

# The Divine Service and the Mission of the Church

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On February 7, 1997, Opus Dei and Students in Mission sponsored a Symposium on Worship and Mission on the campus of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. Speakers included Dr. David Luecke, Rev. Robert Scudieri, and Logia book review editor, Rev. John Pless. The following is Pr. Pless' opening statement in the dialogue. Cassette recordings of the Symposium may be ordered from the media services department of Concordia Seminary, 801 De Mun Avenue, St. Louis, Missouri 63105.

In addressing the topic "The Divine Service and the Mission of the Church," I would suggest that we pay attention to three fundamental questions (1) How is the liturgy understood theologically? (2) Are we sufficiently attentive to the ecclesial culture of North America? and finally (3) What is the character of the community into which we seek to evangelize unbelievers?

First, How is the liturgy understood theologically? Augsburg VII provides our starting point: "For it is sufficient for the 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." Note that the Confession does not speak of a generic presence of Word and Sacrament as establishing the unity of the church, but rather of "the Gospel being preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it" and sacraments administered in accordance with the divine Word. Preaching and sacraments require form. Freedom from rites and ceremonies instituted by men does not imply that the question of form is neutral. What Elert says regarding Luther's liturgical thought is also applicable to the Lutheran Symbols: "No matter how strongly he (Luther) emphasizes Christian freedom in connection with the form of this rite (the Sacrament of the Altar), no matter how much he deviates from the form handed down at the end of the Middle Ages, no matter how earnestly he warns against the belief that external customs could commend us to God, still there are certain ceremonial elements that he, too, regarded as indispensable" (The Structure of Lutheranism, 325).

Lutherans are concerned with the form of the liturgy from the perspective of the confession of the Means of Grace. In contrast to Rome's claim that liturgy is sacrifice, or more recently, "work of the people," and the Reformed who understand liturgy as the vehicle for the church to ascribe praise to the majesty of a sovereign God, Lutherans see liturgy as God's work, Gottesdienst, divine service. Thus Article XXIV of the Apology insists that the liturgy is the Lord's public service to His people (AP XXIV:79-83) and that "the term liturgy squares well with the ministry" (AP XXIV:81). Essentially, liturgy is what the Lord does. Luther captures this in his sermon on John 14 (1537-38): "Thus the apostles and pastors are nothing but channels through which Christ leads and transmits His Gospel from the Father to us. Therefore wherever you hear the Gospel properly taught or see a person baptized, wherever you see someone administer or receive the Sacrament, or wherever you witness someone absolving another, there you may say without hesitation: 'Today, I beheld God's Word and work. Yes, I saw and heard God Himself preaching and baptizing.' To be sure, the tongue, the voice, the hands etc. are those of a human being; but the Word and the ministry are really those of the divine majesty Himself. Hence it must be viewed and believed as though we were seeing Him administer Baptism or the Sacrament with His own hands. Thus we do not separate, or differentiate between God and His Word or ministry; nor do we seek God in another way or view Him in a different light" (AE 24:67).

If the liturgy is the Lord's work, it cannot be made into an adiaphoron, for the pure preaching of the Gospel and the evangelical administration of the sacraments are hardly adiaphora. To be sure, certain rites and ceremonies embedded in the liturgy may be adiaphora, but not the pure preaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the sacraments.

At this point a few comments regarding Article X of the Formula of Concord are in order as this text has come to be seen as something of a declaration of liturgical independence. Article X makes a distinction between that which is commanded by God and those items which are neither commanded nor forbidden by the Word of God. Much is often made of paragraph 9: "We further believe, teach, and confess that the community of God in every place and at every time has the right, authority, and power to reduce, or to increase ceremonies according to the circumstances, as long as it does so without frivolity and offense but in an orderly and appropriate way, as at any time may seem to be most profitable, beneficial, and salutary for good order, Christian discipline, evangelical decorum, and the edification of the church." A careful reading of this paragraph in its historical and doctrinal context makes it clear that the Formula is not advocating liturgical autonomy but confessional consistency. The church orders of Braunschweig, authored by Chemnitz, demonstrate that "the community of God in every place" is not a local congregation but a territorial church. These church orders bind pastors and congregations to given rites and liturgical orders for the sake of unity in confession. The theme of confessional consistency is placed in the text of Article X itself as the point is made that in times of confession, items which are in and of themselves adiaphora cease to be matters of indifference. "We believe, teach, and confess that a time of confession, as when enemies of the Word of God desire to suppress the pure doctrine of the holy Gospel, the entire community of God, yes, every individual Christian, especially the ministers of the Word as the leaders of the community of God, are obligated to confess openly, not only by words but also through their deeds and actions, the true doctrine and all that pertains to it, according to the Word of God" (FC-SD X:10). Is not confessional Lutheranism at such a point over against the Baptist denials of the Gospel in these closing years of the twentieth century?

