

What is Scriptural and What is Traditional in Lutheran Church Work?

By Arnold J. Koelpin

[Inner-city Mission Seminar General Board for Home Missions]

Introduction: the question

1. Defined
2. Not new, but necessary

I. What is Scriptural in our church work?

Content: ministry

1. The mandates of Christ
2. Their central position in our work
3. The theology of the cross opposes the theology of glory

II. What is traditional in our church work?

Forms: ceremonies and usages

1. Necessity
2. Use in freedom
3. Guidelines:
 - a. Positive: dual purpose
 - b. Negative: twin danger
4. The middle way of faith
5. An application to liturgical form
 - a. Continuity and change
 - b. Appropriate forms

III. The “And” of our question

1. The same old thing
2. Interaction

The question before us in this session is: What is Scriptural and what is traditional in Lutheran church work? If I understand the topic correctly in the light of the general theme of the conference, “Communicating the Gospel Across Cultural Lines,” our task will be, first of all, to set the Scriptural foundations for church work, and then, to set off, in contradistinction to the *Scriptural*, those areas of our church work which are culturally conditioned and hence traditional and subject to change. The term *Lutheran* in the topic undoubtedly points to the question as we see it in the Synod and therefore to those ways and practices which have their orientation in the Christian faith as handed down in the evangelical Lutheran church to this very day.

The goal of our efforts, therefore, seems to be a practical one. We wish to know those areas of our church work in which variation is permissible for the sake of communicating the Gospel and those areas where no change is possible for the sake of faith. It is hoped that such clarification will assist us in performing the task of preaching a changeless Christ to a world of change. This essay does not intend to suggest specific solutions to individual problems in our church work. That task is reserved for your discussion. What this presentation is to highlight, under the direction of God’s Word, are the basic truths that are to guide the performance of our mission “to preach the good news” (Mark 16:15).

In raising the question before us, however, we are all well aware that its problems are not peculiar to our Synod at this time, nor even to our generation. Cultural disparity and its attendant problems of communication are not the invention of the modern city and of the sociologists who document them. Remember in wonderment and thanks to the Lord the progress of the Gospel from its Semitic homeland. Culturally speaking, the Gospel crossed the barrier from the ceremonially trained Jew to the cultured Greek; it passed from the practical and legal-minded Roman to the barbarian tribes of the European northlands; it went from aristocratic Europe to pragmatic America and beyond. An effort to come to grips with many of the same problems that face us moved the founders of the modern ecumenical movement to call conferences on “Faith and Order” and “Life and Work.” The results of the consultation aside, the general areas covered correspond in many ways to the question laid before us today, “What is Scriptural and what is traditional in church work?” Sad to say, under the cover of change in traditional church work, modern ecumenists often shifted the Biblical priority of preaching the Gospel to social concerns. And right there lies the warning!

How easily the attempt to find ways and means to speak to people of a certain culture can result in the abomination of a culture religion. When Judaism under the kings became a mere sectarian religion, God sent His prophets to issue the many “woes” on the vain exercise of religious practice and called off their feasts and sacrifices and condemned them. “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgement of God rather than burnt offerings!” (Hosea 6:6). The medieval church likewise had no lack of activity. Church work dominated the scene with daily masses and vigils, pilgrimages, indulgence sales at reliquaries, and the like. But all this scurrying about was *aven*, as Luther called it, citing the Hebrew word for vanity. The cultivation of the Word and faith had been exchanged for the merits of busyness. Whatever else the value of Karl Barth’s theology might be, he did call the 20th century church in Europe to separate itself from the culture to which it had wedded itself. Where Christianity had taken on the liberal views of God and man and progress, where subsequently the horrors of World War I brought to light not man’s progress to a new humanity but the brutality and inhumanity of man to man, Barth was right in sounding the alarm regarding the crisis of Christianity wed to a culture in crisis.

