraments. I guess another way of looking at it is to put the matter this way: Given our theology of God's work through Word and Sacrament, and given the fact that we believe, teach and confess that God wants to be among us in the Lord's Supper, and given the fact that we believe

that God wishes to serve us in the worship service, and given the whole history of Biblical worship practices, which we have traced earlier in this presentation, given all of this: What will our Lutheran worship service “look like”? What will we do, what will we say, what will we sing? I think these are the sorts of questions we need to ask as we evaluate some of the changes which are being considered and actually used in various congregations of our synod.<sup>2</sup>

One comment we hear from time to time is that the historic worship practices of our church are German and that we can not expect non-Germans to use the liturgy of our hymnals. That statement is troubling for a number of reasons. Frankly, to me it is very inappropriate to suggest that African-Americans or Asian-Americans or other ethnic minorities are not able to use the historic liturgy. It is also more than a little condescending to suggest that new members of a congregation cannot be expected to learn the liturgy, so we have to use something else for them. I think we need to take a second look at some of

---

2. Robin Leaver, an Anglican scholar, has this to say about the emergence of a new sort of Pietism in the Lutheran church: “We do not have to look very far to see that today there is a new spirit of pietism abroad, a pietism that sees the essence of Christianity in the small, informal group, rather than in the total community of faith at worship within a recognized and formal liturgical order. It is a pietism that measures its success by the number of people it touches, rather than by the truth of the message it proclaims. It is a pietism that is preoccupied with ‘simple hymns’ and informal structures of worship. It is a pietism that is impatient with the German Reformation of the sixteenth century, a pietism that asserts that we need new forms and less of the old. It is a new spirit of pietism that looks in many respects like the old pietism.... The leading question, of course, is this: Where did the old pietism lead? By the end of the eighteenth century German Lutheranism had almost disappeared. Liturgical forms had been eliminated, the highly developed church music of Bach and his contemporaries was no longer heard in the churches, and the content of the Christian faith had been watered down to little more than Unitarianism, with an invertebrate spirituality, lacking the backbone of a confessional theology. Instead of leading to a period of growth in the church, Pietism precipitated an era of decline of the church, a situation which was not reversed until, around the middle of the nineteenth century, there was a recovery of Lutheran confessional theology, Lutheran liturgical practice, and Lutheran church music....” Robin Leaver, “Bach and Pietism: Similarities Today,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 55:1 (January 1991), p. 18.

these statements which would suggest that we need to move away from our historic worship practices in order to accommodate unbelievers or non-Lutherans.<sup>3</sup> It seems just a tad inappropriate to permit those who know the very least about the Christian faith and about our Lutheran confession to determine the forms by which this faith and this confession is expressed in public worship. Minimal knowledge of the truths of Scripture and the Confessions is not a good basis upon which to study worship forms.

I am troubled by the sorts of hymns and songs being used in some of our parishes which are not much more than repetitious phrases like “Give God the glory” or “Praise Him.” These sorts of hymns or chant-like songs may have their place, but I seriously question if these are the sorts of hymns we need in our worship services. Lutheran hymns historically have emphasized the fact that hymns are sung confessions of the faith. No, not every hymn will include every doctrine of the Christian faith, but a good hymn will reflect the principles of good, solid Lutheran hymns; namely, it will put the emphasis on Christ and His work for us, on God’s mercy and grace, and on the means of grace, on doctrine and Scriptural themes and motifs. Hymns for our church should put the emphasis on man’s receiving God’s grace, not only on man’s emotional response to God’s grace. The sort of subjective and “I”-centered hymn we are encountering more and more in our congre-

---

3. In a publication of the English District of our synod, Pastor Charles Evanson offers this observation on the charge that the liturgy is “German.” “In one way, such attitudes are quite chauvinistic. Does anyone really think that the Lutheran liturgical tradition represents a unique Lutheran way of conducting public worship? The same basic tradition is shared by three quarters of a billion Roman Catholics, the many Eastern Orthodox Churches, the pre-Chalcedonian Churches, the Anglican Communion, and over 70 million Lutherans, not even the majority of whom are German. The basic pattern of liturgical worship is very ancient and most probably originated in the unique fusion of synagogue and Church usages in Jerusalem and Palestine which early found expression in the Jerusalem, Syrian, and North African Churches. Far from being ‘Germanic,’ our forefathers in Germany, Norway, Sweden, Africa, and elsewhere learned it from those who first brought them the Gospel and the Gospel sacraments in response to the Apostolic Mandate.” Charles Evanson, “Evangelical Lutheran Worship,” *Journal of English District Pastors* 4:1 (November 1991), p. 11.

