

Liturgical Uniformity?

✠ *In the name of Jesus.* ✠

The Wisconsin Synod has never, to my knowledge, been called “high church.” Not even by accident. Some revel in this. Some weep. Almost everyone has an opinion. That fact alone makes talking about worship and liturgy one of the third rails of theological conversation in the Lutheran Church. It makes one think of Hermann Göring’s joke in the film *Nuremberg*. “What do you have when you have one German? A fine man. Two? A *Bund*. Three? A war.” When you discuss worship – the liturgy, *Gottesdienst*, the Divine Service, the Mass, what have you – talk to three people, you will find four opinions. Or a war.

This is the problem we have when we discuss liturgical uniformity. What are we discussing? Are we discussing a particular rite in a particular hymnal? Are we discussing some sort of platonic ideal – “the liturgy” – floating around in heaven? Are we discussing a general philosophy? What do we mean by uniformity? Do we mean lockstep adherence to one particular form? Do we mean a general structural similarity? Do we mean uniformity in a congregation, a circuit, a district, a synod? And what is the source of that uniformity? Does it come from moral persuasion or legislative fiat? None of this addresses the key question: is uniformity necessary or beneficial?

As I said before, this is a theological third rail. If I say that we should have liturgical uniformity, there will be those who come out of the woodwork with pitchforks and cudgels declaring, “Legalist! All things are free! There are no New Testament laws!” If I speak against liturgical uniformity, there will be others coming out of the woodwork with their pitchforks and cudgels declaring, “You’ve

betrayed your oath to the Confessions! You’re no Lutheran! Go back to your praise bands, you Methobaptipentepalian!”

We stand firmly on the third rail now. Sides have been drawn. Either you are liturgically *laissez faire* or a ritualist. Either you are a hubris-filled sectarian or a hopelessly rigid repristinator. Either you declare uniformity unnecessary (in fact, harmful!) or you declare uniformity necessary to orthodoxy, not only beneficial, but of the essence of the Church. Either you are for freedom or for unity. There seems to be no middle ground, no demilitarized zone, between Evangelical chaos and sarcastic self-destruction. You either hate Jesus and the souls he came to save, or you hate Jesus and the means of grace he instituted. You are either orthodox or a heretic. You are either a squishy Pietist or a hardcase filled with sarcastic loathing, dripping with snark and snobbery.¹

These are not caricatures. You have been part of the discussions. This is how it is. Few people speak reasonably and rationally about forms of worship, the liturgy, the means of grace. You either love Jesus or you love the liturgy. It seems you cannot do both. You are either for reaching people with the gospel or you have a closed mind. Part of the problem, as James Waddell notes, is that this is all

¹ For a treatment of this battle, see James Alan Waddell, *The Struggle to Reclaim the Liturgy in the Lutheran Church: Adiaphora in Historical, Theological, and Practical Perspective* (2005). For an example of snobbery, confer this sample of a review of *Christian Worship* by Paul Alliet in 1994, “Why every recent Lutheran hymnal has seen fit to include ‘How Great Thou Art’ is a mystery to me. I recognize, however, that there are many who, for reasons I cannot guess, love it and manage, by a process I cannot fathom, to be edified by it” (54).

intensely personal (Waddell, ii). When we discuss the liturgy we discuss the thing we spend most of our time working on and thinking about and doing. We do this with the most people. It identifies us. We can quantify it. "How many people did you have in church this week?" "How did the hymns go?" "How was the sermon?" "How many people came to communion?" It is also the thing we are judged on most quickly. "Those hymns were terrible!" "How come we're using that order of service?" "I loved x, y, or z." "I hated x, y, z." "The organist could speed it up/slow it down." "Our previous pastor didn't wear that/say that/smell like that." As pastors, the Divine Service, in many ways, defines us. We find much – though, certainly, not all – of our identity in it.

All of that is true, even though we find ourselves shepherding in a decidedly (and sometimes ferociously) low-church synod. This, too, is part of what makes this conversation a third rail kind of thing.

Maybe before we approach any sort of solution or answer about liturgical uniformity, we should remember who we are. This is how August Pieper famously put it: "*Wir sind in der Wisconsin Synode; wir machen keine 'show.'*" "We are in the Wisconsin Synod; we don't put on a show" (Braun, 5).²

Or, as Victor Prange assesses another of the Wauwatosa theologians, J.P. Koehler, "Koehler shows an appreciation for protestantism; one misses an equal appreciation for that which is

² You can find this and more in Braun's engaging essay, subtitled "The Black Geneva Piety of the Wisconsin Synod." If you want to listen to a conversation about the essay and the issues it deals with, check out Episode 29 of the podcast, *Let the Bird Fly*, www.letthebirdfly.com. You can also find it in the Fall and Winter 2006 issues of the *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly*.

catholic. Koehler speaks of how the life of the church so easily becomes 'materialistic.' At times one gets the feeling that Koehler would have felt right at home in a Zwinglian church building cleansed of all distractions so that in that plain and bare setting the Word alone could impact the soul. Koehler appreciated hymnody; I find little evidence that he cared much for the liturgy. The liturgy is catholic; hymnody is protestant" (Prange, "Review of J.P. Koehler's, 'The History of the Wisconsin Synod,'" 40).

Or, there were the remarks made in defense of the 1917 hymnal of the Wisconsin Synod. They argued for moving the *Agnus Dei* away from its traditional spot in connection with the Lord's Supper to immediately following the confession, and then made "another incredulous observation: 'We believe the average churchgoer will thank us for not putting in more than one Scripture lesson'" (Tiefel, "Formation and Flow of Worship Attitudes," in *Not Unto Us*, 153).

