

**“Confessing the Gospel in Sermon and Song: The Theology and Practice of Worship in Martin Luther.”**

**The Nuechterlein Lecture on Lutheran Worship  
Emmanuel Lutheran Church  
March 20, 2010**

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We call it the “church *militant*” – and for good reason. For the history of the Christian religion is, among other things, a long series of controversies, and many of them have involved worship. And what is true in general is also true of the Lutheran Church, especially in our times. Instead of uniting us, “worship” has come to divide us, so much so that people even talk about “the worship wars.” I do not pretend that today’s presentation is going to solve any disputes, but I do hope to show that there is a *Lutheran* way of talking about worship that goes right back to Martin Luther. And that this way of looking at worship may even today be helpful in sorting out some of the issues that concern people.

As a teacher of history, I have, of course, a vested interest in showing its relevance to the contemporary scene; but I don’t want to promise too much. Historical analogies are often superficial, always difficult, and sometimes even false. So I am not going to argue that our

times are like the 16th century and that liturgical issues today are the same as those of the 1500's. No, there's a lot more than miles separating modern, mobile America from Luther's rural, nearly medieval Germany. But what I am going to suggest is that for those who believe that human beings are still sinners in need of a Savior and that the God of creation and of redemption is still God in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (as the Scriptures themselves testify, "Jesus Christ the same, yesterday, today, and forever"), issues involving worship can never be absolutely brand new and so, voices from the past may indeed be relevant to our conversation in the present.

But why Martin Luther? Besides the obvious (after all, we still call our church by his name), Luther's reformation of the 16th century included extensive alterations in popular worship, and so the Reformer wrote a great deal to explain and to promote liturgical change in the churches that followed his movement. By examining what Luther said as well as what he did regarding Christian worship in his times, we may find principles that can guide Lutherans as they look for ways to worship in our times. Therefore in our first session this morning, I want to explore what Luther said about worship and then in our second session what he actually did, especially in sermons and hymns.

First of all therefore, what Luther said, i.e., his theology of worship.

We begin by noting that Luther was hardly alone in raising concerns about Christian worship as he found it at the end of the Middle Ages when so many were consumed with ceremonies and rituals of all sorts and often directed any place besides Christ, e.g., to the saints or the consecrated host. So well before Luther emerged as a reformer in October of 1517 with his 95 theses, others had been complaining about popular piety, among them most notably Erasmus of Rotterdam, the great Humanist reformer of the Renaissance. Already in his *Enchiridion, or Handbook of the Militant Christian* (1503), Erasmus had argued for a biblically based piety that came from the inner man and had excoriated both the cult of the saints and ceremonialism. In other works too, for example, his *Praise of Folly* (1511) and his *Colloquys*, he developed his criticism and made all sorts of common devotional practices the object of his scorn - everything from the mindless repetition of the Psalter by the monks to mandatory fasting during Lent. More positively, Erasmus would argue for reading and study of the Bible by the ordinary people as the basis for an authentic Christian piety modeled after the teachings of Je-

sus. Ultimately, many Protestants would articulate ideas similar to those of the great humanist.<sup>1</sup>

But nonetheless, there was something significantly different between the reform movements of Erasmus and Luther in spite of obvious similarities in the practice of piety; and that was in the message that each preached. For Erasmus, the heart of Christianity was, in the words of a modern biographer, "to imitate Christ in his poverty and humility, in his love and self-denial. If we call ourselves Christian, we must abide in Christ."<sup>2</sup>

In contrast, for Luther, Christianity was first and foremost about what God has done for sinners in Christ and not what we should do for Him. Reflecting his own experience of the burdens imposed by late medieval piety and preaching, Luther reveled in his discovery of God's free grace for sinners through faith apart from works of any kind. As he said in a well-known passage regarding his new understanding of the gospel, he felt as if he "was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates."<sup>3</sup> But this also meant that Luther had no use

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<sup>1</sup> John P. Dolan, ed., *The Essential Erasmus* (New York: New American Library of World Literature, 1964), 51, 59-60, 66, 71, 148, 287.