gations is not a good thing. I want to strongly encourage our congregations to use the approved hymns in our hymnbooks. The whole subject of appropriate music for our church services is very important. Music is not as “value neutral” as some might wish to argue.<sup>4</sup>

Let me cite a very concrete example of the problem as I see it. There are some in our synod who have recently suggested that our church would be advised to take a look at the movie *Sister Act* to see how a congregation was livened up by introducing very secular sorts of musical styles in the worship service. In the movie a group of nuns begins to sing pop songs and suddenly the church is filled. I wonder, again, what we would be confessing before the world if we were to go this route. I find these suggestions troubling, very troubling, and I need to share this with the synod. I know many, many others have found such remarks to be very troubling as well. It would be my feeling that we need to be much more careful and thoughtful as we move into consideration of changes in our worship practices and traditions. The main point here is that there are extremely serious theological issues at stake. I do not think we have given them enough thought. That is why I am glad that conferences like this one have been called. This is why I am also pleased that the new book *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice* has been made available to our synod. I urge the members of our Synod to study this volume very carefully. It supplies much needed information on these crucial issues concerning our worship practices.

---

4. Kantor Richard Resch writes on music’s role as teacher in our churches. “As a servant of the church, music helps teach the timeless and universal truths of the faith. The problem in the church today is that music is seldom seen as a teacher of anything, good or bad. But whether the teacher is recognized or not, the teaching does go on; *something* is being taught. When church music serves the will of man, emphasis is placed on *how* the music is received instead of *what* is being taught. However, if the music of the church is seen as a divine method of catechizing the faithful, then saving truths are easily given to even the youngest saints. The difference between music as a slave of the flesh and music as a servant of the Spirit becomes evident to young and old by witness of the church’s practice.” Richard Resch, “Music: Gift of God or Tool of the Devil,” *Logia* 3:2 (Eastertide/April 1994), p. 36.

As Walther said, our historic worship practices are certainly not the means by which people come to salvation. This is only through the Word and Sacrament. But it is also true that our historic worship practices are what form and shape our identity as Lutherans in this country. We are confessing Lutherans who are not ashamed of our beliefs. We are convinced that this is what Scripture teaches us and what our Lutheran Confessions articulate as well. We need to say boldly, before the world, and with great joy: “This is what we believe, teach, confess and practice.” We do not want in our church a watered-down Lutheranism or a poor imitation of another denomination’s style of worship. We are committed to walking together as a synod when it comes to these issues. Our synod’s constitution points out that one of the expectations for the members of our synodical family is that they make “exclusive use of doctrinally pure agenda, hymnbooks, and catechisms” (Article VI). Our synod has considered uniformity in our worship practices to be a great strength, not a weakness. I believe we need to seriously reconsider attitudes which would tend to move toward everyone doing “their own thing” when it comes to worship and liturgy. It would be helpful if we could encourage and promote uniformity in ceremonies, not as if this is necessary for salvation or commanded by God, but for the good this would do our common mission work, being able to present a united front across our country and a consistent Lutheran identity from city to city and from state to state.

### **Concerns with the Use of Historic Lutheran Worship**

I do need to express a few concerns toward the other side of the debate. I have genuine pastoral concerns for those who wish to maintain the liturgical traditions of our synod. And I need to be upfront enough to share these concerns as well. First, let me share a concern in regard to attitudes. When criticizing moves away from our historic worship practices, we need to take care that we do not trample underfoot the persons involved. We need gently to encourage the brethren on these issues. We do not need to pull out our guns and start blasting away. So, in terms of attitude I do believe we need to take care that on

either side of these issues we do not simply “write off” the person or persons with whom we disagree. Oftentimes the problem with these issues is simply a lack of knowledge. Those who change the church’s worship practices oftentimes do not have an adequate background in the theology of worship and so do not properly understand the basis and foundation for our Lutheran worship practices.