Or, as another pastor reportedly said, "When you make those liturgies, make them as different as you can. I want my people to know instantly when they're not in a WELS church" (Tiefel, "Toward a Liturgical Unity", 22).

Or, there was the picture on the cover of *The Northwestern Lutheran* in 1988. It showed the synod president and others wearing albs and stoles. This prompted "several letters of outrage (not printed in subsequent issues of *The Northwestern Lutheran*), one of which charged the wearers with sinning, denying the Lutheran Confessions, and causing serious offense" (Braun, 25-26).

Of course, you cannot forget what James Tiefel terms the "thousand pound gorilla on our synodical back": "this anti-Catholic thing" (Tiefel, "Treasures Old and New", 11).

But, lest you think it is just us liturgically knuckle-dragging Wisconsin Synod types, it is not. Hermann Sasse, in 1949, laments, "The church of the present day lives in a world which no longer prays and which can no longer pray" (*Ecclesia Orans*," 77).

In 2004, Al Collver wrote, "Recently, a layperson asked, 'Has the church always been fighting over worship?' The first impulsive response was, 'No, of course not. There was a time when the church was unified in her worship. Once upon a time, there was one hymnal commonly used in almost every Lutheran church in America. Once upon a time every congregation worshiped the same way; a person could visit one church and be reasonably certain that the same worship would be found across the Synod. These were the good old days.' The Preacher reminds us, 'Say not, "Why were the former days better than these?" For it is not from wisdom that you ask this' (Eccl 7:10). Upon further reflection, the verity of the impulsive response was called into question. When one looks back over the history of the church, it becomes fairly apparent that worship has been an issue in the church from the very beginning" (Collver, 51).

Indeed. Paul addressed worship issues in his letters because it is a universal struggle. In Romans 14 he reminds us that certain days and certain foods are neither right nor wrong. Colossians 2 addresses that same topic. So does 1 Corinthians 10-14. It began in Corinth with troubles at the Lord's Table and ended with problems having to do with the preaching office. In between we find Paul's exhortation to love. "The greatest of these is love." Even then the Divine Service electrified the Church and caused sparks to fly.

In the early centuries of the Church, the Quartodeciman controversy broke out, when

the eastern and western churches battled over the date of Easter. Should it be fixed on a Sunday or should it fall on the 15th of Nisan, regardless of the day of the week?

As we prepare to celebrate the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation, we recall the struggles over the liturgy and worship in the sixteenth century. Those struggles required our Lutheran fathers to write articles seven, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, twenty-two, twenty-four, twenty-six, and twenty-eight of the *Augsburg Confession* (along with their corresponding articles in the *Apology*). Then, about fifty years later, the second generation of Lutherans needed to write article ten of the *Formula of Concord*. These articles touched on those things that define the Church and have always defined the Church, as Acts 2:42 teaches, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."

Here is what the Church and her liturgy is about. God serves us with his means of grace. Norman Nagel said it well. "...what we have in the liturgy is what has been going on for as long as the church has been going on.... Take the means of grace out of the liturgy and you haven't got much left" (Nagel, 24, 26).

This contributes to our problems when we discuss worship and the liturgy. We get bogged down in a discussion of *forms*. We talk about certain songs or styles of music. We talk about certain instruments. We talk about styles of preaching. We talk about what the pastor is or is not wearing. We talk about certain parts of certain rites or certain gestures within those rites. Not that these things are unimportant. They were important enough for the Jerusalem church to issue some "rules" about the piety of Gentile Christians, "You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat

of strangled animals" (Acts 15:29). They were important enough for Paul to lay down some rules about prophesying (1 Cor 11 and 14). They were important enough for God to be very specific about what Israelite priests wore, what animals they sacrificed, what the Tabernacle looked like, and how the Jewish religious calendar flowed (cf. Exodus 23-31, Leviticus, Numbers 3-9, 15, 18, 28-29, Deuteronomy 12-18, 23, 26). We scoff at these things or dismiss them at our own peril.

On the other hand, they are not the essence of the matter. Paul said, "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom 14:17). He advises Timothy and Titus repeatedly to avoid foolish quarrels and stupid arguments. Interestingly, the word for "foolish" gives us our English word "moronic." Jesus advises us against elevating the traditions of men to an equal status with the Word of God (Matt 15/Mk 7). We can pile up the passages on this score, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free" (Gal 5:1).

But we have to do...something! That we are flesh and blood means our preaching and administration of the means of grace take on flesh and blood forms. This is the assumption not only of Scripture (cf. Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy again) but also of our Confessions. They simply assume that we will have and maintain "rites or ceremonies instituted by men" (AC VII:3).

And they, as Scripture seemingly does, speak out of both sides of their mouth. What does that mean? Well, on the one hand, Scripture says, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free," but also, "I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought" (1

Cor 1:10). Literally, Paul says, "I encourage you...so that you would all speak the same things." You have Romans 14, where Paul says do not judge each other according to your view of days or food, "Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves" (v22), but also Ephesians 4, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (v3).

Then you have Paul's great worship section, 1 Corinthians 10-14. He says, "Everything is permissible" *and* "not everything is beneficial." "Everything is permissible" *but* "not everything is constructive." He says the body of Christ is made up of many diverse parts, we are not all the same *and* "All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church." "God is not a God of disorder but of peace" and "Everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way."