I would suggest that Carter Lindberg is right; there is a continuum from the Anabaptist Movement of the 16th century to Pietism to the charismatic movement and church growth movements of this present century. In one way or another, each of these movements run up against the assertion of the Smalcald Articles "that God gives no one his Spirit or grace except through or with the external Word" (SA III:viii-3). Our concern for the liturgy is not fueled by romanticism for the past but for the sake of the Gospel which is given by external means, the Word rightly preached and the Sacraments administered in accordance with our Lord's mandate.

Second, are we paying sufficient attention to the ecclesial culture of North America? We need to recognize that the ecclesial culture of North America is Evangelicalism. This culture has its roots first in Puritanism, which is basically Calvinistic, and secondarily in the great revival movements of the late 18th and 19th centuries, especially the awakening movement associated with Charles Grandison Finney, an Arminian of the first order. The ethos of American Evangelicalism is at home in North America. As Nathan Hatch has pointed out in his book *The Democratization of American Christianity*, the Jeffersonian ideas of individual freedom and equality are congenial to Evangelicalism's emphasis on conversion as a personal decision and the church as a spiritual democracy. Evangelicalism's stress on the autonomy of the believer and the immediacy of spiritual experience apart from sacramental means has shaped a religious culture that accents an individualistic faith over churchly life and tends to characterize Baptism, Absolution, and the Lord's Supper as externals on the periphery of the Christian life, at best. Subjectivity coupled with a suspicion of the intellect has produced a religious culture that elevates heart over head, emotion over intellect.

Lutherans are being invited to embrace the culture of Evangelicalism at a time when some of the brightest and best thinkers from within Evangelicalism are lamenting the spiritual barrenness of this culture. Witness the writings of David Wells, Michael Horton, D.A. Carson, Os Guinness, Mark Noll, John MacArthur, and Eugene Peterson to name but a few. This past April, the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals issued the Cambridge Declaration. Among other things, the Cambridge Declaration makes the following assessment of worship: "Wherever in the church biblical authority has been lost, Christ has been displaced, the gospel has been distorted, or faith has been perverted, it has always been for one reason: our interests have displaced God's and we are doing his work in our own way. The loss of God's centrality in the life of today's church is common and lamentable. It is this loss that allows us to transform worship into entertainment, gospel preaching into marketing, believing into technique, being good into feeling good about ourselves, and faithfulness into being successful. As a result, God, Christ, the Bible have come to mean too little to us and rest too inconsequentially upon us. God does not exist to satisfy human ambitions, cravings, the appetite for consumption, or our own private spiritual interests. We must focus on God in our worship, rather than the satisfaction of our personal needs. God is sovereign in worship; we are not. Our concern must be for God's kingdom, not our own empires, popularity or success."

Third, what is the character of the community into which we are evangelizing unbelievers?

We are not evangelizing unbelievers into a voluntary religious organization but the Church, the body of Christ, the Bride of the Lamb. The Church lives in many cultures, but is at home in none as our citizenship is in heaven. In Revelation 7, John writes: "After these things I looked and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, saying: 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'" This is the culture, yes, the cultus, of God's doing.

We may not drive a wedge between heaven and earth. The Lord Jesus Christ "has ascended far above all heavens in order to fill all things," says the Apostle Paul. Our Lord has crossed over from eternity into time in His incarnation. He has given us the new birth from above, the rebirth of Holy Baptism by which we are made heirs of His heavenly kingdom. Baptism gives us birth into a new culture, the culture of heaven. We do not have to wait until we die to have a share in heaven.

"The Sacrament of the Altar," said Sasse, "is heaven on earth." That is why we sing the Sanctus with "angels, and archangels, and the whole company of heaven." That is why our liturgy is not and cannot be an echo of the pop culture with its sound bytes and its exchange of edification for entertainment. No, the liturgy is the repetition of the heavenly song. Like Moses before the burning bush we are on holy ground when we gather in the Lord's name around font, pulpit, and altar. These are holy places, for here God is distributing His gifts. Apart from these gifts the church has no mission. Far from being detrimental to the church's mission, the liturgy is the source and goal of all missionary activity.

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