<sup>2</sup> Cornelis Augustijn, *Erasmus: His Life, Works, and Influence* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 78. See pp. 71-88, for an extended discussion of Erasmus's "Christian philosophy."

<sup>3</sup> "Preface to the Latin Edition of Luther's Works" (1545), in Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, eds., *Luther's Works*, 55 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, and Phil.: Fortress Press, 1955-86)

for any reintroduction of law or works as the centerpiece of the Christian's life. Justification by faith became for him the "first and chief article" of the Christian religion, regarding which, he said, "On this article rests all that we teach and practice against the pope, the devil and the world" - "all that we teach *and practice* [Germ., *leben*; Latin, *agimus*]," including worship.<sup>4</sup>

This becomes abundantly clear when one examines what Luther had to say about Christian worship. The key for him is that the Gospel should prevail in everything. Thus, in explaining the new German mass that he prepared for Wittenberg in 1526, Luther commented, "For among Christians the whole service should center in the Word and sacrament," the significance of which he had previously indicated, "[Christ] is...remembered and elevated by the word of the sermon and is confessed and adored in the reception of the sacrament. In each case he is apprehended only by faith."<sup>5</sup>

At the heart of the service are word and sacrament, for they present Christ to the people. Regarding them and

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34:337. For the original, see *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1883- ) 54:186.8-9.

<sup>4</sup> "Smalcald Articles" (1537), in Theodore G. Tappert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Phil.: Fortress, 1959), 292. For the original, see *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*, 4th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1959), 416.

<sup>5</sup> "The German Mass and Order of Service" (1526), LW 53:90,82 (WA 19:113.2-3; 99.21-100.1).

baptism too, Lutherans would later confess in the Augsburg Confession,

Through the Word and sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given, and the Holy Spirit produces faith, where and when it pleases God, in those who hear the Gospel. That is to say, it is not on account of our merits but on account of Christ that God justifies those who believe that they are received into favor for Christ's sake.<sup>6</sup>

What people need when they gather for worship is the Gospel, the message of Christ for sinners. That is why Luther was so offended by the worship that he inherited from the medieval church, as he wrote:

First, God's Word [i.e., the Gospel] has been silenced, and only reading and singing remain in the churches. This is the worst abuse. Second, when God's Word had been silenced such a host of un-Christian fables and lies, in legends, hymns, and sermons were introduced that it is horrible to see. Third, such divine service was performed as a work whereby God's grace and salvation might be won. As a result, faith disappeared.

When the Gospel was not explicitly present through the preaching of the Word, sinful man transformed worship into man's work instead of the occasion for God's gift of Christ. Therefore, Luther regarded preaching of that Gospel Word as an essential element in every service and even wrote, "When God's Word is not preached, one had better neither sing nor read, or even come together."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> AC 5 (Latin). Tappert, 31. BKS, 58.

<sup>7</sup> "Concerning the Order of Public Worship" (1523), LW 53:11 (WA 12:35.24-25). See also the "German Mass," LW 53:68 (WA 19:78.26-27).

Luther could describe the content of Christian preaching in various ways and often equated it with teaching the basic truths of the Christian religion as, for example, when he talked about worship for the immature and young, "They...must be trained in the Scripture and God's Word daily so that they may become familiar with the Bible, grounded, well versed, and skilled in it, ready to defend their faith and in due time to teach others and to increase the kingdom of Christ." Elsewhere, Luther called for pastors to teach the 10 Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer from their pulpits.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, the essence of preaching for Luther was not Christian doctrine *per se* but the presentation of Christ the Savior. In a brief introduction to a collection of sermons written on the traditional Scripture readings for the Sundays and festivals of the church year, Luther defined the Gospel as "a discourse about Christ, that he is the Son of God and became man for us, that he died and was raised, that he has been established as a Lord over all things." But then he cautioned the preacher in his presentation of Christ, "Do not make Christ into a Moses, as if Christ did nothing more than teach and provide examples as

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<sup>8</sup> "German Mass," LW 53:62,65 (WA 19:73.18-22; 76.1-15).

the other saints do, as if the gospel were simply a text-book of teachings or laws."

