

What Does It Mean Today  
To Be The Church?

REGIN PRENTER

The Conflict To Renew Lutheranism

HANS-LUTZ POETSCH

The Role Of Conservatives  
In An Age of Revolution

RALPH MOELLERING

Are We Getting Through  
With The Gospel In Our Liturgy?

REINHART TRAUTMANN

Worship In The USA

REINHARD MUMM

Luther's Ecclesiological Significance  
For The Twentieth Century  
Ecumenical Movement

HARRY J. MCSORLEY C.S.P.

Ignorance About Preaching

WILLIAM F. MEYER

Theological Refractions  
Book Reviews

# the springfielder

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# Are We Getting Through With The Gospel In Our Liturgy?

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**W**OULD YOU LIKE to live in a house, to which generations over a period of several hundred years have added rooms and balconies, staircases and steeples, awkward corners and doorways? In such a house a visitor or guest would wander about as in a maze. He would hardly be able to reconstruct the ground plan. While we, as the owners of the house, would soon get accustomed to that confusing location, he, our visitor, would merely see a senseless compilation of architecture.

In the eyes of guests and visitors the liturgy in our Lutheran services must look like such a house. The different parts, such as the Introit, Kyrie, Gloria, Salutation and others have been added to the order of the Mass in the course of the centuries. We have reliable sources which testify that the Introit was added to the order of the Mass in the seventh century. The Introit used to be a psalm which was sung as long as the clergy proceeded through the church to the altar. When the clergy reached the altar the Pope or bishop gave the sign for the Gloria Patri. Our Introit has melted down to two or three verses of a psalm. What I say is this: *Our generation is unable to see the ground plan of the house or the intention of the architect.* To the people of our days the liturgy is a perplexingly entangled and complicated matter which they do not understand. No one, unless he is an expert in liturgics, a person constantly dealing with the intricate matter, is in a position to understand the purpose of our liturgy. To many people the parts of our liturgy are simply pious phrases which are said or sung for the sole purpose of connecting the more important parts as the readings from Scripture, the sermon and the Lord's Supper. All this refers to the concept of liturgy as well as to the music and the language of liturgy.

Our question "Are we getting through with the Gospel in our liturgy?" must be reduced to the simple question: "Do we reach the hearts and minds of our service visitors? My observations refer to the situation in Germany. The conclusions I draw however might be of universal interest and value. I like to add, that I dare not claim to make statements of irrevocable truth. My paper cannot cover the entire liturgy of the full morning service with Holy Communion. Thus I simply put my finger on a few of the more important parts of the order of service.

*The Introit.* The language of the psalms is of a very poetical character. Former generations had a fine sensation and understanding for poetry. The generations growing up now seem to have only a

vague and imperfect notion of what poetry is like. Thus they hardly understand the pictorial and colorful verses of the psalms. When we try to evangelize modern people, especially young folks, we have to take in due consideration that fact. The holy men who wrote the Scriptures used the common language of their time, the Greek *koine*. When the Bible was translated the translators used the vocabulary of the common people and everybody's language, not some artificial manner of expression. On the other hand we want to continue what God's people started when they sang the psalms of the Old Testament. One strange thing about the singing of these psalms is the fact that we haven't developed any new forms and melodies since the Gregorian Chant came up in the early Middle Ages. Do the people of our twentieth century young generation understand such ecclesiastical singing? I doubt if the average churchgoer senses the beauty of the ancient melodies of the Introit. Though we know that hardly anybody is in full accord with the Gregorian Chant, we, the liturgical minded ministers and the church at large keep on using it. Why are churches empty all over the world? Could it be that we hang on to ancient rites and ceremonies? It's high time to find new forms for a generation which is about to move off to new horizons.

*The Kyrie.* Originally the *Kyrie eleison* was the response of the congregation after the minister had prayed the intercessions. After each one of them the congregation said or chanted the *Kyrie eleison*. The Gregorian Reformation in the eighth century placed the intercessions into the communion part of the Mass. Only the ninefold *Kyrie* was left, it was later reduced to a threefold *Kyrie* with a mere translation as response of the congregation. That in itself is nonsense and hardly suited to be understood.

*The Salutation.* Originally the Introit and *Kyrie* were sung by a choir. Then the minister stepped into the chancel and greeted his congregation at the beginning of his service. When later the *Gloria in Excelsis* was added to the order of the Mass which the minister intoned, the salutation was left in its place instead of moving it before the *Gloria*. Today the salutation after Introit, *Kyrie* and *Gloria* has no real function. Who understands the meaning of the greeting when it occurs in the middle of the service?

*The Collect for the Day.* The different parts of the collect as address, relative clause, petition and trinitarian conclusion, make it difficult to see and understand the petition. Especially the language of the relative clause is complicated and hard to understand. A person of our day who reads mostly newspapers and listens to the television loses all his sensation for the language of the church. Then there is no specific relation of the collect to the other parts of the order of service. Some collects refer to the introit others to the epistle. Quite a few have no definite relation.

