

Lutheran Worship Wars

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I have been asked to address the topic, "Lutheran Worship Wars." Where did these wars come from? When I was a boy there was The Lutheran Hymnal. On Sunday morning it was either page five or page fifteen. Page fifteen was basically Luther's German Mass in English and page five was pretty much the same thing but without the Lord's Supper. We followed Matins during chapel at the Lutheran elementary school and Vespers at the Wednesday evening services at church during Advent and Lent. What was there to argue about? Whether to sing the more cheerful melody or the more sober melody for the triple Hallelujah after the Gradual? Or perhaps some preferred the Nunc Dimittis to the Magnificat, but then you could always take turns.

How times have changed! From homemade liturgies that more or less follow the structure of the traditional service to praise services that offer something radically different, the church services one encounters on a Sunday morning in Lutheran congregations across America are impossible to anticipate. There have always been Lutherans who were rather non-liturgical. Up in northern Minnesota where I live, pietistic Lutheran bodies such as the Lutheran Brethren and the Free Lutherans have always had a very sparse liturgy. One wouldn't expect to attend one of their congregations and find the full liturgy of the historic Lutheran Church. In the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, however, even during the heat of the battle for the Bible in the sixties and seventies, you could expect pretty much the same kind of church service from one congregation to another. After all, The Lutheran Hymnal is The Lutheran Hymnal. Nobody ever said it was perfect, but it did provide at least the appearance of a consensus on worship.

That's no longer the case. I don't think that I overstate matters when I say that the worship wars in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod have resulted in greater bitterness and frustration during the past two decades than did the controversy over biblical inerrancy of the previous two decades. What happens on a Sunday morning in their own congregation matters more to people than what theologians in a distant city are arguing about. People expect that when they go to church certain things will happen. Certain words will be said. Certain

actions will be followed. I am talking about such things as confession and absolution, singing the Kyrie followed by the Gloria in Excelsis, listening to the lessons, and confessing the Creed. This is what has happened and this is what folks expect to happen. Hymns will be sung. A man wearing a robe and standing in a Pulpit will preach a sermon based on a text from the Bible. You will sing the familiar psalms and canticles of the church, pray the Lord's Prayer, kneel at the Lord's Altar and eat and drink Christ's body and blood. You will not leave before hearing the words of the Aaronic Benediction that leave you with the assurance that the God who just served you with his holy word and sacrament now gives you his peace. What takes place on Sunday morning will make you feel at home because what takes place will put you where you have met God in the past and have come to know him. You have talked to God and heard him talk to you. This is what you are looking for. This is why you go to church.

And now you go to church and everything is different. You go expecting to find something that is no longer there. Perhaps it's the singing of the Kyrie. Or maybe the Creed is replaced by a homemade version of it that isn't really very good. Instead of a sermon, there is a kind of chancel drama. The familiar canticles are gone. The Lutheran chorales have given way to shallow and repetitious "praise" songs. The Benediction is replaced by a rather lengthy exhortation to be whatever kind of Christian is in vogue for the season. You don't want to criticize. You wonder if your expectations were a bit unreasonable. After all, there must be many different ways of worshipping God. The Bible doesn't actually set down for the church of the New Testament detailed instructions on what to do on a Sunday morning. And if such instructions aren't laid down in the Scriptures and if the Scriptures alone are to be for us the norm and judge of all doctrine and practice in the church, why should you complain if you must endure change? Perhaps you're just being old fashioned. Still, you have the definite sense that something important is gone and you want it back. Church is no longer home.

It's hard to lose what you love, and the loss of the historic liturgy is a tragedy for thousands upon thousands of Lutherans across our country. As the Church Growth Movement has invaded large parts of Lutheranism, Lutherans have been losing their home churches to a market-driven obsession with meeting the felt needs of the religious consumer. The gospel has become a spiritual commodity to be marketed to religious seekers driven by unarticulated wants of a vaguely spiritual nature. And while the traditionalists know that something is wrong, they cannot always make a case for holding on to the traditional church service. It is hard to defend what never had to be defended until the most recent times.