Gospel preaching is not a list of "do's" or "don't's," not even of those precepts presented and exemplified by Christ Himself. Luther explained,

When you see how [Christ] prays, fasts, helps people, and shows them love, so also you should do...However this is the smallest part of the gospel, on the basis of which it cannot yet even be called gospel. For on this level Christ is of no more help to you than some other saint. His life remains his own and does not as yet contribute anything to you.

Sinners do not need examples, they need forgiveness.

A law-giver does them no good, they need a Savior:

The chief article and foundation of the gospel is that before you take Christ as an example, you accept and recognize him as a gift, as a present that God has given you and that is your own. This means that when you see or hear of Christ doing or suffering something, you do not doubt that Christ himself, with his deeds and suffering, belongs to you. On this you may depend as surely as if you had done it yourself...This is the great fire of the love of God for us, whereby the heart and conscience become happy, secure, and content.<sup>9</sup>

Preaching that centers on the Law - even the Law of Christ - has but two possible consequences: either to drive sinners into despair by establishing a standard of perfection that they can never meet or else to encourage them in the delusion that they have actually met the stand-

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<sup>9</sup> "A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels" (1521), LW 35:118-19 (WA 10<sup>I</sup>:9.18-20; 10.20-11.22).



ard. Preaching like that produces hypocrites, not Christians.

In Luther's view there was a place for preachers to present Christ as an example, but only *after* they had presented Him as the Savior. If you want good fruit, you need a good tree; but only the Gospel of God's grace for sinners rectifies the sinner's woeful condition by covering him with the righteousness of Christ. Then - but only then - can a believer do what pleases God. Luther wrote, "Christ as a gift nourishes your faith and makes you a Christian. But Christ as an example exercises your works. These do not make you a Christian. Actually they come forth from you because you have already been made a Christian."<sup>10</sup>

Both the emphasis and the order were extremely important to Luther in describing Christian preaching: First and foremost, Christ the Savior; and then, in second place, the response of Christian love. Preaching like this, Luther believed, belonged at the heart of Christian worship.

Although Luther never wrote an entire treatise about preaching, he thought about it a great deal and frequently commented on it. He also wrote a prayer for preachers, his so-called "Sacristy Prayer," that used to hang in almost every Lutheran pastor's study or sacristy and that still is

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 120 (WA 10<sup>I</sup>:12.17-20).

a good reminder to the preacher of his role in the economy of God before he enters the pulpit.

Lord God, You have appointed me as a Bishop and Pastor in Your Church, but you see how unsuited I am to meet so great and difficult a task. If I had lacked Your help, I would have ruined everything long ago. Therefore, I call upon You: I wish to devote my mouth and my heart to You; I shall teach the people. I myself will learn and ponder diligently upon Your Word. Use me as Your instrument -- but do not forsake me, for if ever I should be on my own, I would easily wreck it all.<sup>11</sup>

One notes, of course, the humility. Luther could never forget that he was indeed a sinner. Everything, therefore, depended upon the grace and goodness of God, including whatever he might accomplish in the pulpit. But note also, secondly, Luther's strong sense of vocation. He mounts the pulpit because God has called him, appointed him to this task of "bishop and pastor," i.e., someone responsible for the spiritual well-being of God's people. A truly awesome task for a sinful man to undertake, and yet, on account of his call, Luther was willing to do it. But how? How did Luther carry out the task of caring for God's people? Answer: By preaching. For Luther, preaching *is* pastoral ministry - "I wish to devote my mouth and my heart to you; I shall teach the people. I myself will learn and ponder diligently upon Your Word."

