

Lutheran Worship: 2000 and Beyond

Seven Theses on Lutheran Worship

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*A Presentation to the Real Life Worship Conference
Sponsored by the LCMS Commission on Worship
Denver, Colorado
February 1998*

Introduction

Grace, mercy and peace to you from Him who is, who was and who is to come, Jesus Christ, our Light and our Life. As we find ourselves rapidly moving toward a new century and a new millennium, it is good for us to look ahead and see there what opportunities and challenges await us, specifically in regard to Lutheran worship. I have seven theses, or thoughts, I want to share with you. These theses build on one another and so you will notice as I move along that certain key themes and ideas will continue to surface as we move from thesis to thesis.

Thesis I

The Main Purpose of Lutheran Worship Is to Receive God's Gifts

If you were to ask most people what *worship* is, they might say, "Worship is praising the Lord" or "Worship is what human beings do to express their thanks to God" or "Worship is going to church," or something like that. While there is some truth to each of these answers, they do not adequately describe the main purpose of Lutheran worship.

We Lutherans have a unique perspective on worship. We know that God's Word and His holy Sacraments are His precious gifts to us. They are the tools the Holy Spirit uses to give us forgiveness, life and salvation. The main purpose of Lutheran worship is to receive these gifts from God.

Our Lutheran Confessions explain this truth as follows: "The service and worship of the Gospel is to receive good things from God" (Apology to the Augsburg Confession, Article IV.310).

I am not sure whether we have adequately emphasized this important truth. God gives His gifts. We receive them. That is the main purpose of Lutheran worship. He does this as His Gospel is proclaimed, as His Word is read, as His forgiveness is announced and sinners are absolved, and as we receive our Lord's body and blood in Holy Communion. In these wonderful ways, God is present with us, His people, drawing us to Himself and giving us what we need so much—His mercy, forgiveness, love, joy, peace, power and comfort! The purpose of worship, therefore, is to be gathered by God around His gifts.

Having clearly established this important point, I need to say that it would be wrong to assume that we are merely passive participants in the worship service. Listen to the beautiful introduction to *Lutheran Worship*.

Our Lord speaks and we listen. His Word bestows what it says. Faith that is born from what is heard acknowledges the gifts, received with eager thankfulness and praise...

Saying back to Him what he has said to us, we repeat what is most true and sure... The rhythm of our worship is from him to us, and then from us back to him. He gives his gifts, and together we receive and extol them. We build one another up as we speak to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Lutheran Worship, p. 6).

How true! God speaks. We listen. Then we speak the great "amen" of faith, saying, "Yes, yes, this is true!" Praise God for His mercy in permitting us to receive His gifts! Praise God for drawing us together around His gifts!

Thesis II

Lutheran Worship Is Christ-Centered

If the main purpose of Lutheran worship is to receive God's gifts, then it follows that Lutheran worship is Christ-centered. Just take a look at the liturgical orders of service in either of our two hymnals. Everything said and done is filled with His Word. Why? Because our focus is on Christ and His work, that's why. The focus of Lutheran worship is on Christ, not man. Therefore, Lutheran worship is always Christocentric (Christ-centered) and never anthropocentric (man-centered).

The Christ-centered nature of Lutheran worship has direct impact on every other aspect of our worship services. We hear His word read and preached. The hymns sung in our services give Him the glory, honor and praise. We spend a great deal of time singing His praises, and less time singing about our own personal spiritual experiences. With the focus on Christ, we notice that even the art in the church portrays the great saving events of our Lord's life and ministry and the great events of God's saving work among His people. Lutheran worship takes our eyes and sets them firmly on the cross of Jesus Christ, for there the Lord of the Universe suffered and died for the sins of the world. Lutheran worship points us to the Resurrected Lord who lives and reigns to all eternity, and promises us everlasting life. Christ-centered Lutheran worship lifts our hearts and minds to the things of God and helps us to understand our place in Christ's kingdom better as His redeemed people. Yes, Lutheran worship must always be Christ-centered.

