

Liturgy as the Life of the Church

By Harold L. Senkbeil

You will notice that while the planners of this conference may not be prophets, it is very clear that they are no cowards. Not only did they plan this affair for a day that turned out to be the opening day of the world series, but they also chose to open up with a topic guaranteed to thrust us all into controversy right out of the starting gate: *Liturgy as the Life of the Church*.

There are some here, I am sure, who remember the "good old days" when theological controversies were simpler and more straight forward. Then you could line up on one side or another behind the champions of your cause and everybody knew where you stood. Biblical innerrancy was fairly easy to comprehend once it got down to brass tax: were Adam and Eve historical people or not?

Some would suggest that we face a non-issue today; that everything boils down to a simple matter of style and taste and that we are all agreed on the substance of the gospel we believe, teach, and confess. I am not that optimistic, and I hope to demonstrate why by the end of my presentation.

At any rate, while there may be as many opinions on what's bugging the church today as there are participants here, there is one thing I'm pretty sure we'd all agree on: The liturgy seems to be the place where the battle is being joined. Many people are pointing their finger at the liturgy as the source of lethargy in our spirituality and impotence in our mission. If we could just get rid of our outdated traditional way of worship we could really be going and growing, is the contention. As the recent "Worship Toward 2000" survey has demonstrated, there is a great deal of confusion in our midst as to what in the world is supposed to happen in our churches on Sunday morning. A radical departure from the historic liturgy appears to be waiting in the wings; in some places in the church its already center stage! And so no matter what your opinion is on church growth or synodical politics, I'm sure you would agree with me that the what, the why, and the how of Sunday morning worship is up for grabs these days.

And so in order to bring this into focus for discussion, - in good Lutheran fashion - I propose four theses on exactly that: the what, the why, and the how of Sunday morning worship; all under the announced theme: *Liturgy as the Life of the church*. You could place my theses under two headings: the two-way action in the liturgy, and the relationship between the substance of the gospel and the style of the liturgy.

The Two-way Action in the Liturgy

1. THE LITURGY IS SOURCE OF THE CHURCH'S LIFE IN JESUS CHRIST.

The Liturgy is the source of the church's life because it is the setting in which the church is created and nourished by the life-giving power of the Triune God.

By the word of the LORD were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his

mouth, the Psalmist writes. [Psalm 33:6] *And The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.* [Genesis 2:7] All of life rests upon the generating power of the Word of God and His Holy Spirit, the Giver of Life.

As it was in the beginning, so it is now. As the Word of God was the source and the power of life in the first creation, so the Word of God is the source and power of life in the new creation by water and the Spirit. The eternal Word from the Father, through whom all things were made and without whom nothing was made that has been made, this very same Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth, the only Son from the Father.

And that means we cannot discuss the liturgy apart from the incarnation of the Son of God in human flesh. The incarnation is the sobering reminder that all talk about "invitational, entertaining, uplifting worship" must begin somewhere else. All discussion of marketing the church to the peculiar tastes of American baby boomers at the end of the twentieth century must begin with this solemn first century assumption: *You were dead in your trespasses and sins* [Ephesians 2:1]. *But the people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.* [Isaiah 9:2]

And so all liturgy begins at the beginning, with the astounding great good news that God has breathed His Life into this world of death in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ, who is our life. He is the source and origin of all life. Not only in the creation of the cosmos, but also in the new creation of His holy bride, the church. As Eve was built from the very flesh of Adam, so the Church originates in the incarnate flesh of the Son of God. *In him was life, and that life was the light of men.* [John 1:4] From the side of the second life-giving Adam poured forth blood and water in his death on the cross. But that very death is the source of life for the church in every age. *For there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement. ...And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.* [1 John 5:7-8, 11]

The Incarnate Word of God is thus the focus of all worship and liturgy. He Himself is our life, and in the liturgy the Lord of Life comes to our dying world to dispense His life hidden under the channels of washing, proclamation, and meal. That He should condescend to use such lowly channels is as amazing to us as to those who first came with hurried steps to gaze upon God lying in the hay. Yet each Lord's day this same God born in Bethlehem, crucified, risen, and ascended to the Father's right hand lies hidden in the oral and tangible Word of His Gospel as surely as He once lay in lowly infant disguise in the manger. And in the swaddling clothes of His Word and Sacrament our risen and ascended Lord continues to breathe life to all His people in every age.