The Word, of course, is the key. Luther would be God's instrument in the pulpit when he proclaimed God's Word to the people. Indeed, so strong was Luther's commitment to the Word that he could describe faithful preaching as *God speaking*. In fact, in the very last sermon that Lu-

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<sup>11</sup> Martin Luthers Werke, (Weimar: Hermann Boehlaus Nachfolger, 1909), Band 43, pp. 513. Translated by James Kellerman. Taken from Project Wittenberg online site. April 9, 2007. Original = a part of Genesis lectures (LW 5:123). Cf. Brecht 3:251.

ther ever preached, he emphasized this point while scolding his audience for their neglect of the Word:

In times past we would have run to the ends of the world if we had known of a place where we could have heard God speak. But now that we hear this every day in sermons, indeed, now that all books are full of it, we do not see this happening. You hear it at home in your house, father and mother and children sing and speak of it, the preacher speaks of it in the parish church - you ought to lift up your hands and rejoice that we have been given the honor of hearing God speak to us through his Word.<sup>12</sup>

As the above passage indicates, Luther believed that God speaks to His people wherever His Word is in use, including reading it out of a book. But it is also quite clear that Luther understood this as occurring especially in church when pastors are preaching.

Indeed, Luther is famous for emphasizing the *oral* character of the gospel that is the essence of Christian preaching. In his preface to the New Testament, first published in 1522 but which continued to be used in subsequent editions of the Luther Bible through the rest of the Reformer's life, Luther defined the word "gospel," as "a good message, good tidings, good news, a good report, which one sings and tells with gladness" and then described the Christian gospel as "a good story and report, sounded forth into all the world by the apostles, telling of a true David who strove with sin, death, and the devil." This message, Luther insisted, "Christ...commanded and ordained...be *preached* after his death in all the world...A poor man, dead in sin and consigned to hell, can *hear* nothing more comforting than this precious and tender message about Christ" [emphasis mine].<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> LW 51:390.

<sup>13</sup> LW 35:358-59.

A few paragraphs later, Luther again summarized what the gospel means, "The gospel, then, is nothing but the *preaching* about Christ," but not any old Christ, but He who is "Son of God and of David, true God and man," and not about the ethical teaching of Christ or about the example of godly living that He provides but about the One, "who by his death and resurrection has overcome for us the sin, death, and hell of all men who believe in him." This alone is the message that deserves the title "gospel." It is not enough, Luther insisted, just to be familiar with our Lord's deeds and what was done to Him in this life. Such information becomes gospel only "when the voice comes that says, 'Christ is your own, with his life, teaching, works, death resurrection, and all that he is, has, does, and can do.'" That's what true preaching is: "The voice...that says, 'Christ is your own.'"<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, when a pastor proclaims this message and this promise, he is standing in the line of the prophets and apostles, obedient to the command of His Lord, and speaking with the voice of God! Based on this conviction, Luther once made the rather remarkable observation (in his *Against Hanswurst*, 1541) that pastors should *not* pray for forgiveness of sins in connection with their preaching, but instead:

...should say and boast with Jeremiah, "Lord thou knowest that which came out of my lips is true and pleasing to thee [Jer. 17:6]; indeed, with St. Paul and all the apostles and prophets, he should say firmly, *Haec dixit dominus*, "God himself has said this" [1 Cor. 1:10]. And again, "In this sermon I have been an apostle and a prophet of Jesus Christ" [I Thess. 4:15]. Here it is unnecessary, even bad, to pray for forgiveness of sins, as if one had not taught truly, for it is God's word and not my word, and God ought

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<sup>14</sup> LW 35:360-61.

not and cannot forgive it, but only confirm, praise, and crown it, saying, "You have taught truly, for I have spoken through you and the word is mine." Whoever cannot boast like that about his preaching, let him give up preaching, for he truly lies and slanders God.

Given that the pastor's sermon represents the Word of God by which He rescues sinners from sin, death, and hell, it is no wonder that Luther could also describe preaching as a battle with the devil. Luther's belief in the devil was personal and real. For him, Satan was a "roaring lion, roaming about, seeking whom he may devour"; and Christian preaching was a direct attack upon his domain and an effort to frustrate his wicked purposes. As Heiko Oberman observed, "'God for us'...directly implies 'the Devil against us.'"<sup>15</sup> Or in Luther's own words, "Where Christ appears, there the devil starts to speak."<sup>16</sup>

As far as the hearers are concerned, the devil's main line of attack is to vitiate the comfort of the gospel. In his *Commentary on Isaiah*, Luther described the devil's assault as twofold: "by force and by perseverance" and explained, "Day and night Satan is busy making sinners afraid, and with endless devices he assails this citadel, a happy conscience." God is swift to strengthen us with His own righteousness in Christ, from which the devil "attempts to seduce us by means of our own righteousness." For this there is always but one remedy, the very thing against which Satan labors so persistently. Luther wrote, "The Word must be preached constantly because of the persistence and tricks of Satan, who is always after us and always walks about alertly."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* 104.