So we too stand in a critical time for the church as old questions occur in new situations. Do we attempt in this situation to synthesize our work with prevailing cultural expressions which we meet, and so, in attempting to be relevant, run the risk of losing our Gospel orientation? Is the better path at this juncture to stand apart from the streams of life so that our work might remain unsullied by new cultural manifestations? Neither alternative satisfies. The Lord sent us into the world to speak to the world, and yet requires that our message, life, and work not become part of the world—which will pass. A task impossible without his power, aid, and guidance! Therefore we turn to the Word of God itself and address our question to it.

I.

What is Scriptural in Our Church Work?

In answering this question, the Scriptures make a necessary distinction between *content* and *form*. We need to talk about the content of church work in one way and about its form in another, even though both have a direct bearing on one another.

What then in the content of all church work? Very simply Christ tells us it is ministry. This ministry is service and consists in teaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments. "Through these," our Lutheran Confessions observe, "as through means, God gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where He pleases, in those who hear the Gospel" (Augsburg Confession V). For this reason our work in the church of Christ is bound to those institutions by which God offers us his grace and builds faith. Not our choice, but the Lord's mandate ordained the ministry on earth. And we honor it as his holy ordinance, unchanged and unchanging, central and necessary, vital and enduring, praiseworthy and effectual. When God ordered his Word among men, he bound us to that which makes us free in his sight, namely, to the Gospel proclaimed in Word and sacrament.

How was this ministry ordained? Listen to the mandates. The church's Lord commands: "Preach the Gospel to all creation!" The church's Lord commands: "Baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit!" The church's Lord commands: "Do this in remembrance of Me!" (Matt. 28, Mark 16, I Cor. 11). What congregational work, mission work, church work—call it what we may—requires is administration, administration of the means of grace ordained of God. Around these the congregation forms and gathers; by them the holy Christian church is built. They mark the church's presence in the world as signs of confession and identification; they seal God's good and gracious will toward us by awakening and strengthening our faith; they give the church its unity. Concerning this blessed unity by the Spirit and the Word, St. Paul writes, "There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:4-6).

There is nothing new here; this is true. But dare we take the stress on the content of our church work for granted? Experience would tell us otherwise. Is it perhaps just our seeming acquaintance with what is central that makes us anxious to get on with the practical side, especially where mission problems are involved? How easily we can lose sight of primary concerns and shift the emphasis from that which builds the church, the preaching of Christ's righteousness, to the question of the forms in which such work is done! "Having a form of godliness," we thereby, in effect, deny "its power" (2 Tim. 3:5).

Martin Franzmann, in his excellent introduction to the New Testament, *The Word of the Lord Grows*, discusses the value of the letter to the Romans in respect to church work. He prefaces his remarks by observing that the letter was not written to well-instructed Christians of the old home church, but to a people who, he conjectures, have no eye-witness apostle with them. The word of the Lord had spread in their midst through the agency of a number of nameless men, probably the "visitors from Rome" mentioned in the Pentecost account (Acts 2:10). But now to the point. Paul's letter to them, Franzmann writes, does not "aim at creating a vague, emotional, and enthusiastic movement but rather the firmly rooted, grounded, and established church of God, in which the word of Christ dwelt richly."¹ Paul's missionary letter, in a word, was a doctrinal one. Permit me to quote from his introduction:

Pointing up the value of this letter is like commenting on the depth of the Grand Canyon. But perhaps a word or two on the letter as a missionary document (an aspect of the letter not always sufficiently appreciated) may be in place. The breadth and depth of this exposition of the Gospel of Christ is a perpetual warning against the temptation, which the church has not always resisted, to make of its missionary endeavors a vague and sentimental humanitarian activity, in which penicillin became a substitute for the power of God, the Gospel. It is the most obvious and natural thing in the world that the Gospel should march through the World with steps of mercy, that faith should document itself in a love which comprehends all man's need and agony, but the temptation to "give up preaching the word of

God to serve tables” (Acts 6:2) is particularly strong in missionary work, and the Letter to the Romans is the church’s salutary monitor concerning the primacy of the word. The letter is therefore a reminder too that the content of missionary preaching is of critical importance, that a perversion or dilution of the divine word is no more permissible here than anywhere else in the life of the church.ⁱⁱ