No, the Liturgy is not a means of Grace. But the Liturgy is the framework in which the church serves as stewardess of the means of Grace, serving up heaping portions of the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation earned by her glorious Lord. "She is His new creation by water and the Word." The church has no life apart from that Word. And the church has no life to impart to this dying world apart from that life-giving Word of God.

God has so arranged it in His church that the Word of His Gospel comes in both oral and visible forms. And when we begin to speak of forms, we are immediately speaking of liturgy. The church cannot baptize, preach, or eat the Lord's Supper without liturgy. The question is not whether there will be a liturgical life in the church; the question is what kind of liturgical life will it be?

I would suggest that we begin defining the "how" of liturgy by the "what" of the Gospel. The liturgy is the church's life first of all because Christ is the source of the Church's life. In the liturgy the Lord of Life comes in the means of His grace to breathe life to His church. And the church's life is Jesus Christ!

2. THE LITURGY IS THE SHAPE OF THE CHURCH'S LIFE IN JESUS CHRIST.

The church has no life apart from Jesus Christ, who comes to impart His life to us in the means of Grace. The liturgy is the church's breath. In so far as the liturgy is the setting in which the precious gemstones of Word and Sacrament are mounted, the liturgy breathes the life of the gospel into the body of the church. In the liturgy the church breathes deeply of the life-giving breath of the Spirit. But in the liturgy the church also exhales; that is, she offers up to God her prayers.

Prayer is to faith as breath is to lungs. There can be no breath without lungs. But there can be lungs without breath - and they are dead lungs. True prayer cannot exist without faith, but faith that does not pray is dying. In other words, when the Giver of all life opens our mouth to receive the good gifts of His Holy Word, out of that same mouth flow petitions and praises. Thus the psalmist can write: *O Lord, open thou my lips, and my mouth shall show forth thy praise.* It is this inhale/exhale posture of the church in her worship that lies behind the genitive in the German word *Gottesdienst*; that is, the liturgy is both God's service to the church in His Word and Sacrament and the service given to God by the church in her worship. In the liturgy the church both stands in the presence of God to receive His good gifts and she also responds to him in prayer and praise.

The church has no life apart from Christ. Her motto is the same as Paul's: *For me to live is Christ.* The liturgy is the church's life first of all because it is in the liturgy that the living Lord comes to meet His holy Bride. The liturgy is the church's life also because in the liturgy the Bride gives herself to her heavenly husband. The liturgy has no life of itself, but only because it is filled with the life of Jesus Christ in His Word and Sacrament. The liturgy is the both the source of the church's life and the shape of the church's life. It is the place where she draws her breath and where she gives it back again. It is where she inhales the life-giving power of the Spirit and where she exhales in the power of the Spirit. It is where she receives forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation in the means of Grace and where she offers her sacrifice of worship to the Father through the Son in the Spirit.

Gospel Substance and Liturgical Style

3. LITURGICAL FORMS ARE ADIAPHORA; THE GOSPEL AND THE SACRAMENTS

ARE NOT.

The Lord of the church has given us the gospel and sacraments; He has not given us one prescribed liturgy. Before He ascended on high He laid down the pattern that is to be in place until the end of time. It is by baptizing and teaching that disciples are made; it is by preaching and eating that they are fed and nourished and it is in that Holy Supper that they proclaim His death until He comes.

Therefore all talk of liturgy apart from the Word of God and the sacraments is just talk. All discussion of liturgical form, historic vestments, liturgical gesture, and aesthetically pleasing music is idolatry apart from Him who is our life. This kind of liturgical idolatry is roundly condemned by our Lutheran fathers (Apology to the Augsburg Confession, Article 15):

Scripture calls traditions "doctrines of demons" (1 Timothy 4:1) when someone teaches that religious rites are helpful in gaining grace and the forgiveness of sins. This obscures the Gospel, the blessing of Christ, and righteousness of faith. [Apol. 15 par. 5, Tappert, p. 215]

Yet in the very same article our fathers were bold to say that the liturgy was held in higher esteem among them than in the church of Rome:

We can truthfully claim that in our churches the public liturgy is more decent than in theirs, and if you look at it correctly we are more faithful to the canons than our opponents are.Every Lord's Day many in our circles use the Lord's Supper, but only after they have been instructed, examined, and absolved. The children chant the Psalms in order to learn; the people sing, too, in order to learn or to worship. [Apol. 15 par. 39-40, Tappert, p. 220]

The Lutheran church in other words, was genuinely evangelical in its gospel - and at the same time more catholic in its liturgy than the Roman church. Now we must ask what was it that constituted evangelical catholicism - why were certain liturgical practices acceptable and others not? What made the difference in the reformers' minds between the proper use of the historic liturgy and its abuse in the Roman rite of the day - a liturgy which Luther scornfully called "the pope's bag of magic tricks?" [SA XV, par. 4, Tappert, p. 316]

The answer lies in the Word of God incarnate, who is the proper focus of all worship and discussion of the divine liturgy. *The chief worship of God is the preaching of the Gospel*, we read in the Apology to the Augsburg Confession. [Apol. XV par. 42, Tappert, p. 221] The Gospel and the Sacraments give shape to the liturgy which is the shape of the Church's life in Christ.