When we say Lutheran worship is Christ-centered, this is not to say that those who gather for worship are mere blocks of stone. Our worship focuses on Christ, who is present for us and with us in His Word and Sacraments. He is truly among us. We are not contemplating a far-off Christ, or meditating on abstract ideas. Lutheran worship is not like going to a self-help group or a therapy session. It is God who gathers us for worship around the gifts He gives to us through Word and Sacrament. We are worshipping the One who is very near, as close as the preaching of the Word. We are worshipping the One who is actually present under the bread and wine of Holy Communion. He promised, "I will be with you always." In our worship service He fulfills that wonderful promise. He is living and active among us, right here, right now, where He has promised to be-in His Word and Sacraments. Therefore, it is important to say that while our focus is on Christ, His focus is always on us! Thanks be to God that this is true!

Thesis III

Lutheran Worship Is a Reflection of Lutheran Theology

The ancient church had a saying: "The law of prayer is the law of belief." In other words, how you pray is a reflection of what you believe. How a congregation conducts its worship service is a reflection of its theological convictions. Therefore, Lutheran worship must always be a clear reflection of Lutheran theology. This is a very important point.

When Martin Luther did the work God had given him to do in reforming the church, he did not throw out the historic liturgical worship of the church. His reforms were cautious and careful. Luther took the church's historic liturgical worship and removed the Roman Catholic errors that had crept into it. He brought the Gospel to the forefront and got rid of what conflicted with the Gospel. He did not discard the historic liturgy. Luther's concern was that the Gospel predominate and be the center of Lutheran worship. But unlike other reformers of the sixteenth century, Luther did not believe that the best way to preserve the Gospel in the church was by cutting off the church's connection to its historic liturgical practices. Luther recognized the great value of the church's liturgical worship.

While it is certainly true that we can and should borrow what is good from many traditions, Lutheran worship reflects the historic patterns of worship the church has known for thousands of years. Sometimes we hear people say that because the Reformation occurred in Germany, Lutheran worship is *German*. This is really quite untrue. Our Lutheran worship is in line with the historic worship of the church of the ages. We need to recognize that our worship reflects traditions that are Palestinian, African, East Asian, Greek, Italian, French, Spanish, German and so forth. The historic Christian worship service is rooted in thousands of years of tradition and reflects the contributions of many ethnic groups. In this way, Lutheran worship transcends contemporary culture and does not bind us to any one culture.

But again, let me return to our thesis: Lutheran worship must always reflect Lutheran theology. What does this mean for our worship services? It means that we will not go out of our way to discard the treasures of the Christian liturgical tradition, for we recognize that these are good forms that transcend time and culture. Because Lutheran worship reflects Lutheran theology, we notice a strong emphasis on the proclamation of God's Word, in both spoken and sung form. We notice a high regard for our Lord's presence in His Sacraments, with a particularly high regard for the Lord's Supper. Lutheran worship is shaped and molded by our firm belief that God the Holy Spirit is present and active in Word and Sacrament, creating a people for God and continually renewing the people of God.

But let us examine the flip side of this thesis. If Lutheran worship is a reflection of Lutheran theology, what do you think might happen if we were, for example, to begin to conduct our worship services in a manner similar to what one might find in a Baptist church, a Pentecostal church, or a non-denominational Evangelical church? Do you think it is reasonable to assume that if Lutherans worship like Baptists, it will probably not be too long before they believe as Baptists do? Or, if Lutherans worship like Charismatics, how long will it be before we embrace the doctrine and practices of the Charismatic movement? If we Lutherans recognize our roots and why we worship the way we do, it will probably also be true that we will wish to remain with that basic pattern of worship. As we contemplate changes in this pattern, we exercise restraint, care and caution, for we recognize that genuine Lutheran worship is a reflection of genuine Lutheran theology.

Thesis IV

Lutheran Worship Is Characterized by Reverence and Dignity

Building on our first three theses, it is important now to say that Lutheran worship needs to be characterized by reverence and dignity. I am concerned when I notice a movement away from a sense of reverence and dignity in our Lutheran worship. Let me speak plainly. I am troubled when I notice some of our pastors conducting the liturgy as if they were entertaining friends in their home, with little quips and humorous asides sprinkled throughout the service. This robs the

people of the opportunity to focus their thoughts on Jesus Christ. Such self-indulgence has no place in our worship services. A sense of reverent awe and dignity needs to permeate our Lutheran worship services.