Franzmann is not alone in his warnings. A more blunt analysis of the problem of the modern church’s deviation from the content of Christian preaching to a fascination with its manifestations and forms comes from the Reformed theologian, Donald Bloesch. Discussing the “resurgence of evangelicalism,” he states:

This brings us finally to the carnality and frivolity in much modern-day popular evangelical religion. This can be seen in the glorification of beauty queens and athletes who happen to be Christian. It is also noticeable in the fascination of many evangelicals with public relations and showmanship. In some schools and churches technique and method are valued more highly than right doctrine, and group dynamics is given more attention than prayer and other spiritual disciplines. The popularity of gospel rock groups that appeal to the sensual side of man is yet another indication of accommodation to worldly standards. Culture-religion is also evident in the camaraderie between some evangelical leaders and right-wing politicians.ⁱⁱⁱ

While most of what is said here may not apply to Lutheran church work as we know it, the basic temptation to revert to a theology of glory is possible for every Christian heart. The devil’s attacks on the Gospel are at times not so subtle, at times subtle, and often most subtle. Prof. J. P. Koehler’s warnings against the spirit of “hurrah” in our church work, against legalism and formalism in our midst, against business methods substituting for Gospel power, remains a continuing call to repentance for all who do Christ’s work.^{iv} Luther pictured such enthusiasm as that little Pharisee that sits in every Christian heart and by his work would hinder the coming of God’s kingdom among us. The theology of glory always seek to attain spirituality by our activities. Such is an active righteousness, as Luther calls it, or in more common terms, a work-righteousness.

But the way of Christ in the theology of the cross. Here Christ is the active one, and we are passive. He gives, we receive. This passive righteousness is not found in us, but outside of us in Christ’s activities on our behalf. The righteousness that counts before God, therefore, being foreign, is hidden to our natural eye, and we cannot perceive it on our own. For the activities in Christ’s suffering that we are able to observe with our eyes are repulsive to our nature: his pain and death. We hide our faces from the one who was “stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted,” “He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,” as people judge beauty (Is. 53). The cross is not glorious; it is condemnation. Yet we glory in the arm and preach nothing but Christ crucified because the hidden glory revealed in the cross is this: in Christ’s death, we are redeemed. The eye does not see that scene, but faith understands the message and believes and is glad. To bring to the world the theology of the cross, the righteousness of God hidden in the mystery of God in the flesh and grasped by faith—that is our work. (I Cor. 1) It is vital; it is essential. For we live, dear brothers and sisters, we *live* by the forgiveness of sins and the righteousness of Christ. Where Word and sacrament maintain their central place, where Christian life is nourished by the preaching of God’s Word, where fellowship in the church, initiated by baptism, is confirmed richly by the reception of the Lord’s body and blood, there the question of forms, usages, ceremonies, and traditions recedes into the background as far as church work is concerned.

But the question of forms is by no means eliminated. Nor are forms unimportant, because they provide occasion to exercise Christian love and understanding. Therefore the question of forms and traditions become all the more difficult because of their nature.

II. What is Traditional in Our Church Work?

What about the form of church work? In what way does the Scripture speak about forms? In establishing the content of the church’s work by his life and command the Lord Jesus Christ did not call the church away from its life in the world, transporting its members out of the universe. Our life and activity takes place in this

present world, and there the Gospel works. As fishers of men we do not first have to place the fish into the stream, there to be caught by the net of the Gospel. Fish live in the stream by nature. It is their natural element. As God's creation we, too, are in the world by nature, and although the fashion of the world will pass away at the Judgment, yet at present we live and move and have our being in the world. And here is where forms come in.