Our Lutheran Confessions insist that the only way to build the church is by the hand-crafted tools entrusted to the church through her evangelical ministry:

To obtain such (saving) faith God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy spirit, who works faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the Gospel.

[ACV(1111-2), Tappert, p. 31]

It is the evangelical ministry of the church that provides for her catholicity: having the ministry of the gospel and sacraments, *satis est* - that's enough.

...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. It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that ceremonies, instituted by men, should be observed uniformly in all places. [AC VII(2), Tappert, p. 32]

The argument today is that since liturgy is adiaphora, we are free to use any form of worship that will work. But what works these days - I would argue - is not the gospel and the sacraments. What works in America today is what has always worked in America - a heavy dose of sentimentality laced with subjectivism packaged in a do it yourself framework. This is the evangelical style which, it is claimed, can suit Lutheran substance just as well as its own.

This is twentieth century America, we are reminded; not 16th century Germany. Worship style, we are told, are just that: purely style. Sacramental theology is purely a matter of taste, like preferring Big Macs to Whoppers.

Evangelism is clearly a matter of marketing, we are informed. If we want the church to grow we must imitate our evangelical neighbors. They are the ones, not we, who represent the Christian experience indigenous to America. We come from a European village church tradition; they are from the frontier tent church tradition of American revivalism. How can we expect Jesus to stay with a church in America that copies a European model, we are asked. We'll just have to adopt a more "American" style - and yet hang onto our Lutheran substance. This is the position held by many of our fellow Lutherans.

But here some of our evangelical neighbors are doing us a favor. Men such as Robert Patterson, the Associate Director of the National Association of Evangelicals, and Michael Horton, who recently edited *The Agony of Deceit*, an expose of American Televangelism are publicly calling the movement to account. Michael Horton in his book *Made in America* has charged evangelicalism with capitulating to the spirit of the age and compromising the gospel in the name of effective evangelism. Evangelical churches, he argues, have fallen prey to the American heresy of individualism, pragmatism, consumerism, the pursuit of pleasure, the subjectivity of emotion, relativism, and alienation. "We are not selling a product to a consumer," he reminds us, "but proclaiming a Savior to a sinner."

Commercial evangelism may bring attention to us, but the evangelical revival we have been hearing about is just another movement. Wait until the bright lights burn out and the superchurches are turned into warehouses as the next generation grows more cynical than it would otherwise have been. What happens when the churches can no longer keep up with the technological sophistication of the entertainment industry? In short, what happens when the loaves and fishes run out? [*Made in America*, Grand

Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991, p. 71]

Even more graphically Horton accuses his fellow evangelicals of emasculating the gospel in an attempt to "sell" it to the American public:

Our emotional, sentimental religion has knocked the objective, rational foundation from under American Christianity, thereby undermining ultimate meaning for civilization. We have neutered God! [*Made in America*, p. 106]

This subjective, sentimental, individualistic, - and we might add anti-incarnational and anti-sacramental message is what passes for Gospel in America today. This is the substance of evangelicalism. At best, I would suggest, it is a parody of the gospel. At worst, it is another gospel - it is not the faith once delivered to the saints.

Though liturgy is adiaphora, to be sure, the Word we preach and the sacraments we administer are not. Though we are free to adopt whatever style of worship we wish, we are not free to change the gospel nor sidestep the sacraments. And so I ask, dare we adopt a style which denies the very heart of what we believe, teach, and confess?

I think not. Not without compromise of the truth. Orthodoxy is not merely intellectual adherence to some abstract truth floating around in space somewhere, but with the heart to believe and with the mouth to confess. In fact, "orthodoxy" means "right worship" before it means "right belief."