Our Confessions do the same. They say that rites and ceremonies need not be everywhere the same, diversity in fasting is not divisive of fellowship, and yet we happily maintain the rites and ceremonies we have known for centuries, even if they are burdensome to us. They confess that churches have the right to make use of and change rites and ceremonies as needed and that we should not judge each other based on having more or less ceremonies, and yet we have not abolished the Mass in any way. In fact, we do it better than the rest. More, "It can easily be judged that if the churches observed ceremonies correctly, their dignity would be maintained and reverence and piety would increase among the people" (AC, "Review of Various Abuses that Have Been Corrected," 6).

This is not equivocating. It is rightly handling the word of truth and avoiding the usual false dilemmas that these debates present us with. Freedom and unity are not opposed to each other. Mission and doctrine are not opposed

to each other. Liturgical uniformity can be both an act of freedom and unity.

Paul and Jesus prove this. They worshiped in the synagogue. They followed the ritual order of lessons and prayers, that is, the liturgy, much of which we inherited. They followed the rhythms of the Church year, attending feasts and festivals and carrying out vows. Yet Christ could say, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mk 2:27). Paul spoke those oft-abused words "Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings" (1 Cor 9:19-23). Paul does not put all his eggs in the basket of freedom, "Everything is permissible! Do whatever you want!" By no means! Rather, Paul understood the freedom we have within our unity. We are united in Christ and the doctrine of Scripture. A variety of forms can express that unity.

I suspect you are still waiting for me to commit myself. "So, do we enforce liturgical uniformity or not?" Perhaps we should define something. What is the liturgy? Is it the *Common Service*? Which one? Is it the Western Rite or one of the Eastern rites? Is it your list of ordinaries or my list of ordinaries? Is it your set of proper prefaces or mine? Your list of minor festivals and saints' days or mine?

See, again, the problem is we get bogged down in the conversation of specific forms. We would be best served to talk about style over against forms. This is the way of Scripture and the Confessions. The Old Testament speaks specifically, very specifically, in great detail, about specific forms. The New Testament speaks more broadly and generically. Our Confessions list some examples – vestments, lessons, calendars, the Mass – but they do not offer lists of approved prayers, hymns, rites, etc. There are no lists of approved and unapproved things, as we find to both the right and the left of us. The Reformed and Calvinists tend to make lists. The Roman Catholic Church tends to proscribe things and have indices of that which is forbidden. Lutherans do not do that. Even in the church orders you find they tend to avoid naming every possible name and regulating every possible detail. Rather, they focus on purifying the Mass, that is, preaching the gospel rightly and administering the sacraments according to their institution. Only that which is "decisively unevangelical" is avoided or removed (Zeeden, 36).³ If we talked style or structure, we might get a little bit farther in our conversations. We might learn to better find our unity in our freedom and our freedom within our unity.

When we talk about liturgy, we need to talk about a general outline of ordinaries and propers, a calendar, and the administration of the Sacrament. This is the style, the general format, the core that has been developed and passed down both in East and West, dating back into the synagogue and among every

³ Zeeden points out that in the early decades of Lutheranism, as it remains yet today, people debated just what exactly was "decisively unevangelical." This accounted for some variations between the various regions and church orders.

nation, tribe, people, and language. It is not northern European or German or Lutheran. It is Christian. We have certain recurring features and certain varying features. We have a Church year, a calendar. We preach and join together for the meal. For all the freedom and variety you can find all around the world all through the ages, still, you find an amazing degree of "structural sameness" (Christie, "Lutheran Liturgy and Evangelism," 15-16). Or, as Solomon said, "There's nothing new under the sun" (Eccl 1:9). Indeed, this again takes us back to the first Christians in Jerusalem after Pentecost. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching (preaching) and to the fellowship (both socially and in terms of Divine Service), to the breaking of bread (the Sacrament) and to prayer (the structured prayer life they had known as Jews, along with the worship structure of Sabbath services).

Notice, these are things we can agree upon: preaching, fellowship, sacrament, prayer. This is not practicing lowest common denominator ecumenicalism. "Can't we all just get along?!" Instead, this takes a realistic view of the topic. When we start getting into specific details and minutiae, that is when the anger, the debate, the rage, the snark, the sarcasm, and the heresy hunting begins. Unnecessarily so.

But it happens, because, as the Scriptures and the Confessions make plain, we are flesh and blood people. So our worship of God takes flesh and blood forms. It is made up of ceremonies and rites. This is life (think of all the forms and rites in sports, weddings, and graduations). God's arrow-down activities, God's service to us, take place in the context of rites and ceremonies. They cannot but. Preaching happens from a pulpit by a man and there are movements and words. God pours out his holy water upon a child by that same man. These beg for routines and they

have them: movements, words, elements. The life-giving body and blood of Christ comes in the context of words spoken, prayers offered, the fellowship gathered (standing or kneeling), holding out their hands or their tongues, receiving, eating, being forgiven.

Among the necessary things – preaching the gospel, administering the sacraments – there cannot but be some sort of ritual, form, or ceremony. No matter what kind of church you belong to there will be ritual, form, or ceremony, that is, liturgy. Again, I am not saying, "Don't get all hung up over things." I am not saying that there are not some things better or more constructive. I think there are.

What I am trying to get to in my own plodding way is that we must wonder if we have, in some way, put too much weight and burden on the liturgy. And here I do not mean the means of grace. We must put all of our weight upon the means of grace. Rather, it is the idea of "liturgy," in that platonic sense of some sort of heavenly ideal, the perfect thing, the invisible form that we search for constantly.