The church needs outward forms in its present existence precisely because it is in the world, not in heaven. Even though the true church, whole and undivided, lives by faith in the Word and promises of God, it still goes about its daily tasks in the here and now. In his high-priestly prayer Jesus reflects on the church in the world and the seeming conflict between its faith which separates believers from the world and the life which unites believers with the world. "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it" (Jn. 17:15f). In a similar manner Paul's admonitions to the Corinthian Christians recognized the tension of living in the present world, yet not conforming to it. He writes to them: "What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on...those who use the things of the world, [should use them] as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away" (1 Cor. 7:29, 31). Thus in its present condition the church needs outward forms and ceremonies and will have traditions. Such purely external matters in themselves do not bring about the church's unity. The content of its work, the Gospel, does that. But the church on earth is not formless. Nor are the particular forms of church ceremonies and traditions prescribed by God. The much abused Article VII of the Augsburg Confession underscores this concern by saying: "For it is sufficient for true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word. It is not necessary for the unity of the Christian church that ceremonies, instituted by men, should be observed uniformly in all places." In connection with the latter point on ceremonies, the practical problem lies. The problem is intensified by social, cultural, intellectual, and even generation gaps. Right at this point in connection with our freedom, at the place where faith is exercised in love, we are most vulnerable and subject to abuse our liberty. At this critical juncture where the Gospel seeks its forms in freedom, we ask our question: What is traditional in our church work?

Our question certainly is not raised merely to identify forms. All of us are able to single out what is a traditional item in our church work and what is not. Among the traditional areas, for example, are the structure of the congregation and of the Synod, the ceremonies of our worship services, the church year, the curricula of our Christian schools, and the like. But the question concerning the traditional is undoubtedly raised for a different reason. Once we have identified traditional forms in our midst, we would like to know how to handle them in given situations. Are there guidelines we can follow in regard to the choice and use of forms? Are there ground rules for mission work in this respect? Does Scripture help us to overcome the problem of distinguishing between form and content? Does the Scripture assist us in appreciating the interaction of ceremonies, usages, and traditions with the basic work of preaching the Gospel? Yes, it does so, by giving us both a positive and a negative response, by giving us both direction to action and caution in performance, so characteristic of Scriptural instruction.

What are the guidelines for action with regard to traditions? On the positive side, forms and traditions set up by us are best observed where they contribute to good order and peacefulness in the congregation. Each of these qualities are not derived from the nature of tradition itself. We do not observe traditions for traditions' sake. Rather we observe human rites because they provide "an example of how things could be done decently and in order in the churches" and thereby help "instruct the common fold" (AC-Apol. XV, 20). Paul indicates this pedagogic purpose for traditions in his first letter to the Corinthians. In discussing both the profit of the Spirit's manifold gifts in the congregation and the possible abuse of them, he provides a truly evangelical guideline. What he suggests is not an arbitrary principle that he himself invented. Paul derives his guideline from the nature of God himself. He says, "For God is not a God of disorder but of peace." And on that basis, he admonishes that "everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way" (I Cor. 14:33 and 40). Whatever forms the church uses, therefore, should be purposeful and pedagogical, expressions of faith and expressions *for*

faith, which edify the congregation. They build up the church when they promote harmony, tranquillity, and orderliness, rather than confusion in the congregation. Such efforts are not merely God-pleasing; they also reflect God's pedagogical dealings with us, his creation. One of the lessons God teaches us in the creation account in Genesis is that he is a God of order, as well as a God of goodness. In fact, his order and goodness go hand in hand. So Christians, in the freedom of the Gospel, practice such traditions and use such forms which serve the cause of the Gospel. Here Paul again speaks from his own experience. "Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible" (I Cor. 9:19). God's ways and our neighbor's need guide our use of ceremonies, customs, usages and traditions. In all, faith is both exercised and edified.

But now to the negative side of God's counsel. Where Scripture warns, it does not doom us to inactivity, nor does it intend to kill our zeal. It wants to guide our efforts rightly. God warns because Satan wants to hinder God's work by using our activities in a false way. Thus Scripture cautions us against a twin danger with respect to church work. The first danger is formalism; the other is antiformalism. The first results in a false externalizing of God's work; the other a false spiritualizing. The first might be called the Roman error, the second, the sectarian.

There is nothing as deadening in the church as formalism. Formalism occurs when the forms and methods take over the center of our church life, and do so without the apprehension of faith. For faith comes by hearing the Word of God and not by the observing of customs. Even the sacraments can be turned into a shell when they become a matter of mere performance on our part. You remember how the sacred ark of the covenant was rushed into battle against the Philistines as a kind of magic box to defeat enemies (1 Sam. 4). Israel no longer trusted in the Lord of promise, yet formally used the sign of his grace for the benefits they believed it would bring. The Lord taught them a lesson. They were defeated and lost the ark.