Secondly, we can have the most correct liturgy, yet do it in a lifeless, meaningless way. Simply “going by the book” without quality presentation makes for a dull, plodding liturgy. Nothing could be worse for the cause of increasing appreciation for historical worship than worship done “by rote” with little feeling or joy. Some liturgies are conducted as if the church were putting on a funeral for a dead horse! The pace of the liturgy has to be active, moving and alive—not dull and slow. The quality of the presentation of the liturgy needs to be first-class. Pastors need to speak or sing their parts well, clearly, loudly and with proper feeling and meaning behind what they are saying. The music for the service needs to be well done. Practice for the worship service is essential. It is no wonder some wish to abandon the liturgy, if the liturgy is done poorly. Again, I wonder what we are confessing when we do the liturgy poorly, lifelessly and without proper meaning and emphasis. In some cases, it is true that our congregations seem only to be “going through the motions” with the hymnal. A well-done liturgical service is a wonderful thing to be a part of! It lifts the spirit and draws one into the very presence of God who wishes to be with us in Word and Sacrament. It draws us away from the mundane, hum-drum hype and hoopla of Madison Avenue and Hollywood Boulevard and into the “Holy of Holies” of the Lord’s presence where we receive His forgiveness through the Word and Sacraments. This is the purpose of a well-done liturgy. A poorly done liturgy, on the other hand, can detract from the very necessary hearing of the Word.

Let me offer a specific word of concern to our pastors. The pastor is the leader. He must take this role seriously. He should be aware of the need to present himself well to the congregation, dressing appropriately and being well-prepared to lead the service. He should not

stumble through the readings of lessons or miss words and phrases as he conducts the liturgy. He must take care that all can hear him and that he speaks slowly and meaningfully, with a sense of joy and wonder at the fact that we are privileged to be worshipping our Lord and God. The pastor's sermon must be textual, relevant, meaningful and clearly presented to the people of God. I am extremely concerned that the quality and content of our pastors' sermons are not just acceptable, not just good, not even very good, but excellent, truly excellent. Our pastors' sermons should reflect the high and holy calling in the Lord that our pastors have to shepherd the flock of God over whom they have been made overseers by the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:28). The people do not attend church to listen to the pastor simply amuse them, or give them a "pep talk," or a psychotherapy session in feeling better about themselves. The people of God come to hear a word from God through the pastor's sermon. What an awesome privilege! What an awesome responsibility our pastors are given by Jesus Christ, through the call of the congregation, to be their spiritual leader in the Lord.

Our pastors must take great care to prepare for their sermon. The people do not want schwafler, they want good, substantial, doctrinal sermons which touch them "where they live." And, brother pastors, the Gospel must predominate in your preaching! A sermon which is nothing more than a moralistic harangue has no place in a Lutheran pulpit. We need, each Sunday, to work to present yet another facet of the beautiful diamond which is the precious Gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the very life and heart of the church. The sermon must be textual! The Word, the Word, the Word—as Luther repeated throughout His life—is the power of God's Spirit. The people want sermons based on the Word of God in all its truth, purity and power. The mighty Spirit-filled Word must fill our sermons and fill the ears of our people.

Church musicians must be sensitive to the needs of the people as they sing hymns, being careful to lead the people in worship with music, not simply to impress them with great musical skill. The pastor and church musician need to function as a team. And what a blessed thing it is to see a team working well! How unfortunate when a team

does not function well. I want to commend our church musicians here today. Truly you are unsung heroes (no pun intended)! Your labor to support the worship of the people is truly a blessing from God to our synod and I want strongly to encourage you to continue your faithful work in this regard. So, here's a special word of thanks to our church musicians.

The next concern I have for our congregations is how well they welcome visitors. Recently I noticed a catalog of materials for Greek Orthodox churches. They have developed a tract to introduce the visitor to the Orthodox liturgy. The tract is very attractive and boldly states, "Welcome." It contains a helpful guide for the visitor. This is the sort of thing our parishes need to do for our visitors. Do not expect a visitor to walk in, sit down and be able to comprehend what is happening in the liturgy. We need to consider printing out the order of liturgy with clear explanations of what we are doing and why we are doing it. A clear, simple explanation for visitors would be very helpful. Perhaps a congregation could train people to be "Guides" for visitors. They could assist them, point out where to go, what to do and make them feel less intimidated by their visit to an unknown congregation and to what perhaps is an unfamiliar style of worship. But it is not only the visitors about whom we should be concerned. Our own members need to be educated on the meaning of our historic worship practices. Our pastors and congregations need to take a proactive leadership role in making information available to our people to enrich and enhance their understanding of and appreciation for our historic worship practices.

