

Lutheran Liturgy and Evangelism

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When it comes to liturgical worship and evangelism, there are two oversimplifications that need to be dealt with at the very outset. Where we find ourselves in relation to these two oversimplifications will say much in the area of our theology and practice of worship.

Oversimplification #1: The liturgical service is not the place to do evangelism. The liturgical service is God serving his people and God's people serving him. The unevangelized simply do not fit into the equation of *ein wahrer Gottesdienst*.

These people do have a point. Think of the words of the Venite:

Oh, come, let us sing to the Lord...

The unbeliever, however, can only fill a big room with sound.

Let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation...

The unbeliever makes a noise – maybe even a loud one – but it is not one springing forth from a heart of joy.

Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving...

The unbeliever does “church” because it is the thing that moral Americans do.

For the Lord is a great God and a great king above all gods...

Unbeliever: I know that one! “In God We Trust.”

And then there is over-simplification #2: Church services have “evangelism” (in the sense of *outreach to the unchurched church-guest*) as their main goal. C. Peter Wagner writes:

One of the things a large church can do well is to celebrate. By “celebrate,” I mean roughly what most people mean by “worship,” but not entirely.... The occasion for that (celebration) in most churches is on Sunday morning. When a lot of people come together, hungry to meet God, a special kind of worship experience can occur. That experience is what I want to call “celebration”.... Some Sunday morning worship services in our churches are fun, too. Unfortunately, however, in a large number of our churches, the Sunday morning service is more like a funeral than a festival. There is nothing unauthentic about that kind of worship.... *But it is not the kind of experience that they are very enthusiastic in inviting their unconverted friends to* (emphasis mine).... This is probably one reason why many churches have remained small over the years (because the services aren't fun!)... Good celebrations need lots of people to make them fun and attractive.¹

¹ Wagner, C. Peter. *Your Church Can Grow*. Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1976. The above quote is gathered from several pages on “celebration+congregation+cell = church,” pp. 97-99.

There *is* a grain of truth in both of these oversimplifications. Worship is *primarily* (but certainly NOT exclusively) for those who have come to a knowledge of the truth. Liturgical, means-of-grace-centered worship builds up the existing body of Christ – the body of believers. On the other hand, Wagner *does* have a point about “funeral-like worship” services. The message of Christ crucified is a solemn one, but it is not plaintive. The point at issue, however, is just what do writers like Wagner mean by using a subjective term such as “funeral-like.” It is probable that Paul Gerhardt’s hymn “I Will Sing My Maker’s Praises” – sung to its strong, c-minor melody – might be considered “funeral-like” by the church growth adherents such as Wagner. If Gerhardt and minor music is funeral-like, then the Evangelical Lutheran Church is a church of pall bearers at best – cadavers at worst.

Is there a middle road between the two oversimplifications? This author believes so. The Lutheran liturgical style of worship is one that promotes the building up of the saints but does not mitigate against evangelizing the unchurched visitor. Whether we like it or not, when the unevangelized think of Christianity, they think of church – the building on the corner. The unevangelized *will come* to our churches. What will we do?

The Entire Christian Life Is a Life of “Worship”

Worship is not something that takes place only between the bookends of Sunday morning breakfast and Sunday afternoon football. Worship is a way of life. Worship is the *Christian* life. The Christian’s worship never ceases. St. Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will (Romans 12:1-2).

The Christian’s life is a life of continual worship, lived out of thanks for God’s mercy, and lived in accordance with God’s will.

Luther, the champion of the priesthood of all believers, has some instructive remarks concerning this kind of worship:

The worship of God (*Gottesdienst*) is the praise of God. This should be free at the table, in private rooms, downstairs, upstairs, at home, abroad, in all places, by all people, at all times. Whoever tells you anything else is lying as badly as the pope and the devil himself!²

Luther was writing against the medieval notion that worship was held only within the confines of a church or monastery, was led only by an ordained priest, and took place only within context of the Office of the Hours. No. In view of and resulting from God’s mercy, the Christian’s life of sanctification is in itself a fragrant offering to God.