Similarly the mass, the holy supper of our Lord, had become an abomination of churchly work and sacrifice under the Roman pontiff. How much Rome erred in connection with the mass when she bound Christian consciences to a performance of traditions invented by men, such as fastings, pilgrimages, and the like. But dead formalism was not the invention of Rome. Satan has contrived at all times to enslave the Gospel by getting Christians to become form-bound and thus to turn their hearts to performance of ritual in substitution for the continuous transformation of the heart by the Gospel. In this way the observance of forms becomes meritorious. God warned Israel then and warns Israel now not to be caught up in religious ceremonies. "I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the music of your harps" (Amos 5:21f). Here you have the stubborn ceremonialist, who, as Luther describes them (on the basis of Psalm 58:4), like deaf cobras "are not willing to hear the truth of liberty, but, having no faith, boast of, prescribe, and insist upon their ceremonies as a means of justification."^v

But the opposite of formalism is not formlessness. Our previous discussion concerning the church's life in the world should remind us of this. Anti-formalism is only the inversion of its twin danger and often is a cover for an individual to show his own self-importance as a tradition-breaker. Contrary to the charge that some may make, it is not legalism to have a form. There are those who criticize forms and traditions in church work in much the same way as the activist youth of the 1960s misunderstood political structure. These youth wished for an unstructured utopia where each individual was a thing unto himself and everyone did his own thing. In that extreme they perceived neither the selfish nature of man nor God's institution of government. Forms indeed are used legalistically when they become a means of becoming religious and of obtaining spiritual benefits. We resist such a use because it obscures the Gospel of free grace. Paul had that experience with the Galatians. The Judaizers, who came after he had left, did not deny the righteousness of Christ. They merely suggested that by following such activities as distinguishing certain days or being circumcised, the Galatian Christians would be completing the work of righteousness. So Paul clarified, "You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ" (Gal. 5:4). And later he explained to the Romans, "If by grace, then it is no longer by

work; if it were, grace would no longer be grace” (Rom. 11:6). The singing of a particular hymn, the appointment of a district president, the celebration of Christmas on December 25—these are not legalistic procedures, nor do they in themselves convey the grace of God. They are forms of worship and service in the church for the edification of its members and in praise to God.

A consequential danger of anti-formalism is that the same set of attitudes carry over to the ministry of the sacraments. Luther’s colleague at the University of Wittenberg, Carlstadt is a case in point. He is often called the Reformation puritan who wanted to make a clean sweep of the Roman forms. In an effort to make faith so spiritual that outward forms and ritual were all but eliminated, Carlstadt stated his rule: “*Spiritualiter non sacramentaliter.*” God deals with us “spiritually, not sacramentally.”^{vi} Thereby he downplayed the Lord’s Supper as a means whereby God offers us his grace. In this way the Supper in effect became a mere form. And Carlstadt himself became a formalist, much in the same way that Baptists do by making baptism a mere outward sign of an inward happening. To Carlstadt the Lord’s Supper became a mere rite, done only because Christ said it was to be done. Spiritualistic-anti-formalism followed only those forms prescribed by Christ and eliminated all other traditions in the church. God’s gift in art, architecture, and music were in many cases abolished.

In this respect the iconoclast error was the lack of love. In spiritual pride they crushed the weak and ignorant with an overbearing faith. Paul warns the Corinthians against such super-spirituality, for it makes a person arrogant and forgets that, as sinners, we are in the same boat as our neighbor. There is irony in his words to them: “We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong!” (I Cor. 4:10). In the same tenor Luther chastised the spiritualists for changing the established forms without instruction. In the first of the sermons preached upon his return to Wittenberg at the time of the 1522 disturbances worked by radicals, he said:

I notice that you have a great deal to say of the doctrine of faith and love which is preached to you, and this is no wonder, an ass can almost intone the lessons, and why should you not be able to repeat the doctrines and formulas? Dear friends, the kingdom of God—and we are that kingdom—does not consist in talk or words, but in activity, in deeds, in works and exercises. God does not want hearers and repeaters of words, but followers and doers, and this occurs in faith through love... So we should deal with our brother, have patience with him for a time, have patience with his weakness and help him bear it... The cause is good, but there has been too much haste...