These folks are discouraged. While I don't blame them, I don't think they should be. I believe that our generation has a wonderful opportunity to regain a vitality in worship and a rebirth of the confessional Lutheran spirit that could not have

happened except in the wake of the assault on the traditional church service that we have suffered for the past couple of decades. The Lord chastens every son he loves. We are being forced to ask very basic questions about worship. We cannot appeal to a lost consensus. We cannot even know if the consensus was real or only illusionary. Whatever pain the church must endure is a God-given opportunity to rediscover the very foundations of our faith in a way that will strengthen the church.

I think it only fair to tell you that when it comes to the worship wars I am a partisan. I confess that I am a radical traditionalist. I agree with the farmer: "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." I disagree with the policy of the government: "If it ain't broke, fix it until it is." If I could simply assert to my brothers and sisters in Christ that they should accept my view of things and love and cherish the historic liturgy and hymnody of the church, and that would settle it for them, why wouldn't that be a simple solution? Ah, but for some reason folks aren't willing to let me appoint myself arbiter in these battles. So I will not be able simply to insist that the historic liturgy should be retained as is. I must provide you with a persuasive argument. Well, that's what I intend to do. I hope you weren't expecting me to come up with some kind of a synthesis between the traditional service and the various contemporary "praise" services that have become popular in recent years. That is not my intent. However, I might be able to offer some advice on how we Lutherans can defend the historic liturgy of the church in a Lutheran manner that will avoid fruitless and harmful arguments.

By the historic liturgy I am referring more or less to what we have in The Order of Holy Communion on page 15 in The Lutheran Hymnal; The Common Service on page 15 and the Service of Word and Sacrament on page 26 in Christian Worship; The Divine Service Rite One on page 41 and The Divine Service Rite Two on page 60 in the Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary of the ELS; Divine Service I on page 136 and Divine Service II on page 158 and page 178 of Lutheran Worship; and Holy Communion Setting One on page 57, Setting Two on page 78, and Setting Three on page 99 of the Lutheran Book of Worship. These services are not by any means identical, but they all contain certain essential elements and they all follow the same basic structure. Prior to the service proper is the preparation in which we invoke the presence of the Triune God, confess our sins to Him, and receive the absolution spoken by the pastor. An Introit may introduce the service proper, which begins with the Kyrie in which we cry out to our Lord Jesus for his mercy. It continues with a hymn of praise, the Gloria in Excelsis, which promises the mercy we need, and grounds it in the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord Jesus who intercedes for us. It includes the prayer commonly called the Collect for the day and is followed by the reading of the Holy Scriptures, the confession of the church's faith in the Creed, and the Sermon. The celebration of the Lord's Supper includes the singing of the Sanctus, the praying of the Lord's Prayer, the consecration of the

elements with Christ's words of institution, the singing of the Agnus Dei, and the eating and drinking of Christ's body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. The historic service has always concluded with the Aaronic Benediction.

Where does the Bible say that we must follow this historic service as this service has come down to us? It does not say so. How could it? How could the Bible mandate a specific form of worship that didn't exist when the Bible was written?

Well, then, what does the Bible say about the church service? In one sense, it doesn't say much. But in another sense, it says quite a bit. If we are looking for Bible passages that will prescribe for us specifically what we should do when we are gathered together as Christ's church, we won't find much in the area of detailed specifics. However, if we are looking to the Scriptures to learn who Christ is, why we need him, and how he chooses to come to us to serve us and save us we will find a rich treasure.

Is the use of the historic service an indifferent matter? May we in Christian freedom discard the liturgy that we have inherited from the church catholic? If the Bible doesn't require something, surely the church may not do so either. There is a certain surface logic to the argument that the historic liturgy may be discarded because the Bible doesn't require its use and we must base our doctrine and practice on the Bible alone. But the so-called Scripture Alone principle may not be applied in a manner that runs against the other two pillars of the Reformation: Grace Alone and Faith Alone. How does God bring his grace to sinners in their need? How does God elicit faith in the heart that is by nature stone, cold, dead? Surely the Scriptures have quite a bit to say about this!