Already in Luther's day they sensed this. In the 1528 *Instructions for Visitors of Parish Pastors*, prepared by Melancthon for the first great visitation (LW 40:263-320), it says, "It is obvious that much confusion has resulted from an unrestrained preaching about church order. Therefore the pastors have been admonished to give greater attention to important subjects, such as Christian repentance, as treated above, faith, good works, the fear of God, prayer, the honoring of God, regard for parents, the education of children, respect for government, not to envy, not to bear hate, not to injure or kill any one, chastity, living virtuously in marriage, not to be greedy, not to steal, not to drink intemperately, not to lie, to slander no one. These subjects are of greater importance than

the eating of meat on Friday and the like, however correct such may be before God and conscience" (297-298).

In other words, the visitors encouraged the parishes and their pastors not to spend all their time discussing and debating the Divine Service and the liturgy. Not because it was not important. It is important. It is the most important thing we do together. But because it so quickly devolves into those logomachies and battles that Paul warns Timothy and Titus about. And, sadly, these debates, which, I suspect, like the framers of the Constitution in regard to certain of our amendments, our Lutheran fathers never envisioned, have taken on a weight all out of proportion to their actual import. Tiefel reminds us, "God has not asked us to grow the church" (Tiefel, "Liturgical Worship for Church Planters"). Yet we convinced ourselves that if we use this form or that ceremony, if we drop this or add that, then, then, we will finally experience that growth, that success. Both sides say such things. The contemporary side says, "This will bring in the kids, the unchurched, or the millennials." And the liturgical side says, "Ah, ah, wait, studies say millennials want transcendence." But too often we end up only talking about the form, not the substance. Then we run into the great danger. We become the Pharisees from which we run. Bo Giertz said it well: "Since by nature all of us are veritable Pharisees and are so sure that we can be saved by our own good deeds, a liturgical renewal without a corresponding awakening of the conscience can mean nothing more than that a given number of people have begun to fulfill a certain number of pious exercises in the conviction that they are now making further deposits in the savings bank of heavenly merit. With such a renewal the devil himself will be very well satisfied" (Giertz, 11).

Because we forget, and we get all wrapped up in our great debate over forms and ceremonies and rituals. We forget that it is not form or ritual or ceremony that brings people to Christ. It is the Holy Spirit calling, gathering, enlightening, and forgiving through the Scriptures that animate those forms. Hermann Sasse: "Men did not come to the church in the early days of the Faith because of the beauty of liturgy. The cult of the Egyptian goddess Isis and the cult of the Unconquered Sun, judged by the purely aesthetic standards, were probably much more sensuously beautiful than the simple Eucharistic celebrations of the early church. Yet if we could ask these ancient worshippers what attracted them in the liturgy of the Christian church, they would answer, 'We come to the church because we have found here not an imaginary but a real Saviour, and thereby we have discovered in the Christian liturgy a fairness that transcends all earthly beauty'" (Sasse, "Liturgy and Lutheranism," 42).

So do not be surprised that when the Scriptures or our Confessions discuss the work of the Church they talk about preaching and the Mass. Over and over again. The *Apology* gives us our surefire strategy for "growth": "If we must speak of outward appearances, Church attendance among us is better than among the adversaries. The audiences are held by useful and clear sermons. (Neither the people nor the teachers have ever understood the doctrine of the adversaries.) There is nothing that keeps people at church more than good preaching. The true adornment of the churches is godly, useful, and clear doctrine, the devout use of the Sacraments, fervent prayer, and the like. Candles, golden vessels, and similar adornments are fitting, but they are not the specifically unique adornment belonging to the Church. If the adversaries make these things the focus of worship, and not the

preaching of the Gospel, in faith (and the struggles of faith) they are to be numbered among those whom Daniel describes as worshipping their god with gold and silver" (*Ap XXIV:50-51*).

For here, in the preaching and the sacrament, in the devotion to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer, we have what Harold Senkbeil called "God's intrusions" (Senkbeil, 150). This is what the liturgy is and is for. "We come expecting to meet God" (Senkbeil, 178). And we do. In the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments, God comes down from on high to me because I cannot rise up to him. It is discomfoting. It is discombobulating. It is at the same time comforting. But it is not always, nor should it always be comfortable. After all, remember our nature: dead in sins, hostile to God, unable to understand (Eph 2:1, Rom 8:7, 1 Cor 2:14). Even in Christ, I remain at war with God in my old self. "Baptism means that the old man in us should be drowned by *daily* contrition and repentance" (*SC, Baptism, 4*). "In this Christian Church he *daily and fully* forgives sins to me and all believers" (*SC, Creed, 3*). "Therefore, the Mass is to be used for administering the Sacrament to those that need consolation. Ambrose says, 'Because I always sin, I always need to take the medicine'" (*AC, XXIV:33*).

This is how Luther approached his liturgical work. If you have not already, read volume 53 of *Luther's Works*. Do not stop there. Read also his *Invocavit Sermons* of 1522 and *Freedom of a Christian*. These are not hidden gems of Luther, so I suggest nothing radical. Except, maybe I am. Read them and actually listen. No matter what side of the debate you are on in terms of liturgical uniformity, you might be surprised. I would say the same about the Scriptures and the Confessions. In every case they speak out of both sides of their mouth.

They speak for uniformity and freedom. They speak about keeping central Christ, forgiveness, and justification by faith alone. When that is done, the other things tend to fall into place.

So, for example, in 1522, when Luther scolds his Wittenbergers during that epic *Invocavit* week for their iconoclasm, he can say both, "How could you! How could you tear down these things! We will continue to act in the same ways we acted before when we were good Catholics!" and also, "Yet you know that these things do not matter!" But when it came right down to it, he refused to make rules, laws, and demands. He refused to compel consciences. He said, "Just preach!" Famously, "I did nothing, the Word did everything."