Let me illustrate. The sun has two properties, light and heat. No king has power enough to bend or guide the light of the sun; it remains fixed in its plow. But the heat may be turned and guided, and yet is ever about the sun. Thus faith must always remain pure and immovable in our hearts, never wavering; but love bends and turns so that our neighbor may grasp and follow it... Take note of these two things, “must” and “free.” The “must” is that which necessity requires, and which must ever be unyielding; as, for instance, the faith, which I shall never permit anyone to take away from me, but must always keep in my heart and freely confess before everyone. But “free” is that in which I have choice, and may use it or not, yet in such a way that it profit my brother and not me. Now do not make a “must” out of what is “free,” as you have done, so that you may not be called to account for those who were led astray by your loveless exercise of liberty.^{vii}

The lesson is clear. In all matters of ecclesiastical forms, it is neither having forms nor not having them that counts; it is neither performance nor non-performance that is the Christian way. For the one leads to activism; the other, to the false abstinence of quietism. Both ways cause us to fall into the trap of purely human effort. What counts is faith, faith active in love. For faith works, as Paul tells us, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love” (Gal. 5:6).

Where does that leave us? How do we walk in the congregation between the stubborn ceremonialist who will not change that in which God has left us free and the anti-traditionalist libertine who would rashly force

change on the weak without the perception of faith? The Christian must take the middle course of faith. And that is a real exercise, standing against those who destroy liberty by entrapping us in the commandments of men, and at the same time entering the shoes of those who do not understand. For faith cannot be forced. The secret to acting lies in the content of our work. We need to instruct by the Gospel in connection with these matters. Be patient and let the Word do the work. As Paul did, we should let members know what the Scripture says about the content of our ministry and about ceremonies and forms and usages. In the process, under God's blessing and by His grace, we will gain the Scriptural perspective. The mandates of God will continue to stand in their central position, and, from that vantage point, the forms of church work in our midst will assume the humble position of service to the Gospel: organization in the service of the Gospel, music in the service of the Gospel, liturgy and church year in the service of the Gospel. In this way the called church becomes the gathered church, a congregation who assemble around the Word and the sacraments to worship God, a communion of saints who fellowship in holy things, sharing of the Lord's body and blood under the bread and wine.

The Apostle Paul bids us to take the middle way of faith and condemns both extremes when he says, "The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does." (Rm. 14:3). For in that case neither party is acting toward the other according to the love that edifies. We should rather listen to the Scripture which teaches that we should not go aside to the right or to the left (Deut. 28:14) but follow the statutes of the Lord which are right, "rejoicing the heart" (Ps. 19-8). Just as a person is not righteous because he clings to the forms and activities of ceremonies, neither will he be counted righteous because he neglects and despises them.

How this middle way of faith was applied can be seen in the history of the Lutheran church. The problem of the interaction of content and form is highlighted in the reformation of the liturgy. The Lutheran Reformation showed its moderation in the revision of the worship service by maintaining its connection with the church of all ages. The reformers advocated change but not at the expense of continuity. Continuity with respect to forms recognizes that faith is not so individualistic, so much of the moment, that it has no connection with the church of the past. There are no brothers without fathers. Continuity respects the heritage of the fathers handed down through the centuries and makes it one's own. Yet change in form does come and will come as time passes by the process of adding, sifting and rejoicing. Such change comes, almost imperceptibly, of itself, by the process of acculturation and change in style in the world about us.