Before we can rightly approach the Holy Scriptures for instruction on what the church service ought to be we need to know first of all why we would consult the Bible at all. For what purpose does the Christian go to the Holy Scriptures? What do we expect to find? Now if you were to attend the rituals of a lodge, you might run across a description of the Bible like this one that is found in the manual of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks: "This is the book of Law, upon which is founded justice." Clearly that is an inadequate view of the Bible! Or, if you were to consult any number of the many Reformed sects in America you might learn that the Bible contains spiritual principles for successful living. But what does Jesus say? Does he tell us to see the Bible primarily as that legal code to which we are bound? Or does he invite us to seek out in the Bible religious or spiritual principles, which we then must put into practice? No, Jesus says, "You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me." (John 5:39)

We don't read the Bible as we do a religious textbook from which we derive lessons that we must then apply. The heavenly doctrine revealed in the Holy

Scriptures is centered in Christ crucified for sinners. The blood of the Lamb is the crimson thread that holds together every page of this Holy Book. It was in displaying the wounds of his crucifixion that Jesus breathed on his disciples the Holy Spirit. We seek no other Spirit than the Holy Spirit who reveals the wounds by which our sins are borne and washed away. It is interesting to note how in St. John's Gospel, chapter 20, the Evangelist joins together the office of the keys and the Holy Scriptures. First John records Jesus' words telling his church and her ministers that they are to forgive and retain sins. Then John adds this comment, "And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name." The same Spirit who comes to us through the oral word spoken by the preacher is the Spirit whose words are recorded for us in the Holy Scriptures. And both forms of address are given for exactly the same reason: That through faith in Christ Jesus, the eternal Son of the Father who suffered and died for us, we might have forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

We will love what we know we need the most. What does a sinner need above all else? He needs the forgiveness of his sins! Who, then, does the sinner need? Who is the best friend the sinner has? Is it not Jesus who took his sin away on the cross? So the sinner needs Jesus. Jesus doesn't need what the sinner can give. The sinner needs what Jesus can give. The question that we sinners need to ask is how and where does Jesus give us what we need? Where is this Jesus who suffered for us? When Jesus says, "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heaven laden, and I will give you rest," (Matthew 11:28) where are we to go in order to be coming to Jesus? If we are to confess with Peter, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life," (John 6:68) where, specifically, do we go to hear the words of eternal life that Jesus speaks?

When Jesus came and had pity on a man paralyzed and unable to walk, the first words he spoke were, "Son, be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven." (Matthew 9:2) To those who questioned his divine authority, Jesus claimed that he had authority on this earth to forgive sins and he healed the paralytic to prove it. (Matthew 9:6) It is precisely this authority that Jesus claimed immediately before giving to his disciples the so-called Great Commission. In Matthew's Gospel Jesus lays claim to all authority in heaven and on earth. Then he tells the eleven to go and teach all nations by means of baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to guard or keep or hold on to everything that he had taught them. To this evangelical command he adds the promise, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20) Jesus clearly binds his gracious presence and saving power to wherever

his gospel is preached and his sacraments are administered. This is not just a Lutheran peculiarity. This is a fundamental biblical truth.

Consider what happened in space/time history. On the day of Pentecost, the gospel was preached and three thousand people gladly received that gospel and were baptized as we read in Acts 2:41. In the very next verse we read, "And they [that is, those who believed and were baptized] continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers." (Acts 2:42) There you have the Divine Service. Every essential element of the historic liturgy of the church is mentioned in this passage. There is the teaching of God's word that Jesus first taught to the apostles and which the Holy Spirit later brought to their remembrance as Jesus promised. There is the celebration of the Lord's Supper, in this instance referred to as the "breaking of bread" because that was the mode of distribution of Christ's body in the early church, years before the advent of communion wafers. And there were the prayers, chief among which was, of course, the Lord's Prayer. This is and remains the basic ingredients of the divine service up to our day. While all the specific elements of the service are not set forth, the fact that the early church is indeed following a set liturgy can hardly be denied. There are few biblical texts that deal specifically with the form of the church service. St. Paul addresses abuses that had arisen. He chides the Corinthians for desecrating the Lord's Supper and he confronts the offense of women preaching. In Colossians 3:16 he says that the hymnody of the church should teach the faith. But to seek out in the Bible detailed instructions on precisely what to do and when to do it is a fruitless task. It will likely lead to reading into the text what just isn't there.