Likewise, in the following years, when he saw fit to address liturgical reform and renewal, he made it clear that he was speaking in terms of "friendly exhortation" (*LW 53:46*). He would demand nothing, compel nothing, enforce nothing. At the same time, he hoped that there would be some level of uniformity among the regions, territories, and churches; but he would not demand this or make his rite the only right (rite?) way.

He pointed out in 1530, in his *Admonition Concerning the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of our Lord* (*LW 38:91-137*), that God himself abolished his own divine forms, those Old Testament ceremonies and rituals. He did it dramatically. "In saying this, Jesus declared all foods 'clean'" (Mk 7:19b). "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean" (Acts 10:15). "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mk 2:27).

Then he lasered in on the main thing. "Now if you want to engage in a marvelous, great worship of God and honor Christ's passion rightly, then remember and participate in the

sacrament; in it, as you hear, there is a remembrance of him, that is, he is praised and glorified. If you practice or assist in practicing this same remembrance with diligence, then you will assuredly forget about the self-chosen forms of worship, for, as has been said, you cannot praise and thank God too often or too much for his grace revealed in Christ" (LW 38:106).

Again, "It is true that such worship takes place devoid of all splendor and does not appeal to the eye according to the flesh; but it fills the heart, which otherwise neither heaven nor earth could fill. If the heart is filled, then also eyes and ears, mouth and nose, body and soul, and all members must be filled. For the way the heart behaves, so all the members behave and act, and each and every thing you do is nothing but an expression of the praise and thanks to God. That is then a different ornament and embellishment from the golden chasubles, yes, from imperial, royal, papal crowns; the ornaments and glitter of all churches and all the world are as refuse compared with this glorious remembrance of Christ. A single expression of this divine worship rings clearer, sounds better, chimes further than all drums, trumpets, organs, bells, and whatever else on earth may produce sounds even if they were all in one place and would all simultaneously ring out with all their might. That is indeed a different sound and song from all songs and sounds on earth, and yet it sounds insignificant as it enters the ears; but coming from within, from the heart, it sounds so mighty that you think all living creatures are making the same sound and all external human song is by comparison altogether silent" (LW 38:107-108).

Or, as Luther might have said it if he were as pithy as me, "Get the Mass or go home!" "Now the nearer our masses are to the first mass of Christ, the better they undoubtedly are; and

the further from Christ's mass, the more dangerous. For that reason we may not boast of ourselves, over against the Russians or the Greeks, that we alone celebrate mass properly, any more than a priest who wears a red chasuble may boast over against him who wears one of white or black. For such external additions or differences may by their dissimilarity produce sects and dissension, but they can never make the mass better. Although I neither wish nor am able to displace or discard such additions, still, because such pompous forms are perilous, we must never permit ourselves to be led away by them from the simple institution of Christ and from the right use of the mass. And, indeed, the greatest and most useful art is to know what really and essentially belongs to the mass, and what is added and foreign to it.... If we desire to observe mass properly and to understand it, then we must surrender everything that the eyes behold and that the senses suggest—be it vestments, bells, songs, ornaments, prayers, processions, elevations, prostrations, or whatever happens in the mass—until we first grasp and thoroughly ponder the words of Christ, by which he performed and instituted the mass and commanded us to perform it. For therein lies the whole mass, its nature, work, profit, and benefit. Without the words nothing is derived from the mass" (LW 35:81-82).

Or, as Peter Berg wrote in *The Motley Magpie*, "We must also remember that the Christian's goal is not the well-ordered life, but to go to heaven, period" (Berg, "The Mass is the Heart and Life of the Church," 4). Then he went on to say, "The forgiveness of sins, distributed in gospel and sacrament, assure him of his salvation, and they are powerful pardons which move him to help his neighbor in every bodily need. Indeed, the believer consumes the Supper that he might be consumed in service to his fellow man. Good deeds follow

as a matter of course, for faith is a living and active thing, and the Christ, who lives within, continues to carry out his ministry of compassion here on earth through His believers" (Ibid.).

Yes, the Mass, the Sacrament, the means of grace, that is the main thing. The closer to Jesus the better! We need daily and full forgiveness. But, but, but, something will flow from that. Paul says, "Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again" (2 Cor 5:14-15). You say, "That has nothing to do with liturgy!" I say, "Duh!" But it does have to do with fruits of faith. "By their fruits you will know them." "Faith precedes, love follows." Forms, rituals, ceremonies, these are fruits of faith. They express our heart.

In the context of the Divine Service, worship, church, the Mass, whatever you call it (and we can defend all these names), those fruits center around how we preach the Word and administer the sacraments. This brings us to the liturgy and allows us to touch on uniformity.

Here are two things you cannot debate. There has never been perfect uniformity within the Church. I am not just talking about the Lutheran Church, but the whole Christian Church. Read any book on liturgical history.⁴ Imagine a color. Someone, somewhere used it for one of the seasons of the Church Year. Our Confessions speak of this repeatedly and made it part of their case against so-called "universal rites." They say, "Even among you

⁴ One I recommend is *The Christian Year* by Edward Horn (1957). Another, *Worship Without Words* by Patricia Klein (2000).

there is diversity." Then, "Diversity in human rites doesn't break fellowship" (e.g. AC XXVI:40-44). So, a fair reading of the Confessions, which accurately reflect Scripture, is that there is no universally agreed upon or compelled rite, ritual, or ceremony to be used within the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Boom! Down goes liturgical uniformity!