Our Lutheran worship services should be known as truly sacred events, marked by a deep sense of the holiness and majesty of God. We need to realize that when we attend the worship service, truly holy things are going on. God is with us. He is present among us through Word and Sacrament. The great struggle of God against Satan is taking place as life and salvation are given out. These are serious matters. The angels in heaven sing, "Holy, holy, holy is God the Lord of Sabaoth!" and cover their faces at the sight of the holy God. Dare we behave in a manner that clearly conflicts with this wonderful sense of reverence and dignity?

Thesis V

Lutheran Worship Transcends Culture

It is very tempting for the Christian church to do whatever is popular for the moment in the culture around us. We need to recognize that Lutheran worship transcends culture. I am not saying that church is an "escape" from the world. This can never happen. I am saying that our worship services need to help us see clearly that when we gather as God's people, we have stepped out of our own human opinion and passing fads, and have moved into God's world.

We need to take great care in our worship practices that we not allow our church to be caught up in the latest trends that come along in our culture. We also need to take care that what we do in worship does genuinely communicate God's truths to God's people today. An excellent article appeared in a journal for church musicians that underscores the point I am trying to make under this thesis. Let me share a quote from the article:

Today's culture tells us that we deserve whatever we want whenever we want it. This mentality is rapidly invading the church. The ultimate blasphemy of a consumer 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 on God, rather than having God depend upon our ceaseless activities that may masquerade as gospel? (Collman, "The Tyranny of the Familiar," *The American Organist* [March 1995], p. 39).

These are strong words. We need to consider such words carefully. As we seek to reach out boldly with the Gospel, let us take care always to remember that our worship services are not merely one more way people can be amused or entertained. We need to be gathered by God to receive His gifts, and to hear His Word applied to our lives. Then we are equipped to go out into our world to serve Him who so wonderfully serves us with His Gospel. We gather in worship to be strengthened for service to our Lord in our daily callings in life, whatever they may be, wherever they may be. If our worship only reflects what we find in our world, then something has gone seriously wrong. If our worship services become only a little bit different from what we might experience at a rousing musical concert or an exciting sporting event, haven't we missed the mark?

We would not wish to give people the impression that there is one specific and distinct period of time we must emulate. That is why the Christian church's worship has developed slowly and gradually down through the centuries and why, from culture to culture, there are differences in the style of music and the forms used. Underneath it all, at least in the historic Christian traditions, of which Lutheranism is certainly a part, there are common patterns and forms of worship that have come down through the ages. These forms have served the church well, and will continue to serve us well as we move toward the year 2000 and beyond.

Thesis VI

Lutheran Worship Seeks to Edify Christ's Holy People

There is a beautiful prayer that we say at the end of some of our worship services. It goes like this: "Grant, we implore you, almighty God, to your Church your Holy Spirit and the wisdom which comes down from above, that your Word may not be bound, but have free course and be preached to the joy and edifying of Christ's holy people." When it comes to Lutheran worship, we could modify this prayer in this way: "Grant, we implore you, almighty God, to your Church your Holy Spirit and the wisdom which comes down from above, so that our worship services may be done for the joy and edifying of Christ's holy people."

In our Synod today, there is a genuine point of tension between well-intentioned people who feel differently about worship. Some have referred to "worship wars" in our Synod. As we express our concerns about what are sometimes even dramatic novelties and shifts away from our church's historic worship practices, we want to take great care that we do not trample underfoot those who may disagree with us. Nor do we need to pull out our six-guns and start blasting away, nor simply "write off" those with whom we may find ourselves in disagreement, no matter what side of these issues we are on.

As we struggle with questions of what is in the best interest of edifying Christ's people, we recognize that the greatest challenge is the need for catechesis, that is, teaching. Many of the people in our congregations have never had a good opportunity to learn what Lutheran worship is all about. It is dangerous when a congregation just does the worship service without ever knowing why. If a congregation's only explanation of why they worship the way they do is, "Because that's the way we've always done it," there is a great need for catechesis in that congregation. Ignorance about the liturgy is as great a danger as throwing out the church's liturgical worship. As we move toward the year 2000 and beyond, we have before us an incredible opportunity to teach the faith, and all the good, wholesome, Gospel-centered traditions of our faith. We must be very patient and loving as we work with people to help them appreciate the great liturgical heritage of the Lutheran Church.