One thing we can say about Acts 2:42 is that it directly addresses and should settle one feature of the worship wars that sharply divides our friends in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. In the ELCA there is little argument against an open Communion policy that invites any baptized Christian to the Altar to eat and to drink. In the Wisconsin Synod and the ELS there is little argument against a closed Communion policy that invites to the Altar only those who are joined with us in agreement with the apostolic teaching. Within the Missouri Synod, however, there has been an ongoing and increasingly bitter division on the matter of who may commune. This text, which sets down the essential elements of the Divine Service, also clearly joins together the apostolic teaching, the Christian fellowship, the reception of the Lord's Supper, and the prayers of the church. These all go together.

Closed Communion is one of the most difficult issues we confessional Lutherans face in our day. We seem to be aware of how harsh the concept appears to be to outsiders, which may explain why in the past generation or so we Lutherans have begun to speak of "close" Communion instead of the historic "closed" Communion. I used to call it "close" Communion myself, until I learned that that

phrase was coined by the Baptists. Then I decided to stick to “closed” Communion. But it is undeniable that we are uncomfortable with it, even when we know it is the will of God. It is just so unpopular. Some congregations have even resorted to having Communion only at times when the general public probably won’t be coming, so as to avoid giving offense to folks who cannot understand why we would keep any sincere Christian away from the Lord’s Supper.

One reason that closed Communion is so unpopular is because of a fundamentally incorrect understanding of what happens when the church is gathered together on a Sunday morning. Consider the arguments raised against closed Communion by sincere people who are horrified by it. Who are you to keep folks away from your altar? Do you think you are better than other Christians? Is your piety more pure? Is your worship more sincere? Are your offerings more valuable in the sight of God? Isn’t it the height of spiritual arrogance for you to deny fellowship to folks who aren’t any more sinful or any less sincere than you are?

What do all these questions assume? They assume that what is happening on a Sunday morning as the church is gathered together is an essentially human activity. They assume that the fellowship that exists among the faithful is created by the faithful. This was the view of the famous and highly influential Reformed theologian, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768 – 1834) who said, “The church . . . is a fellowship created by the voluntary actions of men, and only through these does it continue to exist.” The idea of the church as a voluntary association has a strong pull, especially in America where voluntarism is greatly prized. Schleiermacher’s view is widely assumed to be the Christian one. And we are judged for rejecting it: “Why would you choose to exclude from your fellowship anyone who would freely choose to participate in it? Why should someone have to learn your doctrines and your rules and your ways of doing things? Why shouldn’t you accept a fellow Christian as a brother or a sister without imposing any additional requirements? Your position on church fellowship is unbrotherly, legalistic, and contrary to the spirit of Christ who invites everyone to his feast.”

This is an understandable argument, isn’t it? It is based on this false assumption that the Communion of Saints exists by means of individual Christians gathering together to do things that will bring this communion into being. But that’s not how it happens. What does the Bible say? “But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved).” (Ephesians 2:4-5) “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be hold

and without blemish.” (Ephesians 5:25-27) Clearly, Schleiermacher and his disciples are wrong. The fellowship of the church is created by God who creates her to be that holy and spotless bride of Christ. The communion of the Communion of Saints is solely the creation of a gracious God.

Every Lutheran catechumen knows how this communion is established.

I believe that I cannot by my own reason for strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith; even as He calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth and keeps in with Christ Jesus in the one true faith.

Now here’s a simple question for you to consider. Specifically, where and when does the Holy Ghost call us? Where is his gospel preached? Where are his gifts that enlighten us graciously given? Where does he sanctify and keep us together as one holy Christian church? Is it not most specifically by means of what happens on a Sunday morning when we are at church? In fact, don’t we go to church specifically to be served by God as God gives us what we cannot give ourselves? The church isn’t perpetuating herself when she gathers together on a Sunday morning. Rather, she is being created and preserved by the Holy Spirit.

Martin Luther writes in the Large Catechism,

I believe that there is on earth a little holy flock or community of pure saints under one head, Christ. It is called together by the Holy Spirit in one faith, mind, and understanding. It possesses a variety of gifts, yet is united in love without sect or schism. Of this community I also am a part and member, a participant and co-partner in all the blessing it possess. I was brought to it by the Holy Sprit and incorporated into it through the fact that I have heard and still hear God’s Word, which is the first step in entering it. Before we had advanced this far, we were entirely of the devil, knowing nothing of God and of Christ. Until the last day the Holy Spirit remains with the holy community or Christian people. Though it he gathers us, using it to teach and preach the Word. (Large Catechism, Creed, par. 51-53)

Concerning the Holy Spirit, Luther also writes in his great creedal hymn, “Who the church, his own creation, keeps in unity of spirit, here forgiveness and salvation daily come through Jesus’ merit.” Once more, in the Large Catechism, Luther writes, “In other words, he [the Holy Spirit] first leads us into his holy

community, placing us upon the bosom of the church, where he preaches to us and brings us to Christ.”