Not so fast, my friends. A fair reading of the Confessions also makes it clear that while diversity in fasting is not divisive of fellowship and churches of God have the right to add or subtract ceremonies according to their needs and we are not to judge each other based on more or less ceremonies (e.g., FC X) – pause, take a breath, this is a very Germanic sentence – at the same time, it cannot be debated that our Lutheran Confessions fell down on the side of preferring liturgical uniformity insofar as it can be achieved.

"What, then, are we to think of the Sunday rites, and similar things, in God's house? We answer that it is lawful for bishops, or pastors, to make ordinances so that things will be done orderly in the Church, but not to teach that we merit grace or make satisfaction for sins. Consciences are not bound to regard them as necessary services and to think that it is a sin to break them without offense to others. So in 1 Corinthians 11:5, Paul concludes that women should cover their heads in the congregation and in 1 Corinthians 14:30, that interpreters be heard in order in the church, and so on. It is proper that the churches keep such ordinances for the sake of love and tranquility, to avoid giving offense to another, so that all things be done in the churches in order, and without confusion (1 Corinthians 14:40; comp. Philippians 2:14)" (AC XXVIII:53-55).

"However, it is pleasing to us that, for the sake of peace, universal ceremonies are kept. We

also willingly keep the order of the Mass in the churches, the Lord's Day, and other more famous festival days. With a very grateful mind we include the beneficial and ancient ordinances, especially since they contain a discipline" (Ap VII/VIII:33).

"...we gladly keep the ancient traditions..." (Ap XV:38ff).

"Still, we teach that freedom should be so controlled that the inexperienced may not be offended and, because of freedom's abuse, may not become more opposed to the true doctrine of the Gospel. Nothing in customary rites should be changed without a reasonable cause. So to nurture unity, old customs that can be kept without sin or great inconvenience should be kept. In this very assembly we have shown well enough that for love's sake we do not refuse to keep adiaphora with others, even though they may be burdensome. We have judged that such public unity, which could indeed be produced without offending consciences, should be preferred. We shall speak about this entire subject later, when we present on vows and Church authority" (Ap XV:51-52).

So, if we wished to be a bit snarky in our day and age, we might say, "We have a hymnal, deal with it!" And use it. This is our Church Order: the hymnal. We have agreed upon this as a group of Christians (a "church of God"). It certainly is not perfect, but it is what we have. Plumb its depths before you run off to other waters that we have not agreed upon and may or may not be better. Why would we bother? Do you wish to make the people followers of you rather than Christ? Do you wish them to become part of a congregation that makes it impossible for them to go to any other congregation in peace or good conscience? Do you want to ruin it for the guy who follows you? This goes both ways. We

watch out for being so far out of the curve in both liturgical and contemporary terms.

Again, this was not, and is not, uniformity for uniformity's sake. Our Confessions offer many good reasons for why they maintained the rites they knew (purged of papal abuses) and encouraged maintaining this style of worship. It is a list you know well. We do these things – even though we do not need them ("They have no need of holy days," LC I:83) – so that

- we know when to meet (Heb 10:25);
- we know what will be taught on a given day, or this year (Rom 10:14-17);
- we regularly have opportunity to hear the Word and receive the Sacrament (Acts 2:42; to paraphrase Luther in the *Large Catechism*, "Do this does not mean, 'Do not do this.'");
- we maintain good order (1 Cor 14:33);
- we promote peace among ourselves (Rom 12:18, Eph 4:1-7);
- we do not unnecessarily offend brothers and sisters (1 Cor 10-14);
- we maintain tranquility and an ability to work together, rather than causing division (3 Jn, 1 Cor 8, 10, 13; Rom 14);
- we outwardly display in some form or fashion the inward unity we have in the faith (Eph 4:1-7, Jn 17:21);
- we discipline ourselves to learn, to grow, and to be humble (Rom 12:1-6);
- we learn to ask "What do people need" not, "What should people do" (Lk 10:42);
- we love the weak among us and love our neighbor (Rom 14, Matt 22:34-40).

Notice, none of this limits us to one particular form, ritual, or ceremony. Rather, they undergird every conversation we have and decision we make. They show us that the question the Pharisees asked in Mark 7:5, while in their case motivated by hypocrisy, is

not necessarily a terrible question when asked with a good heart, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders?" This is a fair question to ask when someone does something different. It is not the end of a discussion or a trump card. It is, simply, a fair question. If something has been consistent, time-tested, orderly, and dignified, what great need motivates the change? If it proclaims the gospel and administers the sacraments rightly, why must things be done differently? The *Formula of Concord* puts it nicely. "From this explanation everyone can understand what every Christian community and every Christian person are to do or to leave undone, without injury to conscience, with respect to adiaphora. This applies most of all to preachers. In this way God may not be angered, love may not be injured, the enemies of God's Word may not be strengthened, nor the weak in faith offended" (FC SD X:25). Do not anger God. Do not injure love. Do not strengthen God's enemies. Do not offend the weak. Those are four good things to avoid.

So, what do we do? Of course, we "contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3). Then we realize that in the Divine Service we contend most of all. "When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God" (Ps 73:16-17a). Here God has provided the place where, as Richard Neuhaus said, most of our pastoral counseling happens: altar, font, lectern, pulpit (cf. Prange, "Improving the Liturgical Section for the New Hymnal").

That means all this stuff matters. We cannot content ourselves with our typically lazy answer, "It's all just adiaphora anyway." Adiaphora does not mean you stop thinking about something. It means you have to think more. It is easier if God commands or forbids

something. "Whew! That's settled!" Adiaphora means that God left things unsettled.