In that connection, in order to edify Christ's people as they gather for worship, we need to take great care not to conduct the liturgy in a cold and lifeless manner. 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 Lutheran worship among us than worship done merely by "rote," with little feeling or joy. Our worship services need to be well done. They need to move along at a good pace. Pastors should be familiar with their parts of the liturgy. Organists need to be well rehearsed and committed to providing excellence in leading the singing and music of the service. Choirs should be dedicated to rehearsal and practice, to do the best they possibly can for the Lord and for the edification of Christ's holy people.

All we do in our worship services is as a reflection of our love for God and a response to the tremendous gifts He gives us in the worship service. A well-done liturgical service is truly a joyful and edifying experience. Excellent worship services draw us away from the humdrum hype and hoopla of Madison Avenue and Hollywood Boulevard and bring us into the "holy of Holies" of the Lord's presence where we receive His forgiveness through the Word and Sacraments. This is the goal of a well-done worship service. A poorly done service, on the other hand, detracts from the joy and edifying of Christ's holy people.

Another important way to make sure worship is truly edifying is to be sensitive to the needs of visitors to our worship services. I believe an over reaction to this concern is to say that our services are to be designed for visitors. The person who visits one of our Synod's congregations needs to be impressed with the truth that something awesome is taking place. The visitor may not immediately understand everything going on in the worship service. This will take time and patient instruction.

Let's use an illustration to make the point. Suppose you knew nothing about baseball and were asked to come to a Colorado Rockies baseball game. Do you suppose they would change what was happening down on the field just because you were a visitor who didn't know too much about baseball? No, of course not. They would play the game as it always has been played. But they would perhaps provide a scoreboard that would help you keep up with the game. Maybe someone would take you to the game, explain it to you, and talk about it with you afterwards to help you understand it even more. There would be books for you to read so you could learn more about baseball. I think you realize the point I am making.

We need to take great care to help our visitors appreciate and understand what is happening without changing things just so that every point is perfectly clear to the visitor. Excellent materials are available to help the visitor understand Lutheran worship. Our Synod's Commission on Worship produces an excellent quarterly insert in our Synod's monthly newspaper, Reporter. There is a tremendous book available, which is perhaps the most thorough-going, confessionally Lutheran presentation on worship that has ever appeared in English, titled, Lutheran Worship: History and Practice. There is a pocket-sized book titled Meaningful Worship: A Guide to the Lutheran Service, which would be good to use with new members and visitors. These books are available from Concordia Publishing House here in St. Louis.

"The joy and edifying of Christ's holy people" is one of the important goals we must continue to hold high before us as we discuss and work through these important issues. I commend to you the goal of careful catechesis, that is, teaching the people of our congregations what is involved in being a confessional Lutheran in our world today.

Thesis VII

Uniformity in Worship Practices Is a Blessing

As we look ahead toward the year 2000 and beyond, there is one more important question we need to ask ourselves. It is this: "What is the value of uniformity in worship practices across our Synod?" In a way, this is perhaps one of the most burning issues our church faces. There are two extremes to be avoided in answering that question. The one extreme would be the view that every congregation should simply do whatever it wishes, however it wishes, without any regard for the other congregations of our fellowship. The opposite extreme would be the view that everyone in the Synod must do precisely the same thing every Sunday, with the same words, the same songs,

the same liturgy, on the same page, from the same order of service, without any deviation, variety or change. I believe that neither of these extremes is acceptable.

There are those in our Synod who propose that every congregation in the Synod should simply do its own thing. They base this argument on the principle of *adiaphora*. In our Lutheran Church, the notion of *adiaphora* came up during a time when the Catholic rulers of portions of Germany attempted to force Lutherans to do certain things in their worship services, claiming that these things were part of the very Gospel itself. For instance, the Lutherans were told, "You must wear a certain kind of liturgical vestment or else you do not have a true worship service." The Lutherans responded, "If you tell us we must do this, then we cannot do it, for the Gospel does not depend on it. *Adiaphora* refers to things neither commanded nor forbidden by God.