<sup>16</sup> WA 25:263. Cited in Meuser, *Luther the Preacher*, 25

<sup>17</sup> LW 17:42-43.

But not only the hearers of preaching need to rely on the gospel. So do the preachers themselves, for the devil will stop at nothing to silence them. In the same section of his commentary, Luther used his own experience to describe the Christian's battle with Satan:

The Christian is a great soldier. If he should defeat one enemy, the flesh, the world is there to attack and contradict you. In endless ways it will oppose you as a heretic, a rebel, or a subversive, it will harass you with supreme disgrace, while from another side all the rulers of this world, kings, princes, and intelligentsia, will be against you...This is the supreme offense, to be opposed by such splendid and influential people ...Therefore the conscience thinks otherwise [than God's Word says]. When God says, "I will help you," the conscience replies, "I feel someone crushing me." When God says, "I will be with you," it seems to me like, "You go away, Satan is with me." Summary: All things seem the opposite of what they are...Therefore you must say that these are the words of faith, as all things are of faith. The opposite of what seems to be is true, and you may say [with the prophet], "Behold, they shall be confounded."

As with his hearers, then, the preacher may rely on only one thing in his battle with Satan: God's Word. And God's Word is the essence of Christian preaching that is at the center of Christian worship.

However, besides preaching, Luther also had great respect for the place of the Lord's Supper in the worship of the Church. But here he understood it in a way that was very much different from the medieval Church, since, for Luther, once again, it was all about the Gospel of God's free grace in Jesus. Luther's opponents regarded the mass

as a sacrifice for sins performed by the priest for the sins of the living and of the dead. It was a repetition or continuation of what Christ had done on Calvary, in other words, a work performed by men that earned God's grace and favor. For Luther, however, the Lord's Supper was not a means by which we approach God with something we have done but rather, a means by which He comes to us with what He has done for us in Christ and presents to us the body given for us and the blood shed for us for the forgiveness of sins. As early as 1520, Luther wrote,

You have seen that the mass is nothing else than the divine promise or testament of Christ, sealed with the sacrament of his body and blood. If that is true, you will understand that it cannot possibly be in any way work; nobody can possibly do any thing in it, neither can it be dealt with in any other way than by faith alone.<sup>18</sup>

In other words, Luther understood the Lord's Supper as a means of grace, a method for bringing God's forgiveness to sinners. God acts and we receive, in spite of the fact that we do not deserve.

From Luther's perspective, then, the Lord's Supper was very much like the Word of the Gospel - an offer of grace that we receive simply by trusting the promise contained within it. Accordingly, when later the Lutheran territorial rulers presented the Augsburg Confession to the emperor

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<sup>18</sup> "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," LW 36:47.

as a summary of their faith and practice, they described the sacraments as "signs and testimonies of God's will toward us for the purpose of awakening and strengthening our faith" and emphasized that "they are rightly used when they are received in faith and for the purpose of strengthening faith."<sup>19</sup>

For Luther, therefore, when Christians gathered together for worship, their primary purpose was to receive by faith the promises of God in the Gospel. God offered His grace through the Word, especially preaching, and through the Sacrament, in which God sealed His promise of forgiveness to the sinner by the actual body and blood of Jesus.

So Principle Number One in Lutheran worship is the centrality of the Gospel in Word and sacrament. If we miss that, we have missed everything.

However, the centrality of the Gospel was not Luther's *only* liturgical principle. There was a second principle that becomes clear whenever we read Luther's specific recommendations for worship; and that was, consideration for people. In his liturgical writings, this manifests itself in two different but related ways - first, Luther's refusal to establish any laws regarding the rites and forms of wor-

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<sup>19</sup> AC 13.1-2. Tappert, 36-37. BKS,



ship, and secondly, his insistence that whatever changes they make, reformers remember the weak in faith. Both of these precepts are corollaries to his understanding of the Gospel.