So, of course, we go *ad fontes*. We question our assumptions by returning to the Word and to our Lutheran Confessions. Perhaps we can take to heart something else Peter Berg wrote in *The Motley Magpie*. Perhaps we need to admit that our admittedly (and proudly?) low-church group needs to spend more time in church history and liturgics (cf. Berg, "Thoughts on a Seminary Curriculum"). Maybe we do not know everything we think we do. Maybe we should admit that since we have really only engaged these issues for seventy years we are still growing into understanding, comprehending, and being comfortable with the liturgy and liturgical things. Maybe?

When we go back to the sources, *ad fontes*, it helps us to make sure the things we say are not simply old, tired clichés or unproven dictums. Is form absolutely neutral? Does it inevitably bring with it all the baggage it could carry? Is the church defined liturgically? Does *lex orandi lex credendi* mean that the liturgy defines dogma, dogma liturgy, or both? Is it true that we should only worry about becoming Evangelicals by importing revival forms and not also Roman Catholics by importing theirs? Are we importing someone's forms? Does "good" equal "necessary"? Was Luther on my side or yours? Is that what Jesus said or did? Must it be either freedom or uniformity?

These questions beg answers. The answers are not as easy as you would hope. Peter Prange notes, "Simply stated, if we're dealing with adiaphora correctly, the strong possibility exists that we will be forced to 'talk out of both sides of our mouth,' trying to please everybody in every way. If we're dealing with adiaphora correctly, charges of unfairness and favoritism will most certainly abound.

How much easier it would be to simply make up rules, to bind consciences, and to handle every situation and person exactly the same way! Being legalistic is always easier than being truly evangelical. The results of legalism, however, are disastrous" (Prange, "Worship and Ministry," 16). If you doubt this, consult Paul. He had to defend circumcising Timothy and then defend not circumcising Titus (Acts 16, Gal 2). Likewise, he had to defend himself for his behavior with Jews and Gentiles (1 Cor 9:19-23, Acts 20-28).

As we continue to have this conversation about the Divine Service, liturgy, worship, what have you, remember that we will always have it. It is, again, the most important thing we do. The devil wants nothing more than to throw this into chaos and disorder. So, keep a clear head. As you wade into social media conversations, instruction classes, visits, remember to remind those old codgers and über-progressives (sometimes both groups are made up of baby boomers) that we already have a combination of continuity and culture, of uniformity and freedom. That is, we are already walking the middle path that Scripture, our Confessions, Luther and others advocated. We have a hymnal that guides almost everything we do in worship. We follow a rite with assigned propers and permanent ordinaries. We have a fixed calendar. We have ancient songs and prayers and hymns. We use the words of Scripture for most of our liturgy and catechetical training. On the other hand, we develop new hymnals (as Lutherans in America have always done). We have the vernacular in our services (and Sasse would have us imagine what that must have been like for Germans five hundred years ago). We have songs newly minted, some old treasures translated for us and some new treasures written each year by the Holy Christian Church. And even over the years the ancient songs have been modified,

as when a pope inserted "and give us peace" into the *Agnus Dei* during a time of war.

This reminds us that there are people out there smarter than us, more gifted, people who care about delivering the gospel of Jesus to people. These people came from every nation, tribe, people, and language. Again, this discussion is not – and push back against this – a northern European, German Lutheran discussion. That is why the freedom of the Church has always been a "restrained freedom" (Scharf, 36). This is bigger than me and you and the Holy Christian Church that you know (which is, in reality, the parish you have been a part of for a few years).

So, maybe we solve this by suggesting that the Divine Service should "disappoint" or "frustrate" everybody. Maybe it should meet no one's preference or requirement. This will happen if the emphasis is God serving us. Who really wants that? Who wants to admit that the Divine Service is from the Other and what we do is for the other? Not me. This is the foolishness of the gospel that Paul writes about (1 Cor 1). It offends my old man, the selfish slob who wants to be catered to and preferred, who wants to take off his shoes and put his feet on the table. When this dogged focus on the means of grace – preaching and baptizing, the meal, the meal, the meal – when this frustrates us or our people, when they growl, "Why do I need the meal? You just preached! Why do I need it again this week? Why is it always forgiveness over and over?" Give them Luther's answer, "You have not yet pondered how great is the weight of sin" (qtd. by Sasse in "The Lutheran Understanding of the Consecration," 131).

Something else to ponder: are preachers really doing their job? We can always be better preachers. I fear that we fall back upon our motto, "We're the WELS. We have the

Word in its truth and purity." Then we use that to cloak shoddy or shallow exegesis and the tired repetition of the same old illustrations or law/gospel lines.

I have something else in mind when I talk about preachers doing their jobs. I think about the sixteenth century church orders and visitations. I hear the Scriptures say "Everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way" (1 Cor 14:40) and "Remember your leaders, who spoke the Word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith....Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account" (Heb 13:7, 17). I think of Romans 13, "The authorities that exist have been established by God" (v1). Or 1 Peter 5, "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers" (v2). I think of Article 28 of the *Augsburg Confession* and the *Apology*. Melancthon puts the burden of authority in matters like this not on congregations, but on bishops and overseers – pastors!

