

Christian Worship: 100 Years of the Common Service

By James P. Tiefel

Any celebration of the one hundredth anniversary of the *Common Service* has something in common with an observance of a ship's christening on the day it is scuttled. In both cases the object of attention is sinking. Neither of the Lutheran hymnals which are presently on the market has retained the service in any form that approaches purity, and from the look of things, our WELS revision will also wander.

The reasons? The language of the service no longer matches what we are reading in our Bible and what our children are memorizing in their catechisms. The flow of the service, especially from confession to collect, has never been really understood (and rarely really explained). To many worshippers, therefore, it has seemed needlessly long and repetitious.

The music of the service which Synodical Conference churches borrowed from the 1901 *Choral Service Book* became well known because of repetition and not because of its singability. Many of the settings appeal more to Victorian ears than they do to German ears, and certainly more than they do to American ears. For all of these reasons and perhaps for a few more, the centennial of the *Common Service* will likely not be noted with a great deal of interest, even by the church members who grew to love it and, in some cases, are fighting to retain it.

If the event were to be observed, these same church members would probably be surprised that their service is as young as it is. They might also be surprised to discover where it came from and how it was formed.

The first Lutheran liturgical movement had its roots in the great confessional awakening that began in Europe during the early years of the 19th century. The *Erweckung* was a reaction to the horrors which Pietism and Rationalism had inflicted on the German Lutheran churches, and it brought about a determination to restore a Bible-based confessionalism to every aspect of theological activity—dogmatics, homiletics and liturgics included. The *Erweckung* came to America in ships (Lutheran ships, that is), and before long its adherents were taking their stand against the rationalistic erosion that had occurred among the nation's Lutheran first-arrivals. A part of that stand was the introduction into the American church of the historic Lutheran service with its dual emphasis on the church year (the Propers) and the Lord's Supper, emphases which the Rationalists had long before abandoned.

Church leaders who were convinced of the principle *Lex orandi, lex credendi* ("As the church worships, so it believes") were determined to put the truths of Scripture into the hearts of church members by means of the liturgy. They found their champion in Luther and their models in the Lutheran church orders of the 16th century. By 1879 their church body, the General Council (part of what we know today as the E.L.C.A.), was agreeing with them that an order of service ought to be prepared which would be derived from "the common consent of the pure Lutheran liturgies of the sixteenth century, and when there is not an entire agreement among them, the consent of the largest number of them of the greatest weight" (General Council Proceedings, 1879). The first edition was printed without music during Holy Week, 1888.

In 1912 The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod borrowed the service (and, as we have mentioned, one of its many musical settings) for its official English hymnal. The service was still, a generation later, the best by far of any of the English orders of service. Since many Missouri Synod congregations had grown accustomed to it, the decision to include it in *The Lutheran Hymnal* was an easy one. And so the *Common Service* came to the Wisconsin Synod—just 47 years ago!

The anniversary will draw some press in our synod. The seminary's 1988 summer quarter includes a course offering entitled "The Common Service: A Look Back, A Look Ahead." *Focus on Worship* will publish an analysis of the service and the event. We will probably see more coming from liturgy aficionados outside our circles.

Already before the year began *Lutheran Forum*, in its annual *Una Sancta* issue (*Una Sancta* was a noteworthy—and sometimes notorious—liturgical magazine published between 1940 and 1970) allowed six liturgiologists to put pen to paper on the subject of the anniversary. Their analysis of the *Common Service* was mixed. They laud the fact that it supported American Lutheranism's 19th century return to confessionalism. In

fact, several of the group plead with their subscribers to retain such a confessionalism as the lifeblood of the church. (One appreciates the sentiment, obviously, but assumes their definition of confessionalism is somewhat different from ours.) They express appreciation for its “catholic” (as opposed to parochial) format as well as its commitment to both the Propers and the Sacrament.

It is at this last point that the *Common Service* draws criticism from several of the authors. The chief complaint seems to be that the 1888 service failed to go far enough either to restore the Supper to its traditionally Lutheran every-Sunday status or to bring back its traditionally Christian emphasis on eucharistic sacrifice. They observe this failure in the fact that the *Common Service* allowed for a conclusion without communion and disallowed a eucharistic prayer. For at least these *Una Sancta* writers, the *Common Service* may well have been a necessary step in the evolution of Lutheran liturgical renewal, but it was only that, a step. Not until the *Service Book and Hymnal* (1958) and *Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978) do they find a liturgy which for them is in line with Christian and Lutheran theology as far as the Sacrament is concerned. Both of these more recent services emphasize that the Supper stands equally alongside the Word as the Sunday-by-Sunday thanksgiving action of the church.

Our theological point of view has no doctrinal difficulties with either an every-Sunday communion or a eucharistic prayer. We do not grant, however, that the main service of the church is incomplete without the Sacrament, nor will we accept any notion that a thanksgiving prayer determines the Sacrament’s essence. But we are bound to agree that there is much by way of both history and theology which favors an every-Sunday opportunity for both Word and Sacrament. Our usual once-a-month custom has more to do with roots in Pietism than it does with our Reformation roots. We have a way to go when it comes to appreciating the value of the Supper in our lives. Perhaps we can also grow in learning to hear the bold note of thanksgiving which sounds as Christians come together to receive the Savior’s body and blood.

We have tended to take our cue from Luther (who was so determined that the Supper, after centuries of obfuscation, should be seen by all as an action of God to man that he dropped everything from the communion liturgy except the Words of Institution) and have avoided any temptation to find or form eucharistic prayers for our services. This probably remains a wise course of action, but it ought not prohibit us, either in spirit or in form, from approaching the Lord’s Table with joy, celebration and thanksgiving.

The *Common Service* has served us well for almost half a century. We do well to give thanks as it reaches its 100th birthday. Realistically, it has its problems. We hope that our new liturgies can solve them beautifully, practically and devotionally. We are committed, when it comes to the Sacrament, to a conservative approach. But we can benefit from the analyses which Lutherans will be offering during this anniversary year. If they help us reexamine our approach to and our use of the Lord’s Supper, then any *Common Service* commemoration will serve us well.