In his powerful tract from 1520, "The Freedom of a Christian," Luther gave eloquent testimony to the nature and implications of his understanding of the Gospel. As the title suggests, he understood the principal blessings of Christ's saving work in terms of "freedom," - freedom from sin, death, and the devil; freedom from the Law; and freedom from all works, including rites and ceremonies. "This is that Christian liberty," Luther wrote, "our faith, which...makes the law and works unnecessary for any man's righteousness and salvation."<sup>20</sup>

But in this same work, Luther also recognized the need for religious ceremonies as teaching and disciplinary devices. They were not permanent nor absolutely binding but useful for instructing in the "righteousness of faith." "Thus," wrote Luther, "we do not despise ceremonies and works, but we set great store by them; but we despise the false estimate placed upon works in order that no one may think that they are true righteousness."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> "The Freedom of a Christian" (1520), LW 31:349-50 (WA 7:53.31-33).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 376 (WA 7:72.26-28).

The problem, then, with ceremonies is that fallen man is continually tempted to use them for his own purposes rather than God's, to pervert them into his own religion of external rites and forms whereby he expects to earn his own salvation:

Since human nature and natural reason...are by nature superstitious and ready to imagine, when laws and works are prescribed, that righteousness must be obtained through laws and works; and further, since they are trained and confirmed in this opinion by the practice of all earthly lawgivers, it is impossible that they should of themselves escape from the slavery of works and come to a knowledge of the freedom of faith.<sup>22</sup>

"Do-it-yourself" religion might be natural, but it is also completely wrong-headed. For one thing, it minimizes sin - as if God's justice could be satisfied with external forms while our hearts remained in the grip of self-deception and self-love! And at the same time it trivializes the work of Christ, as if what He has done is insufficient for salvation unless we contribute our puny works. No, Christ has done it all. Salvation is absolutely complete in Him; and nothing that we do can ever contribute one iota to what He has done. It is all ours by faith, i.e., by simply relying on God's promises of life and forgiveness in Christ.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 376 (WA 7:73.1-6).

For Luther, believing this Gospel is the highest form of worship and praise, but denying it and instead insisting upon works of any sort as a part of justification is a travesty. But how does one avoid the trap of works-righteousness when prescribing liturgical rites and forms? That was Luther's challenge in setting forth his recommendations regarding Reformation worship.

The principal way that Luther dealt with this dilemma was simply to repeat over and over again that Christians are not bound to ceremonies, even those he was recommending. For example, the very first sentence of Luther's German mass says precisely this:

In the first place, I would kindly and for God's sake request all those who see this order of service or desire to follow it: Do not make it a rigid law to bind or entangle anyone's conscience but use it in Christian liberty as long, when, where, and how you find it to be practical and useful.

"Use it in Christian liberty [*der Christlichen freyheyt nach yhres gefallens brauchen*]." That is the key for Martin Luther.<sup>23</sup>

Of course, that is not the only value that informs Luther's liturgical work; otherwise, why would he make any recommendations at all? It is clear, for example, that Lu-

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<sup>23</sup> "German Mass," LW 53:61 (WA 19:72.3-10). Also pp. 62, 90. See also Luther's "An Order of Mass and Communion" LW 53:30-31, 37 (WA 12:214.14-33; 218.33-219.7); and his "A Christian Exhortation to the

ther has great respect for the forms that he inherited from the medieval church. Pruned of those elements that contradicted the Gospel, e.g., the sacrifice of the mass, and translated into the vernacular, the traditional Latin mass remained the basis for Luther's German service because it served the Gospel.<sup>24</sup>

Luther also had very high regard for music and thought it the perfect vehicle for Christian worship. Luther filled his German service with songs and composed many hymns himself. In his preface to a collection of church music, Luther wrote:

Next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise. ...It was not without reason that the fathers and prophets wanted nothing else to be associated as closely with the Word of God as music...After all, the gift of language combined with the gift of song was only given to man to let him know that he should praise God with both word and music, namely, by proclaiming [the Word of God] through music and by providing sweet melodies with words.<sup>25</sup>

Besides using music and retaining many of the old forms, Luther also advocated uniformity of worship for Christians in the same location. In his "Exhortation to the Livonians," for example, Luther's counsel is that the

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Livonians Concerning Public Worship and Concord" (1525), LW 53:47-48 (WA 19:418.38-419.39).