I wonder if it might be time to suggest that there have been some deleterious effects of the almighty voters' assembly. Let the office of the holy ministry lead, not just submit things to votes! Let the ministry do its job! Before you bring out pitchforks and cudgels, balance this with Matthew 20 and 1 Peter 5 where the Lord calls his shepherds to lead by serving. But still, they lead. Tiefel wonders, "It is indeed proper to insist that the believers themselves have the right to decide the form of corporate worship they want to employ. Is it equally proper, however, for the congregation always to practice that right? In other words, does the congregation itself always have the ability to determine the forms of public worship which best suit its needs? If asked, many Christians would admit that they lack such an ability;

those who insist they do not lack it often do" (Tiefel, "Liturgics and Legalism"). Let the holy ministry lead!

Again, this is not a call for laws, compulsion, or imposition. I agree with Luther. "Experience, all chronicles, and the Holy Scriptures as well, teach us this truth: the less law, the more justice; the fewer commandments, the more good works. No well-regulated community ever existed long, if at all, where there were many laws.... Another result of many laws is that many sects and divisions in the congregations arise from them. One adopts this way, another that, and there grows up in each man a false, secret love for his own sect, and a hatred, or at least a contempt for and a disregard of the other sects. Thus brotherly, free, and mutual love perishes and selfish love prevails. So Jeremiah and Hosea, indeed, all the prophets, lament that the people of Israel divided themselves into as many sects as there were cities in the land, each desiring to outdo the others. Out of this [spirit] there arose also the Sadducees and Pharisees" (LW 35:79-80).

Our polity and our American scene make this hard, but I think it is worth considering. Can we push back against the knee-jerk shriek of "legalism" at any attempt to suggest that we *should* do a particular thing? We already have hymnals – our version of the church orders of the sixteenth century. Pastors can also point to their calls. On that document that every Lutheran pastor has, it says that your congregation called you to "establish and maintain sound Lutheran practice at all times." To suggest, do, or implement a thing is not legalism. We can yield our freedom out of love, or for good order, peace, tranquility, or to teach. And we should. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

Also see both sides. From Luther's *Exhortation to the Livonians*: "For those who devise and ordain universal customs and orders get so wrapped up in them that they make them into dictatorial laws opposed to the freedom of faith. But those who ordain and establish nothing succeed only in creating as many factions as there are heads, to the detriment of that Christian harmony and unity of which St. Paul and St. Peter so frequently write. Still, we must express ourselves on these matters as well as we can, even though everything will not be done as we say and teach that it should be" (LW 53:45-46).

And, "Now even though external rites and orders—such as masses, singing, reading, baptizing—add nothing to salvation, yet it is un-Christian to quarrel over such things and thereby to confuse the common people. We should consider the edification of the lay folk more important than our own ideas and opinions. Therefore, I pray all of you, my dear sirs, let each one surrender his own opinions and get together in a friendly way and come to a common decision about these external matters, so that there will be one uniform practice throughout your district instead of disorder—one thing being done here and another there—lest the common people get confused and discouraged.

"For even though from the viewpoint of faith, the external orders are free and can without scruples be changed by anyone at any time, yet from the viewpoint of love, you are not free to use this liberty, but bound to consider the edification of the common people, as St. Paul says, I Corinthians 14, 'All things should be done to edify,' and I Corinthians 6, 'All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful,' and I Corinthians 8, 'Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.' Think also of what he says there about those who have a knowledge of faith and of freedom, but who do not know

how to use it; for they use it not for the edification of the people but for their own vainglory.

"Now when your people are confused and offended by your lack of uniform order, you cannot plead, 'Externals are free. Here in my own place I am going to do as I please.' But you are bound to consider the effect of your attitude on others. By faith be free in your conscience toward God, but by love be bound to serve your neighbor's edification, as also St. Paul says, Romans 14, 'Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to edify him.' For we should not please ourselves, since Christ also pleased not himself, but us all" (LW 53:47-48).

In other words, as we receive from the Other his gifts, we begin to think of the other around us. Paul emphasizes that in Romans 14.

"For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord" (v7-9).

"Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way. As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean. If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died. Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men" (v13-18).

“Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall.

“So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves” (v20-22).

Finally (finally!), focus on the Mass, the Divine Service, that is, forgiveness of sins. These things we argue about, that we get passionate about, that we establish or tear down in some great and mighty cause, these things are a means to an end, the delivery system, the plans, the blueprints (Waddell, 231; Schultz, “The Sabbath was made for man”; LW 31:375-376; Deutschlander, “The Western Rite,” 1).

In the *Treatise*, Melancthon wrote, “The idolatry in the abuse of the Masses is clear <besides being altogether useless>. The Masses are used for the most shameful moneymaking. The doctrine of repentance has been utterly corrupted by the pope and his followers. They teach that sins are forgiven because of the value of our works. Then they tell us to doubt whether the forgiveness takes place. They nowhere teach that sins are forgiven freely for Christ’s sake, and that by this faith we obtain forgiveness of sins. So they hide Christ’s glory and rob consciences of firm consolation. They abolish true divine services (i.e., the exercises of faith struggling with <unbelief and> despair <concerning the promise of the Gospel>)” (43-44).

The office of the holy ministry exists to console consciences. The Divine Service – the liturgy – exists to console consciences. The Christian Church exists to console

consciences. That only happens when the means of grace take center stage, that is, when Christ takes center stage. “I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2). We devote ourselves to this: the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayer. That is the Christian life. God comes to us so that we can come to him. This is what we must expect in the Divine Service. This is what the Church gives. Jesus. Forgiveness of sins. Daily and fully. That gives the Church life and well-being. The Church cannot and does not exist without it. You are damned without it. Every decision we make about the liturgy and how much uniformity is too little, too much, or just right must focus on that truth. That I need Jesus. Desperately. And Jesus desperately wants to come to me. “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’ But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed our message?’ Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17). Thy kingdom come!

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