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Theological Observer

The recently proffered report of the "Special Hymnal Review Committee" (SHRC) indicates that further work is required to reach acceptable liturgical goals. On the one hand, every page of the critique makes it clear that the members of the Committee do not really like the new *Lutheran Book of Worship* (LBW). Yet the nature and scope of the critique appear to indicate that evidently the Committee members believe that, even though the LBW is *not quite* what we had in mind, it certainly is on the right track— and given a modest number of specific deletions and insertions the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod can and will have something very much like the LWB in short order! The reviewer assumes that this is what the Committee members are saying, for the only obvious alternatives would have been for them to state clearly either that (1) the whole project must be junked (what has been produced is not at all what we have had in mind); or (2) we really do not like the LBW but given the material and financial investment, we have no alternative but to make some superficial corrections to a production which is fundamentally unsound. Since the members of SHRC make neither of these statements, we must in charity assume that they are fundamentally in sympathy with the *LBW*.

This writer remains unimpressed by either the forthcoming *LBW* (in both the corrected and uncorrected versions) or the superficial and yet overly specific and detailed critique offered by the Review Committee. The foundation of a valuable and valid criticism of the *LBW* really ought to begin with an examination and evaluation of the destination sought and the goal proposed. What, after all, have our liturgical commissions been up to all this time? Independent scholars and commissions in past ages proposed two rather clearly defined goals of new books of Lutheran worship: (1) to salvage and reclaim the heritage of a rich liturgical tradition in Evangelical Lutheranism, and (2) to present the congregations with reasonably workable documents for public worship and private devotion. (The *Common Service Book* of 1888, for instance, gives evidence of the thinking of those who "retrieved" our Common Service for us.)

Until well into the seventeenth century, Lutheran Christianity seems to have understood herself to be standing within what might be called the "catholic" worship tradition. Excepting where the inroads of Reformed influences were already evident, no narrow dogmatism was permitted to deprive Lutheran congregations of rich and meaningful worship forms, ceremonial, or hymnody. Lutheran theologians made no attempt to proscribe or prohibit the singing of the *Stabat Mater* (so abhorred by SHRC) or the *Lauda Sion Salvatorem* (written by Thomas Aquinas for Corpus Christi Day). In point of fact, Lutheran theologians warmly commended these and other medieval and even post-Reformation hymns from non-Lutheran sources. An examination of Calvoer's monumental *Ritualis Ecclesiastica* (Jena, 1704) and older Lutheran hymnals from Germany and Scandinavia bear eloquent witness to a warmly catholic evangelicalism. Nor did our theologians narrowly insist upon a specific biblical warrant for every poetic or ceremonial allusion, for they understood that only what mitigates, obliterates, and obfuscates the *tenor* of Scripture must be eliminated. The requirement of specific and particular biblical warrant for words and actions was well understood as a requirement peculiar to Reformed theologians, rulers, and congregations, and an evidence of Calvinistic chauvinism.

Neither the compilers of the *LBW* nor the members of SHRC seem to share the Lutheran mentality of catholic evangelicalism. In fact, those who think in such terms today might well expect to be analysed and diagnosed as suffering from an obscure and harmful syndrome which renders them theologically

impotent and evangelistically sterile. They clearly are not "with it" in an age in which being "with it" is everything. "Our people want something new and different!" is a statement heard with alarming frequency. It is difficult to escape the impression that what it means is "Our people don't know much about worship, and we are either ill-informed or disinclined to teach them—so let's give them what they want!" There has never—so we are being told—*ever* been a generation anything like our own since the dawn of creation. We use electricity; therefore, we must develop an electric worship. We live in a technological age; so let us develop our worship techniques. We think differently and speak differently, and certainly we behave differently from any previous age; so we must, of necessity, worship differently as well. We cannot so much as say the same prayers our fathers and their fathers said—at least not until we have managed to render them unrecognizable! Henry Ford put it succinctly: "History is bunk!"

Before a new and worthy book of worship can be produced, we must come to the clear realization that our age negates the real significance of worship and the redeemed man as a worshipping creature. The purpose of worship is, after all, not to create moods or sacramentalize concerns, but to fear, love, and trust in God above all things else. The purpose of theology, David Hollazius put it two and half centuries ago, is to teach us *how* God in Christ is to be worshipped. At the same time, we must recognize both our debt to and our continuity with the past. It is precisely the contemporary abrupt break with the catholic past which has created such great confusion throughout the modern Christian world.

The writer does not gainsay the need for a new and more comprehensive book of Christian worship. But before it can be produced, we will have to recognize that what is needed is not something completely *new* and in tune with the secular mentality. Nor do we require a comprehensive dogmatic theology in song and verse! We do need to rediscover and clean up our heritage, which is solidly liturgical, sacramental, and theologically sound. We need further a book of worship which is suitable for use in private and family devotions, for preparation for private or public absolution, for the remembrance of Holy Baptism and the approach to the Table of the Lord. The Small Catechism and Augsburg Confession ought once again to be included, along with the occasional services in which the Congregation participates. We must begin with the first and second generation reformers (Luther, Chemnitz, Chytraeus) and move back to the great patristic authors whom they knew well enough to quote copiously (Irenaeus, Basileus, Chrysostomus, Gregory), the Apostolic Fathers, and the Apostles themselves. This would represent a return to (more than just the past) a fuller understanding of the place of worship in the life of the Church. Who knows, even the Eucharistic Prayer may yet prove to be not altogether objectionable. What will be needed is study, education, effort, and a little willingness to learn.

Charles J. Evanson