<sup>24</sup> "An Order of Mass and Communion," LW 53:20-21 (WA 12:206.15-207.9); and "The German Mass," LW 53:69-90 (WA 19:80.25-113.20). See Luther D. Reed, *The Lutheran Liturgy* (Phil.: Muhlenberg Press, 1947), 71-72, 76-79, for a description of Luther's two communion services in connection with the medieval rite.

<sup>25</sup> "Preface to Georg Rhau's *Symphoniae iucundae*" (1538), LW 53:323-24 (WA 50:371.1-372.5).

preachers "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."<sup>26</sup>

But why? For one thing, it seemed natural to Lutherans that Christians who were united by one baptism and shared the same eucharist, would also observe the same rites and ceremonies.<sup>27</sup> But there was more to it than that - and here again we come to the second overarching principle besides the Gospel upon which Luther based his liturgical reforms; and that was consideration for the people who were going to use those forms of worship. For after his plea for unity to the Livonians, Luther immediately added, "lest the common people [*das eynfeltig volck*] get confused and discouraged."<sup>28</sup>

So too, in the introduction to his German mass, Luther spoke of people being "perplexed and offended by these differences in liturgical usages," at least some of which he attributed to those with "an itch to produce something novel so that they might shine before men as leading lights." Instead, as he said to the Livonian preachers, "We should

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<sup>26</sup> "A Christian Exhortation to the Livonians," LW 53:47 (WA 18:419.2-5).

<sup>27</sup> "German Mass," LW 53:61 (WA 19:72.31-32).

<sup>28</sup> "Christian Exhortation to the Livonians," LW 53:47 (WA 18:419.6).

consider the edification of the lay folk [*der leütte*] more important than our own ideas and opinions."<sup>29</sup>

For Luther, it was a necessary consequence of Christian liberty that Christians use that liberty for the sake of others - and that was as true for the selection of worship forms as for anything else. As Luther said in "The Freedom of a Christian," God has freed us from the religion of works and the Law, so that we might be "the servant(s) of all, subject to all." A Christian, Luther argued, "should be guided in all works by this thought and contemplate this one thing alone, that he may serve and benefit others in all that he does, considering nothing except the need and the advantage of his neighbor."<sup>30</sup>

This principle is of paramount importance to Luther in suggesting liturgical reforms. It is all a question of Christian liberty, "From the viewpoint of faith, the external orders are free and can without scruples be changed by anyone at any time"; but "from the viewpoint of love, you are not free to use this liberty, but bound to consider the edification of the common people [*dem armen volck*]."<sup>31</sup> Liberty is not license but the occasion for loving service to one's neighbor, including the selection of worship forms.

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<sup>29</sup> "German Mass," LW 53:61 (WA 19:16-17, 24-25); "Christian Exhortation to the Livonians," LW 53:47 (WA 18:418.40-419.2).

<sup>30</sup> "Freedom," LW 31:344, 365 (WA 7:49.24-25; 64.24-27).

Probably the most powerful illustration of this principle in Luther's career came in 1522 right after his return to Wittenberg from safe-keeping at the Wartburg. Wittenberg was in convulsions over liturgical changes, made by Luther's university colleagues while he was gone in an attempt finally to put Reformation principles into action instead of waiting for others to do so. But things had gone seriously awry: rioting had broken out and practitioners of the old religion were being assaulted physically by those who followed the reformers. The town council had passed the reformation ordinance insisting on new worship forms, but the Elector of Saxony had forbidden them. What was to be done? No one knew. So Luther returned.<sup>32</sup>

At once, in an eloquent series of brief sermons - one a day for eight straight days in the city church - Luther patiently explained how Christians should employ their freedom in such a situation. Wittenberg's problem, he argued, was no longer the absence of the Gospel and its proclamation but the application of Christian love.