I would like to suggest to you that we have gone a bit wrong with the principle of *adiaphora* recently in our Synod. The principle of *adiaphora* has become more than a rejection of what is being legalistically imposed on us in place of the pure Gospel. Instead, it has been turned into a license to do whatever pleases anyone, anywhere and anytime, without due regard for the benefit of the church and the edification of the people of our Synod. It is quite clear that none of our Lutheran fathers anticipated a day when liturgical anarchy and near chaos would be viewed as helpful for the church. The concern has always been, and must always be, on what best serves the need for good order in our church, so that the Gospel can have "free course and be preached to the joy and edifying of Christ's holy people."

Martin Chemnitz, one of the most important early theologians of our Lutheran Church, had this to say about why uniformity in worship practices is important:

...it brings all sorts of benefits that in ceremonies, as much as possible, a uniformity be maintained, and that such ceremonies serve to maintain unity in doctrine, and the 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. (Preus, *The Second Martin* [1994], p. 21-22).

Our Synod has always been concerned that uniformity in liturgical practices be maintained, for the good of the church. For without uniformity in practice, as I have mentioned earlier, how long will it be before we find ourselves no longer united in doctrine?

Keep in mind that our first synodical founders knew all too well how dangerous a thing it was to impose ceremonies legalistically on the church. They fled Germany to come to the United States in part because the government tried to force a non-Lutheran liturgy on them. There is no way anyone can accuse our founding fathers of being liturgical legalists. They knew all too well what happens in that sort of situation. With that in mind, listen to our Synod's first president, Dr. C.F.W. Walther, as he describes the strength of our Lutheran worship practices, and the benefit of being united in these practices:

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 Roman Catholicism in outward things. It is a pity and dreadful cowardice when a person sacrifices the good ancient church customs to please the deluded American denominations just so they won't accuse us of being Roman Catholic! 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 they can tell by our ceremonies that I do not belong to them? We are not insisting that there be uniformity in perception or feeling or taste among all believing Christians-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 Christians serve the great God publicly before the world... Someone may ask, "What would be the use of uniformity of ceremonies? We answer, "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." (Walther, *Essays for the Church* [1992], I:194).

Dr. Walther would want us to realize that in this country, precisely because we are surrounded by so many other churches, it is more important than ever that our Lutheran congregations strive for the greatest uniformity in practice as possible.

This is an important truth for us to keep in mind as our congregations consider changes in their worship services. Further, we would not be wise to suggest that one can never use another format for singing a portion of the liturgy or that one must never deviate one bit from, for instance, p. 15 of *The Lutheran Hymnal*. But the point remains, that uniformity in worship practices is a great blessing for the Lutheran church and certainly for our Synod. We need to consider how great a blessing uniformity in practice is as we evaluate the wisdom of every parish simply "doing its own thing" in its worship services.

Conclusion

As I look to the years ahead, I see many wonderful opportunities in the Lord. I am personally very excited about the opportunities that the Lord has for our Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. I suppose one could look toward these years with fear and trembling, and indeed, as we look around our world today, there is much to cause us concern, and even things within our own Synod that cause us concern.

But I would like to remind you that it is not really our church, it is the Lord's church. He is and always will be very much in control. You do not know how much reassurance I daily gain from that fact. The gifts He gives are His gifts. It is His Word. They are His Sacraments. We are His people. He promises to do what is best for us. He will continue to speak and we, by His grace, will continue to listen to Him, yes, listen to Him! Listen until that day when you shall see Him face to face. By His mercy, some day you too will join the countless number before His throne who worship Him day and night. There you will join with angels, archangels and all the company of heaven in singing the praises of Him who is the beginning and the end, the first and the last, the alpha and omega, even our Lord Jesus Christ, who with the Father and the Holy Spirit reigns as one God, world without end. May God bless all of you richly; yes, may He bless mightily.

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Jude 23-24

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