*The Readings from Scripture.* The Epistle and Gospel readings for the Church year, go back, as most of the other parts of the liturgy, to

the eighth century. They have grown over a long period of several centuries. There is no clear concept of theological or psychological nature. Texts with a clear kerygmatic character are in the minority. Most evident are texts with drastic miracles, admonitions, and warnings, as in the epistle of the first Sunday in Advent, of which I cite this one verse:

Let us walk honestly as in the day,  
not in rioting and drunkenness,  
not in chambering and wantonness,  
not in strife and envy. (Romans 13:13.)

Well-known texts like the Beatitudes, I Corinthians 15:20ff and Revelation 21 are not part of the order of Epistles and Gospels. What has grown over a period of centuries might have been good for generations in which practically everybody belonged to the Church and grew up in and with the Church.

When today people visit services of divine worship only sporadically and when most of the members of our German congregations come to church at scattered instances only, they hardly experience the course of the church year. I am not so sure if the intention of their coming to church then is worship or merely the desire to hear something out of the Bible. When it is true that they simply come to be entertained with God's news then they feel obliged to include liturgy in the bargain. All these people have to be fed so the seed of God's word can be laid into their hearts. Don't we owe them a clear and understandable witness? Shouldn't the church of our Lord offer them portions of Scripture which speak for themselves? Forthcoming generations will hardly be more willing to accept tradition and traditional forms. The Christian Church has slept more than once. Will it sleep again? In a time in which practically everything is questioned, the proclamation of the Gospel must be in full accord with the situation of modern men. Our practice of reading from the Scriptures as part of the liturgy of our services must be changed sooner or later. Otherwise people won't understand what we read to them and what it means to them. They might think that reading from Scriptures is some sort of a mystic performance by which we try to conjure the past. I have interviewed quite a number of people of all walks of life. They all told me two things, namely that most of the readings of our present epistles and gospels are far too long and too hard to understand. In my Bielefeld congregation I have a very active group of people, who are very eager to promote stewardship. They are all convinced that modern men's ability to hear and ponder is limited by the excessive consumption of newspapers, television and other media. Thus no one is able to understand and contemplate three difficult texts of Scripture in a one-hour service. From opinions and reactions like that I am inclined to say that, as far as the readings are concerned, less would be more, far more.

I am an ardent practitioner of the liturgy of our Lutheran Church. Yet I doubt if all these wonderful texts have a meaning to the members of our congregations. Yes, they come and worship, often with glowing hearts. But of what use is a service when the parts have to be explained with great care? Although I personally wouldn't want to lose the liturgy of our services, I question the usefulness of our liturgy for modern people, especially for those whom we want to lead to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Being appropriately careful of their practices we have to concede the Roman Catholics a good portion of insight into human character. They reduce their liturgy more and more as they have found out that Gregorian chant and German or English language don't go together. And above all, why should an invention of the sixth century determine the entire liturgical practice of all future generations? If we want to go back to the original we would have to start with the first Christian congregation in Jerusalem. And that's just what we ought to do—in my opinion. The Constantinian age of the Christian Church has definitely come to an end, of course as far as Europe is concerned. The enormous burden of two thousand years of tradition has made the church unworthy of confidence. When the small church of the future—and the church will be small in the future—wants to regain confidence she has to develop credible forms of divine worship service. The often sober, dispassionate and cool-headed people of our day are suspicious of orders and forms of the past.

*What can be done?* Naturally we cannot abolish the traditional liturgy of our Lutheran worship services all of a sudden. But we ought to study the situation in which we live and practice. We have to study the hearts and minds of our people. We have to determine how much of the liturgy they actually understand and how much of it can be explained and taught. I am convinced that not too much will be left. But what's the difference, if only Christ, our crucified and risen Lord is preached. He has given us his holy word and the sacraments, not a certain holy liturgy. If we had a procedure of accurately testing the opinion of all our members, I am sure we would find out that there is not much understanding for the intricate liturgy of our services. It might even be dangerous to keep on with a liturgy which could obscure the verified and indisputable facts of our salvation. I am absolutely sure that we sin against the first commandment when we adhere to a liturgy which endangers worship, understanding and belief of many people. We make our liturgy a golden calf, another god. Therefore we have to add new orders of service now. The Roman Catholic Church has such services. I asked a friend of mine who is a Roman priest and he told me that they regularly have services with only *one* reading, two or three hymns, *one* prayer and a short sermon. And people really go for such services. Some of the members of my congregation told me that they would favor new orders if they would be held parallel to the traditional services. After

a certain time of transition, maybe ten years or so, people would decide by their attendance which orders they favor.

Let me sum up my thoughts: Although I am fully in favor of our Lutheran liturgy I am not convinced that this liturgy is suited to proclaim God's message in our time. Too much of the liturgy is hard to understand. Nobody talks like people used to talk more than thousand years ago. Nobody likes to live in houses of such an age. Therefore I am in favor of trying out new orders for our services with a new biblical liturgy containing the essentials of service: We serve God with adoration and prayer, God serves us with word and sacrament.