Bruce Backer has a superb quote concerning this exact point, so please permit (and enjoy) a lengthier section:

By revealing His kindness He gave me strength I never had before, the strength of faith to *walk* the way of life. In love toward me He has also shown me how to walk the way of life. Therefore, because of God’s great mercy to me, I will offer my life as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to

² Plass, Ewald. ed., *What Luther Says*. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1959. Quote #5019

God. Since I offer my whole body and life, my worship is a total commitment 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 52 weeks a year, for as many years as God gives me life and breath.³

Worship in this broad, all-encompassing sense *is* evangelism or could more accurately be described as “pre-evangelism.” Living the Christian life of thanksgiving is worship. Living a life of thanksgiving in accordance with the will of the heavenly Father is also a silent (yet active) witness to Jesus Christ. Worship in this broad sense is an offering to God, but it is also a light shining in this dark world. Letting our lights shine before men is worship of God. In this broad sense, worship has everything to do with evangelism. The evangelizing impact of the daily worship of our people in the factory, on the playing field, at work, or away dare not be underestimated. Their daily life-sacrifice can have powerful effects upon the unchurched and unevangelized.

The goal of this paper, however, is not to concentrate on worship in the broad, basic sense. The goal of this paper is to look at Lutheran liturgical (i.e. corporate) worship and its relationship to evangelism. Our time spent on the Christian’s life of worship has not been accidental. The individual Christian’s life very well might lead to opportunities to issue the invitation “come and see.” The Christian who worships daily will have opportunities to give a reason for the hope he professes. The Christian’s daily life of worship very well might lead to an unevangelized person’s first contact with evangelical Lutheran liturgical worship.

Lutheran Liturgical Worship

What is meant by the word “liturgical?” If one were to ask three people to define liturgical, he would most likely receive as many definitions. Kurt Marquart discusses the common misconceptions (misconceptions that very well might be entertained by our pastors and people) concerning the *liturgy*:

The word *liturgy* itself is a good conversation starter. It seems to be taken by many as a collective term for everything that is not important in a service: Liturgy means the fillers to round things out, the icing on the cake, or, even more bluntly, the window-dressing for the proper stage-managing of sermons and collections. And so we have “opening” and “closing” liturgies, but the meat of the sandwich is somewhere else. If liturgy is simply decorative, it is of course basically trivial. Since, in this view, it has no theological substance of its own, it naturally becomes the plaything of psychology, sociology, “cultural” this and that, and of course “the arts.”⁴

It is clear what the liturgy is not. It is not merely page fifteen nor is it merely a special service that the pastor writes. The liturgy is not merely something that the Christians “do” or “plow through”. Well, what is it then?

Marquart lists three essential elements that make worship both liturgical and Lutheran:

1. The first is that the two elements which constitute the divine service or liturgy are the preached Gospel and the Sacrament of the Lord’s Body and Blood.... The Sacrament is the context or framework for the regular proclamation of the Gospel, for it “was instituted for the sake of preaching, as Paul says: ‘As often as you eat the bread and drink the cup, you are to proclaim the Lord’s death’” (Apology XXIV, 35, German).⁵

³ Backer, Bruce R. “Foundations of Worship,” p. 2. This excellent essay was originally presented to the Minnesota District Pastoral Conference – Lake City, MN. Unfortunately, this paper is not dated. It is available in the essay file at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.