Permit me to relate two short stories from my own experience. The application, I think, will be obvious. In 1961, when my wife and I were staying with a family in the old city of Damascus, I asked an Arab friend who was gifted in drawing to do a pen-sketch of my wife and left a photograph for that purpose. When we returned a week later, he had finished the portrait. It was unmistakably my dear Ruth, but she had distinct Arabic features! Along the same lines of the process of acculturation, I understand that Africans sing our hymns more rhythmically than we do. That brings me to my second story. It has to do with the time when we were visiting a *Kantor* in Germany. A *Kantor* is a trained church musician. The evening was relaxed and because of his interest in church music, I brought out The Lutheran Hymnal. He played several hymns and suddenly commented, "Sounds like the Salvation army!" What I had honored as our old German Lutheran hymn tunes he regarded as having a Salvation Army beat! So we were Americanized after all, acculturated American Lutherans.

Werner Elert, who wrote concerning the structure of Lutheranism, researched the dogma, confession, and worship of the Lutheran church. At one point he comments on acculturation and the adaptability of the Lutheran Church. "It is self-evident that in this connection the special differences resulting from history and nationality will have to be taken into account." He was referring to the Scandinavian form of worship and its adaptations.

Not surprisingly therefore, it was not the Lutheran but the Westminster Confession of Faith of the Reformed church which reduced worship to that which was directly specified in the Scripture. Article 21 of the Westminster Confession states, "But He Himself has instituted the acceptable manner of worshiping God, and by His will He has defined it in such a way that one should not worship Him according to the fancies and

inventions of men or the suggestions of Satan under any visible form or in any way that Sacred Scripture does not prescribe.”^{viii} This principle of prescription was rejected by the Lutheran church as bearing a Scriptural orientation in a false way. Luther once commented: “We should not discard or alter what cannot be discarded or altered on clear scriptural authority. God is wonderful in his works. What he does not will, he clearly witness to in Scripture. What is not so witnessed to there, we can accept as his work. We are guiltless and he will not mislead us.”^{ix} Martin Chemnitz states: “Christian liberty regulates the apostolic rites” (*Examen* I, 135). And the Danish Lutheran church affirms: “Yet we do not despise all the outward ceremonies or old customs that are observed freely and may be dispensed with as the occasion requires.”^x

Appropriate forms in the church, therefore, were actually based on the fact that “the doctrine of the Gospel” was a common possession. For this reason there was an evangelical basis for the community of style, a community which extended not only horizontally to the Christians in the church at the time, but longitudinally to the church of the past. This is the reason why despite the historical gap, we still sing today the 3rd century hymn of Ambrose, “Savior of the Nations Come,” the 8th century hymn of Rhabanus Maurus, “Come Holy Ghost, Creator blest,” along with the 17th century song of Zinzendorf, “Jesus Thy Blood and Righteousness,” and more recent songs of the last century.

Whenever liturgical practice became more and more the province of an isolated group for social or cultural reasons and whenever the sense of the Gospel as the common possession of all was lost, disruption and impoverishment of forms resulted. Elert gives the following description of the Lutheran church in Germany during the era of Pietism and rationalism:

The number of services decreased steadily... There is a belief that within the services the church is obligated to increase the “Protestantizing” of the liturgy... Even the beauty of 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 the servile breed of parsons in the state church granted it private baptisms, private marriages, and “entombments” instead of public funerals. Pietism demands that in this way religious life be made private for the “unbelievers.” ... Zinzendorf then created his own style for worship, his pretty things and his societies for the promotion of Christian intimacy... That was the end in this field. Not until the nineteenth century was there a re-awakening of early Lutheranism’s sense of the forms appropriate to the church.^{xi}

The leaders in the renewal in worship realized that the forms of church work, like the Gospel that engenders them, are for the edification and practice of the *entire* congregation.

III The “and” of Our Question

Before closing, I would like to call attention to the difficulty inherent in the *and* of our question. We struggle in vain to separate the questions of the Scriptural and the traditional in our church work. For Scripture must be brought to bear on both, on what we preach and on our attitudes toward tradition. According to the Scripture, we can and must distinguish the content of our work from the form in which it is carried out. This is a necessary and good distinction. By this distinction we can see how the Scripture binds us to that which makes us free by faith and, at the same time, how Christ frees us to use forms through which we are bound to serve our neighbor in love. Such a distinction serves its purpose, especially in keeping our priorities straight. But the “and” by which we distinguish does not in reality disjoin the content and form of our church work because in carrying out our church work they interact and are conjoined. It is similar to the Scriptural distinction between works and faith. They must be distinguished in our preaching, lest we rely on works and not faith alone before God. Yet in our life faith and works are simultaneous and cannot be separated because faith works. If then our faith is disjoined from the life of faith and manner of work in the church, change in forms will become a thing unto itself. The forms then no longer serve the Gospel, nor do they remain the place where Christian love is exercised.