Finally, the whole matter of creativity and variety comes up in connection with our worship practices. I sense that many in our synod wish to have a degree of creativity and variety, and sometimes this is what leads them away from the historic worship forms of our church. I believe the solution is not to abandon the historic worship practices of our synod but to do a better job of using the worship practices we cherish, with creativity and variety. We do need to recognize that the precise wording and precise form of the liturgy was not handed down

to Moses on Mount Sinai. We will need periodically to revise and change the wording of our liturgy to communicate more effectively. For example, there are a variety of appropriate ways to confess our sins and to receive God's absolution. There are a variety of appropriate wordings for prayers in our worship service. We must avoid rigidity in our worship practices which would tend to squelch any attempt to communicate more effectively. Extremes in this regard need to be avoided. We recognize that the church will revise its worship forms to respond to the needs of various places, peoples, times and cultures. There are many options within the liturgy itself that can change and offer variety: a variety of good hymns, singing of various Psalms and canticles, different orders of liturgical services for non-Communion services, and much, much more. New hymns can and should be written for our congregations. Perhaps we should consider as a synod sponsoring a national hymn-writing program to introduce newer hymns to our synod, hymns written to confess boldly to this modern world our Scriptural and Confessional Lutheran theology. I guess what I am trying to suggest here is that we need not be afraid of change, variety and creativity. We can channel these needs into legitimate and helpful forms without giving up or backing away from our commitment to the time-honored confessional worship practices which have marked us as a church body down through the years.

These are the sorts of concerns I would have when looking toward those congregations in our synod which are committed to using the historic liturgical services of the Lutheran and Western Christian church. As I said, I believe we need balance and perspective in all of these issues. We need to recognize problems on both sides of the issues. We need to work together to identify ways of addressing perceived needs in our synod without losing sight of the confessional implications of what we do on a Sunday morning. So, at this point, I conclude this expression of pastoral concern. I do hope in our discussions we can focus on the issues, not personalities, and on the theological and confessional implications of what we do or do not do in our worship services, for this is indeed the most important consideration.

---

## Conclusion

---

**F**INALLY, IN CONCLUSION LET ME OFFER A KALEIDOSCOPE OF PICTURES OF Lutheran worship. I want to talk about the wide variety of people who sit in the pews of our congregations week in and week out. What is their view of worship? What do they think about it? What is their perception of the unchanging feast in a fast-changing world? On any given Sunday there are more than one million men, women and children gathered together in congregations of the Missouri synod to worship and praise their good and gracious God. As I think about this fact, I can almost see in my mind's eye this huge, vast multitude of people. I can't help but be reminded of the pictures of heaven as we have them in Revelation. We worship in our separate congregations, yet we join together to form one people of God. As the people of God, we join with "angels and archangels and all the company of heaven" in praising our good and gracious God. It is as if we are one congregation at that moment, for indeed, truly we are as the Body of Christ, one people united in Him through our baptisms into His name.

As I glance out over this Sunday morning congregation, a congregation of more than one million people, I see a whole variety of people. I look over here and see a young family with their two small children, people from the Baby Boom generation, assembled together as a family in the Lord's house—a neat young family in the Lord. My eyes move on and I see, sitting side by side a married couple, life-long members of our synod, rooted strongly in the Word and sound doctrine and in our confessional heritage of liturgical worship. I look a little farther out over this congregation and I see here a single mother with her children. Over there I see a widow, and over there a person who has just gone through a painful divorce and is now all alone in church. I see a person who is sick, another who is troubled by a serious family problem, another who is unemployed, yet another who is poor and strug-

## THE UNCHANGING FEAST

---

gling, and on and on it goes. I see a whole variety of people and happily I see a growing number of African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, and a wide variety of cultures—truly a picture of what heaven will be like. And as I look out over this congregation I feel a great sensitivity for the worship needs of all of these many brothers and sisters in Christ in this, our Missouri synod confessional family.

But now my eyes begin to focus on something else. I see a Bible in the pulpit and in the pew racks. I see copies of *Lutheran Worship* or *The Lutheran Hymnal*. I see an organ over there and a choir over here. I see on the altar the elements for the Lord's Supper and I see the baptismal font. I hear the pastor, in the stead and by the command of Jesus Christ, pronouncing the absolution of sins. And as my eyes move from one spot to still another in this kaleidoscopic view of Lutheran—yes, *Lutheran*—worship among us, I pause, look heavenward and say, “O God, do hold before us with great clarity and purity that unchanging feast that is ours in a fast-changing world. Do not allow anything from within or from without to dilute or destroy that great Christocentric heritage of worship with which you have blessed this, our beloved synod. Amen.”

*O Lord, let this your little flock,  
Your name alone confessing,  
Continue in your loving care,  
True unity possessing.  
Your Sacraments, O Lord,  
And your saving Word  
To us, Lord, pure retain.  
Grant that they may remain  
Our only strength and comfort.<sup>1</sup>*

---

1. Johann Mentzer, “Lord Jesus Christ, the Church's Head,” Verse 2 in *Lutheran Worship*, Hymn 293 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1982).