⁴ Precht, Fred L. ed. *Lutheran Worship History and Practice*. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1993. pp. 58-59

⁵ Marquart, Kurt. “Church Growth” As Mission Paradigm – A Lutheran Assessment. Houston, TX: Our Savior Lutheran Church. (pp.82-83)

2. Secondly, there is the primacy of preaching, of that living proclamation of the Divine Word which is the chief and most difficult work of the Gospel ministry. It is the glorious (2 Cor. 3) Gospel itself that is “the power of God for salvation” (Rom. 1:16). Therefore “the chief worship of God is the preaching of the Gospel” (Apology XV, 42).⁶
3. Thirdly and lastly, in our survey of liturgical content, there is the nature of the Sacrament as a priceless gift. If the Sacrament is truly, as we solemnly confess, the very Body and Blood of the Lord, then one thing is certain: it must be immensely important in the Christian scheme of things.⁷

A few thoughts present themselves. Lutheran worship is worship centered around the means of grace. The Word and Sacraments are in every Lutheran liturgical service and not just in skimpy measure. Each liturgical service offers a rich, cost-free banquet of salvation. Faith comes by hearing the message – and the message is heard in our services. Years of training are spent to make our pastors proficient proclaimers of Romans 3 and John 3:16. The sacraments are present. Little babies come to faith in our liturgical worship and the oldest of the old receive renewed strength through the Sacrament of the Altar.

The Lord’s Supper and the unevangelized visitor are not a hand-in-glove match. We are a confessional church and we practice the biblical doctrine of close/closed communion and we do so without apology or regret. It would be a grievous offense for us to dole out the Lord’s body and blood to those who did not rightly recognize it nor prepare themselves.

The fellowship of the Supper is a *vertical fellowship* between the participant and his Lord. The fellowship of the Supper also requires a *horizontal fellowship* – a unity of faith, baptism, and Lord – which is witnessed through public confession. This fellowship and confession will not exist between the members of the Body of Christ and the unevangelized. It is of utmost importance that we deal with the unevangelized in love when it comes to our doctrine of close communion. Our scriptural doctrine might very well cause offense to be taken – we don’t need to increase the offense through loveless and thoughtless (or lack of!) action.

The second aspect of liturgical worship, however, is a **perfect** fit for evangelizing the unbeliever in our public services. The Word of God is preached. This is where the sermon comes in. This is where the law pierces the unevangelized’s heart – perhaps for the first time. In the sermon, the gospel is presented to the unevangelized heart – thus making it evangelized. Marquart, in his “Church Growth as Mission Paradigm,” does not overstate the “closed” nature of the Sacrament. He does not, however, slam shut the church doors in front of the unevangelized. He writes: “True preaching...throbs with the right distinction between Law and Gospel. Christ and His Person and Work – the Gospel! – are ever uppermost.... That is the real reason why ‘nothing keeps the people with the church more than good preaching’ (Apology XXIV, 50, German). Here is the tap-root of the church’s missionary power.”⁸ In his “Corporate Worship of the Church,” Marquart writes: “It must never be forgotten that good preaching, that is ‘practical and clear sermon,’ constitutes the church’s strongest missionary attraction. This major element of the liturgy is the minister’s most demanding task.”⁹ And here is the taproot of our evangelism efforts in our public, liturgical worship!

Let the Word of Christ...

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God” (Colossians 3:16). This is the Apostle Paul’s encouragement to the Christians in the city of Colossae. This is the Spirit’s encouragement for the Christians in the cities of Mequon, Newburg, and Benton Harbor. The word of Christ – the things written

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 84.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 86.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 85.

⁹ Precht p. 60.

that we may believe that Jesus is the Christ – is preached, is heard, and remains in the heart. The word of Christ, however, is not dormant in the heart. It is a powerful, living, faith producing/strengthening force. The word of Christ produces effects such as the acts of worship that Paul describes in Colossians 3:16. God acts. People respond.

The Word – the *λόγος* of God – is unleashed in our worship. The Word is the central driving force in Christian faith and life – and therefore worship life. Martin Luther has a good statement on the importance of the Word to our worship:

Since God at first gives faith through the Word, so he thereafter exercises, increases, confirms, and perfects it through the Word. Therefore the worship of God at its best and the finest keeping of the Sabbath consists...in dealing with the Word and hearing it. On the other hand, nothing is more dangerous than a dislike of the Word.¹⁰