And here, dear friends, one must not insist upon his rights but must see what may be useful and helpful to his brother. ...For we are not all equally strong in faith, some of you have a stronger faith than I. Therefore we must not look

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<sup>31</sup> "Christian Exhortation to the Livonians," LW 53:47 (WA 18:419.7-11).

<sup>32</sup> For an account of these events, see Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: Shaping and Defining the Reformation, 1521-32*, trans. by James L. Schaaf (Minn.: Fortress Press, 1990), 25-45.

upon ourselves, or our strength, or our prestige but upon our neighbor.<sup>33</sup>

Concern for the neighbor is Luther's fundamental principle for evaluating changes in their worship. In these sermons, Luther discusses the various issues - sacrifice of the mass, marriage (especially those in religious orders), the monastic life, sacred images, fasting, distribution of the sacrament, and private confession. To some of these - like the sacrifice of the mass - God's Word speaks clearly; but regarding others, e.g., how to administer the sacrament, the Word makes no clear demands and so, Christian liberty applies. But in every case, Luther writes, "love demands that you have compassion on the weak [*mitleyden...mit dem schwachen*]."

Even regarding those practices clearly against the Word of God, Luther rejects coercion, insisting instead that what works is preaching to change the hearts of men and not force to change their outer practices. Just as Paul, when he saw the idolatry in Athens, did not overturn pagan altars but preached against them and "when the Word took hold of their hearts, they forsook them of their own accord," so too in Wittenberg, if people still sacrificed the mass, Luther says,

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<sup>33</sup> "Eight Sermons at Wittenberg" (1522), LW 51:72 (WA 10<sup>III</sup>:5.6-6.3). Also, pp. 95-96.



I would...not have torn them from it by the hair or employed any force, but simply allowed the Word to act and prayed for them. For the Word created heaven and earth and all things; the Word must do this thing, and not we poor sinners.<sup>34</sup>

If this is true when God's Word speaks clearly, how much more so must it be the case when it does not speak clearly or is actually silent! For example, as far as Luther was concerned, this was certainly the situation regarding whether one should take the sacrament into his own hands before eating it when the people were accustomed to receiving it directly into their mouths. Luther readily admitted that those who received in the "new" way committed no sin for that reason, but, he insisted, "it was not a good work, because it caused offense everywhere...Why will you not in this respect also serve those who are weak in faith [*schwachgläubigen*] and abstain from your liberty?" Correct reception of the sacrament requires faith not forms, and faith produces love for one's neighbor, not contempt. It was that simple.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 77 (WA 10<sup>III</sup>:17.11-18.4; 18.6-10). Similarly, regarding the distribution in both kinds, Luther says, 90, "Although I hold it necessary that the sacrament should be received in both kinds, according to the institution of the Lord, nevertheless it must not be made compulsory...We must rather promote and practice and preach the Word, and then afterwards leave the result and execution of it entirely to the Word" (WA 10<sup>III</sup>:45.10-15).

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 90 (WA 10<sup>III</sup>:44.13-18). Luther also writes, 96, "You are willing to take all of God's goods in the sacrament, but you are not willing to pour them out again in love. Nobody extends a helping hand to another, nobody seriously considers the other person, but everyone looks out for himself and his own gain, insists on his own way, and

But if it was that simple then, in the 16th century, is it any more complicated today in the 21st? Certainly, the pluralistic nature of our society and therefore of our churches raises many questions about the ways we worship, and the technological revolution of our times offers many opportunities for innovation; but Luther's experiences and advice, I am convinced, still can instruct us in what is basic to evangelical worship. When we come together in the name of our Lord, it is first and foremost to receive from God His gifts of grace and forgiveness in Jesus that He offers to us in Word and sacrament. Liturgical rites and forms and ceremonies must serve this central purpose and none other. Indeed, in the matter of externals, Christ has set us free - but free "by love [to] serve one another," even in our choice of worship materials. These were Luther's principles. And they still sound pretty good to me!

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lets everything else go hang....And if you will not love one another, God will send a great plague upon you; let this be a warning to you, for God will not have his Word revealed and preached in vain" (WA 10<sup>III</sup>:57.7-17).