By dominical command we have only two requirements for orthodoxy. We find these stipulations recorded in John's gospel: *God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.* [John 4:24] Interestingly enough the same evangelist echoes the words of Jesus in his apocalypse, this time in first person narrative: *I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day.* [Revelation 1:10]

We know from the book of Acts that the Lord's Day was observed wherever two or more Christians were gathered in the name of Jesus - and there there was apostolic preaching, the breaking of bread, and "the prayers," as Luke puts it in the plural. In other words, there was liturgy. The Word of Christ, St. Paul directed the Colossian church, was to have its way with them. *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.* [Colossians 3:16] Where there was the Word of Christ, there was Christ. And where there was Christ, there were to be prayers, hymns, and spiritual songs.

Therefore to be "in the Spirit" is to be at prayer. And to be at prayer means to be in liturgy.

But which liturgy? That is a subject of great frustration among us today. I would like to suggest ever so humbly that perhaps if we understood the gospel, we might understand the liturgy. Absolutely liturgical style is form, not substance. But style follows substance. Style divorced from

substance will remold the substance to suit the style. The Central Committee of the Communist party in the Soviet Union began their reforms by adopting a more democratic style. What we see happening all over the communist block is the total collapse of communist substance. It's a negative example, I realize, but the point is clear. Style follows substance the way form follows function. You can't tinker around with the style of a church without changing its doctrinal substance.

You cannot abandon orthodox liturgy - or worse yet, adopt heterodox liturgy - and still maintain an orthodox confession.

4. THE SUBSTANCE OF THE GOSPEL SHAPES THE FORM OF THE LITURGY

Lex orandi, lex credendi - what is prayed is what is believed. And what is believed is what is prayed. I have a question. Ever so gently but ever so urgently I would like to ask if perhaps the reason our church is confused in how we ought to pray is because we've forgotten what it is that we believe.

The church is still the church without her liturgy. But she cannot live without her liturgy for very long, because in the liturgy she inhales and exhales in the power of the Spirit. As Wm. Löhe put it in his classic *Three Books About the Church*, the church remains a queen even when she is clothed in rags. But a queen rightly deserves regal robes. It is an expression of who she is. Perhaps the reason we find the rags of revivalism preferable to the robes of liturgy is because we have forgotten who we are.

There is nothing so pitiable as a church who has forgotten who she is. Allow me to give but one example: David Luecke, after his extensive research and involvement in evangelical circles, confesses the following confusion:

One of the results of my exposure to Evangelicals is that I now hesitate about which way to face when conducting a worship service. In Lutheran liturgical tradition the pastor sometimes faces away from the people when invoking the Lord's presence or offering prayer. I find it increasingly difficult to turn my back on the audience. (*Evangelical Style and Lutheran Substance*, St. Louis: CPH, 1988, p. 108)

I would like to lovingly suggest that brother Luecke remember who the church is and what she is doing at worship. All of us at one time or another in our duties in the chancel have been confused about which way to face, and I have had my share of liturgical "boo-boos" too - I am not so much bothered by the orientation this brother chooses in worship as by his terminology; now the holy bride of Christ becomes an "audience."

And what, pray tell, is the pastor in this suggested model? At best, he is a communicator left to his own devices to persuade the audience to buy the product he is selling. At worst, he is an entertainer whose job it is to choreograph a Sunday morning production that will lift people's tired spirits and enable to them to express themselves in a kind of cathartic experience that will make them feel good.

This, you see, is what is perhaps most offensive about the liturgy; it does not express what we feel at the time, but it teaches us what to feel. It demands the subordination of the individual to the communion of saints. It will not tolerate the great idols of our age: individualism, experientialism, and materialism.

But the offense of the liturgy, I would suggest, is the offense of the cross. And by the cross we are saved. The God we worship had the unmitigated gall to become man and to lower himself all the way to death, even the death of the cross. But by that death of His He brings us life.

And now and until the end of time God will still be God. He is determined to dispense the rich blessings of His heavenly riches not through the imaginations of the human heart or in the logical deductions of human wisdom, but through His divine mysteries - which are still regarded as foolishness and stumbling blocks to men.

Cultures come and cultures go, but the God you and I are called to serve remains the same. The cultus of the church is not bound to the German chorale or to the American gospel song. From now until He comes again in glory, the Lord of the church goes on recreating His church after His own image. He cleanses her by the washing of water with the Word and presents her to himself as a radiant church, without spot or blemish. In the liturgy the culture is transcended and transformed by the cultus - Gospel substance always determines the style.