It follows, that if our worship is Word-centered, then it will also be Christ-centered. We hear of Christ in the opening invocation (or perhaps in the opening hymn) and we close with the three-fold benediction (and perhaps another hymn featuring Christ). We read three Scripture lessons: one looks forward to Christ, one tells of Christ's words and works, and one looks back upon Christ. We confess the life and redemptory work of Christ in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds – "I Believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who..." The sermon begins: Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The unevangelized will come to know this one who is called Jesus through the weekly dynamics of Lutheran liturgical worship. Christ is simply everywhere. In his liturgics course, Prof. James P. Tiefel lists three goals for evangelism: proclamation, clarification, and invitation.¹¹ Ample opportunity is found in our services for proclamation. A sermon is simply a structured proclamation of law and gospel. The sermon also has much time for *clarification* – as do the creed and hymns. The *invitation* to worship is found in our hymns, psalms, and general pulpit exhortations. There is much to be said in favor of our evangelical Lutheran liturgical practice when it comes to evangelism.

Sounding a Note of Caution

We take our Lord's great commission seriously. We know that Jesus meant what he said when he spoke: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). In our zeal to carry out the Lord's commission and in introducing the unevangelized church guest to him who is the way, truth, and life – we could possibly hit a pitfall or two. It is this author's feeling that worship is primarily, but NOT exclusively, for the members of his congregational flock. If the Lord in his grace should bless our evangelistic efforts and many of our prospects do come to our services, then we must walk a fine Lutheran line.

A service that is consistently over our people's heads does not edify and is not acceptable, evangelical worship. On the other hand, a consistent diet of services that are aimed (time and time again) at the unevangelized in our midst can possibly lead to a malnourished flock. This author knows from personal experience that Sunday is THE day when the vast majority of our membership (unfortunately!) receive their spiritual meat and drink for the week. As a child growing up, never once did we have a home devotion. I cannot say that I remember ever seeing my parents reading their Bibles at home. We prayed only at the 'big' meals – Thanksgiving and the like. What we received at Sunday worship is what we got for the week. This situation, so very prevalent in a large percentage of our laity is deplorable, but it is a fact.

I can only venture a guess at what my personal spiritual situation would now be, if I had been given a steady diet of theologically weak Christian contemporary music and cozy sermons. Perish the thought – and it has come to my mind – when we wonder while writing our sermons: "Should I say this?" Or: "Would the visitor take offense at this?" Law and Gospel worship and ministry is a walking-on-eggshells ministry. We must

¹⁰ *What Luther Says* p. 1545 #5017.

¹¹ Junior class notes - Chapter 1., p. 2. The notes are available through the WLS student bookstore.

feed like never before with our Lutheran liturgical worship. Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God. God's Word therefore must never be muzzled or muted in our worship!

Dwell In You Richly...

Lutheran worship at its best is gospel proclamation at its best. The message of law and gospel permeates all sections of our services. A general predominance of faith-creating gospel is present everywhere. Fred Pratt Green rhymes it well:

Made sacred by long use, nominated for our time
Our liturgies sum up the hope we have in him:
Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again!¹²

There are three special emphases that are present that also make worship liturgical and Lutheran. All three of these emphases will promote evangelization, because they are *essentially gospel proclamation*.

Focus #1: *The liturgy focuses our attention upon Jesus Christ.*

This is done by reviewing Christ's salvation every Sunday and by reviewing Christ's life and work throughout the year. Sunday in and Sunday out, Christ our substitute is our focus. Year in and year out, we see Bethlehem and an empty tomb as the bookends of our salvation.

Focus #2: *The liturgy features a group of five song texts.*

These are the ordinary, every Sunday songs – thus their name “the Ordinary.” They are as follows:

- Lord, Have Mercy (*Kyrie*)
- Glory Be to God on High (*Gloria in Excelsis*)
- Nicene Creed (*Credo*)
- Holy, Holy, Holy (*Sanctus*)
- Lamb of God (*Angus Dei*)

Each and every one of these songs carries the message of Christ to the ears and to hearts of the worshipers. Their texts are generally simple, but profound. A moment spent with these songs – by the believer and unevangelized alike – is a moment well spent.