In the “*Screwtape Letters*” C. S. Lewis intends to show the wily ways of Satan in undermining God’s work by a series of letters from one devil’s advocate to another. In one letter Lewis has Screwtape diabolically writing to Wormwood about using the technique of the Same Old Thing on Christians. “What we want,” Screwtape suggests, “if men become Christians at all, is to keep them in a state of mind I call ‘Christianity And.’ You know—Christianity and the Crisis...Christianity and Vegetarianism.... If they must be Christians, let them be Christians with a difference. Substitute for faith itself some Fashion with a Christian colouring. Work on their horror of the Same Old Thing.”^{xii} In this way Wormwood was to get the Christians so distracted by questions of form and fashions or in opposing them that the real question of faith is neglected to the Christian’s confusion. The horror of the same old thing becomes the devil’s way of suggesting boredom with *mere* Christianity in favor of the more exciting Christianity And. The manna gets tasteless.

When our traditions have become detached from our ministry, when our Christian life is separated from our faith, when our practice is treated in isolation from our preaching, a foreign spirit sets in. When this happens, we are able to give easy answers to problems of forms in church work. But such is not the case. Difficult as it may be, those answers will come when we cultivate the Gospel and sacraments within the church and congregation. The Gospel will find its forms and not vice versa, as the parable of the new wine in the bottles tells us. So, we should not fear to change, nor change out of fear.^{xiii} The counsel is good. Changes will occur in the church. The traditions of today may not look exactly like those of the past, though their essential content remains the same. What is important is that we do not change or resist change out of fear, fear that the old ways will be lost, fear that we are not being relevant. But rather let us suffer God to guide us by His Word. The inter-relationship between our ministry and the forms of church work are a fruitful field for action, for the church to exercise its faith in love.

May God guide and bless our efforts in our ministry to the saints! The cause is his! Amen.

ⁱ Martin Franzmann, *The Word of the Lord Grows* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), p. 112.

ⁱⁱ Franzmann, p. 117.

ⁱⁱⁱ Donald Bloesch, *The Evangelical Renaissance* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1973), p. 24.

^{iv} The specific references to the writings of J. P. Koehler are: “Die Heiligung Geschieht Nicht mit Hurra” to be found in the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* (then known as the *Theologische Quartalschrift*, published in Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House), Vol. XVII, October, 1920, pp. 279-305. And “Legalism in our Midst,” W. W. Gieschen, trans., found in the *Proceedings* of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, Thirty-fifth convention, under the German title, “Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns,” pp. 121-164 (originally printed in the *Theologische Quartalschrift*, vol. XI and XII).

^v LW 31, “The Freedom of a Christian,” p. 373.

^{vi} E. Hertzsch ed., *Karlstadts Schriften aus den Jahren 1523-25* (Halle/Saale, 1956), “Dialogus oder ein gesprechbüchlin von dem grewlichen vund abgöttisch miszbrauch/des hochwirdigsten sacraments... 1524,” II, 25:1-16.

^{vii} LW 51, “Eight Sermons at Wittenberg,” pp. 71-74 passim.

^{viii} “Westminster Confession of 1647,” XXI, 1 as found in *Bekennnisse der Reformierten Kirche* and quoted in Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, Vol. 1, W. A. Hansen, trans. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), p. 327.

^{ix} LW 40, “Concerning Rebaptism,” p. 255.

^x Elert, p. 327, footnote 8.

^{xi} Elert, p. 335.

^{xii} C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961), p. 115.

^{xiii} The reference here is adapted from the first Inaugural Address of J. F. Kennedy: that we should not “fear to negotiate, nor negotiate out of fear.”