And the Gospel substance is always the same; that's the point: It is always the gospel of Jesus Christ and Him crucified. And now and till the end of time the gospel is not accessible to human culture. The cross remains an offense to the Jew and foolishness to the Gentile. There is but one way to the Father - and that is through Jesus. And from first to last His way is the way of the cross. The means of His grace do not change: He is absolutely determined to come to us only through His Word and Sacraments...and that includes the oral Word of His Gospel which He places in the mouths of His called servants to preach and through the visible word of His Gospel in the Holy Sacraments which He places in the hands of called servants to administer in His Name and by His divine authority.

The Liturgy is the church's life - But which liturgy, we ask. I contend we begin elsewhere. I suggest we begin with a more Lutheran question: What is the Gospel? Which are the means of Grace? Now then, What does this mean?

We have only one life to live in the Church. The church cannot live by herself on a horizontal level as a human association of people who have had some kind of common spiritual experience. We cannot afford to go on building the church on the basis of sociological or psychological principles without paying a great price. The church has no life on earth apart from her heavenly Lord and His life-giving Spirit. In the liturgy she breathes in His life-imparting power through the means of Grace. And in the liturgy she breathes out back to God her prayers and praises. The church is devoted to the liturgy not for aesthetic reasons, but because she is devoted to

the apostles' doctrine, to the breaking of bread, to the fellowship, and to the prayers.

In short, the liturgy is the church's life. She has only one life to live, and she has only one testimony to give: *For there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement. And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.* [1 John 5:7-8, 11]

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ADDENDA

GIERTZ ON WORSHIP

(The liturgy) has flowed through the centuries like a ceaseless stream. IT had its first deep sources in the synagogue. It is not only that a few words have remained in continuous use since that time, such as, Amen, Hallelujah, or Hosanna, but the whole structural form of our order of worship shows clearly its relation to that worship which Jesus Himself shared in the synagogue at Nazareth and in which, as a grown man, he officiated when He was invited to read and interpret the Scriptures. To the ancient worship of the synagogue the apostolic church added the Holy Communion, that new creation which she received from the Saviour Himself and which is the center of all liturgy. As it is celebrated still, with the traditional chants the Preface and the Sanctus, it is essentially a contribution of the first century.

The unbroken connection with apostolic times is also revealed in the external forms of the liturgy. The altar is today the only place in our modern life where, with unbroken tradition, the vestments are still used which were worn by people in that olden day. Within the walls of the church one can still hear musical settings that preserve something of the very tones of that hymn of praise which our Lord and His disciples sang when they ate the paschal meal.

[Bo Giertz, "Liturgy and Spiritual Awakening," Ft. Wayne: CTS Press, 1987, p. 3]

ATHANASIUS on WORSHIP

We must not omit to explain the reason why words of this kind (the Psalms) should be not merely said, but rendered with melody and song; for there are actually some simple folk among us who, though they believe the words to be inspired, yet think the reason for singing them is just to make them more pleasing to the ear!

In the first place, it is fitting that the sacred writings should praise God in poetry as well as prose, because the freer, less restricted form of verse, in which the Psalms...are cast, ensures that by them men should express their love to God with all the strength and power they possess. And secondly, the reason lies in the unifying effect which chanting the Psalms has upon the singer. For to sing the Psalms demands such concentration of a man's whole being on them that, in doing it, his usual disharmony of mind and corresponding bodily confusion is resolved, just as the notes of several flutes are brought by harmony to one effect; and he is thus no longer to be found thinking good and doing evil.... And it is in order that the melody may thus express our inner spiritual harmony, just as the words voice our thoughts, that the Lord Himself has ordained that the Psalms be sung and recited to a chant.

When, therefore, the Psalms are chanted, it is not from any mere desire for sweet music but as the outward expression of the inward harmony obtained in the soul, because such harmonious recitation is in itself the index of a peaceful and well-ordered heart. ...a soul rightly ordered by chanting the sacred words forgets its own afflictions and contemplates with joy the things of Christ alone.

St. Athanasius on the Incarnation (London: A.R. Mowbray, 1963).

LUTHER ON THE CHURCH:

If you are asked, What do you mean by the words, "I believe in the Holy spirit"? you can answer, "I believe that the Holy spirit makes me holy, as his name implies." How does he do this? By what means? Answer: "Through the Christian church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting." In the first place, he has a unique community in the world. It is the mother that begets and bears every Christian through the Word of God. The Holy Spirit reveals and preaches that Word, and by it he illumines and kindles hearts so that they grasp and accept it, cling to it, and persevere in it." [Large Catechism, Creed, The Third Article, par. 40-42, Tappert, p. 416]