Focus #3: *The liturgy reviews the life and work of Christ every year by using different songs, prayers, and lessons that change every Sunday.*¹³

These are called the *Proper*s, because they each have their *proper* Sunday to be done on. Here are several of the *proper*s:

- Opening Hymn
- Prayer of the Day (Collect)
- Lessons

¹² “This is the Threefold Truth” – Christian Worship 406 v.2.

¹³ These three foci are explained more thoroughly in the junior worship notes. The *Christian Worship Manual* will also be a good place to investigate the theology and practical applications of these three foci.

- Sermon
- Psalm of the Day
- Verse of the Day
- Offertory

At the risk of sounding like a resounding gong, note the limitless possibility for gospel proclamation that the propers contain. Even if the unevangelized only comprehend one of the propers, they will have received the gospel! The Holy Spirit can and will use that one point of entry.

What Then Shall We Do?

Do worship well. Make the most of every liturgical opportunity. Do not think that liturgical worship is cold and hard and funeral-like. Liturgical worship has a warmth that no auditorium of “seekers” could ever duplicate. The warmth of the Lutheran liturgy comes for the good news itself. Let no one say that an Evangelical Lutheran cannot be both warm and solemn at the same time!

We are to give God our best – and this includes our liturgical services. We are to give our people the best as we minister to them with our preaching and public service on their behalf. We are to give the unchurched the best. When they come through our church door, they should have an experience like they have never had before. The Word will insure this and our liturgies will reinforce this.

With an established commitment to Lutheran liturgical worship, what can be done to make the most of that worship for the unevangelized? (Knowing that we cannot and dare not try to add to the Gospel’s efficacy, we must also ask “what *scandalon* can be removed?”) Here are some practical suggestions:

1. Have a clear focus in each worship service. People are well served if they come home with one gold nugget.
2. The unevangelized are timid enough when it comes to church – we should not add to that timidity. A greeter, a well-thought-out bulletin, and a friendly person sitting next to them to show them where the front of the hymnal is can do wonders to relieve church anxiety.
3. As for the liturgy itself, it is good to have a “path of worship” printed out in the bulletin. A very efficient way of doing this is to write the major parts of the service with their respective page numbers on the far right hand side of the bulletin, which then sticks out as a “path”/bookmark when placed in the hymnal.
4. An instructive word from the pastor as to where they are in the service will never hurt and will often be appreciated. On the other hand, some are prone to take this too far and explain every single thing. That can become tedious.
5. Our liturgies proclaim Christ. Maybe highlight the “Christ for us” in the proper lessons with a well-thought-out sentence of introduction. These should never turn into a sermonette on each of the lessons. Again, we must know the difference between being “over their head” and being “tedious.”
6. Variety is nice. Have the congregation learn a couple of different arrangements of the Kyrie – or any of the songs of the Ordinary – and print them in the bulletin. The Ordinary

has been around for a thousand years and has been put to music by countless cultures. This is a HUGE untapped source of variety.¹⁴

7. Perhaps have an opening paragraph at the top of your bulletin that gives the basic rationale for your “liturgical style” and/or “close communion.” Any opportunity to explain and possibly diffuse offence before it begins is worth while.

Conclusion

Hopefully this paper has shed more light than produced smoke. It has been a beneficial exercise for the author, in that it has made him come to grips with what his worship actually is. It has also been a good exercise in remembering that his call is not to “go into all the world and perform page 15 in a flawless fashion by leading and playing.” My Savior would have me preach and teach with all my might. The unevangelized will come to our services. They will leave evangelized. It is our solemn responsibility to unleash the gospel upon them while they are in our midst. We can do no more and faithfulness to the Lord Jesus demands that we do no less. Let us be satisfied to do our liturgical worship well and preach Christ with conviction – and then sleep well knowing that the Holy Spirit is about his business!

¹⁴ An example of just such a work would be *Lead Me. Guide Me: The African American Catholic Hymnal*. It contains several settings of each song of the Ordinary. It is published by G.I.A. Publications Inc., 1987.