We don't go to church to do God a favor. We go to church to receive God's favor. We don't need to go to church to worship God. We can ascribe worth to God as we gaze up into the star-lit sky on a clear night up at the lake and marvel at the majesty of our Father in heaven, the Almighty Creator of everything that exists. We can worship God by offering our bodies to him as living sacrifices in holy living as we humbly serve our neighbor in whatever vocation to which God has called us. We don't need to go anywhere or be anywhere in particular in order to offer up praises to the One who has called us out of darkness into his marvelous light. And surely, we don't have to conform to certain aesthetic, cultural, traditional, or any other extra-biblical standards in order that the praise we offer to God will be acceptable in his sight. What makes our lives a living doxology to God is not the fact that we offer our lives to God on a Sunday morning as opposed to any other morning when we get up to go to work.

But we don't go to church primarily to serve God. We go to church to be served by God. We need Jesus. We need what he alone can give. Only the One who offered his humble obedience to the Father as the representative of the whole human race has the authority to tell sinners that they are righteous. If it is Christ's righteousness with which we are clothed, Christ is the One who can clothe us. This is why St. Paul writes, “For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” (Galatians 3:26-27) This is why we invoke the name put upon us when we were baptized at the beginning of the Divine Service. “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there in the midst of them.” (Matthew 18:20) So says Jesus. Jesus, who ascended into heaven to fill all things, remains with his church here below to serve her in her need. The German's call it Gottesdienst, which means Divine Service. The foundation and source of all the service we will ever do is the service that Jesus does for us. He served us by what he did for us. He obeyed the whole law for the whole world and he suffered for the sin of the whole world. His saving work for us is complete. But his service is not complete. He serves us today by giving to us the treasures of salvation that he won for us two thousand years ago.

When we go to church, whom are we expecting to meet and whose voice are we expecting to hear? Our friends from the Reformed religious tradition, whether strict Calvinists on one side or Pentecostals on the other, are all agreed on one thing. They agree that God does not give us forgiveness of sins, salvation from hell, and eternal life by means of the speaking of a man. We Lutherans disagree. We believe that that man up there in the chancel really does speak to us from Jesus Christ himself and that when the minister says our sins are forgiven it is the Lord Jesus, who bore those sins, who is speaking through the

mouth of His minister. And it doesn't matter what kind of a guy the preacher is. God spoke through Balaam's ass, if you will recall. We believe in the means of grace. When a mere man baptizes, absolves, preaches, and administers the Lord's Supper it is the almighty God, the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life, who through these almighty means of salvation establishes and strengthens the Holy Christian Church and makes us members of it.

Much of the conflict about worship within the Lutheran church comes from the fact that Lutherans are looking for instruction on how to worship from people who deny this. A famous Church Growth guru by the name of Carl George, who has become a mentor for many Lutherans, criticizes the traditional church service in his book, Prepare Your Church for the Future. This book is more widely studied in many Lutheran circles than are the Lutheran Confessions. George argues against the traditional service and the prospect of folks depending on a pastor. Here is what he says:

Another harmful side effect involves gift suppression. Generally anyone, clergy or lay, who can maintain the attention of up to one hundred people possesses unusual abilities. Even if this individual utilizes an array of preaching or teaching tools to involve the other ninety-nine people, this basic concept remains, "My full pitcher is pouring into your empty pitcher." In terms of spiritual gifts, one person "gives," and the primary assignment of the other people, gifted though they may be, is to take. (Pages 67-68)

Stating it charitably, George is confused. It isn't a matter of a pastor pouring his full pitcher into the empty pitchers of the people in the pew. It's a matter of sinners who hunger and thirst after righteousness being filled. And this is God's work, not the work of any man. Who is the One who preaches, baptizes, absolves, or gives out the body and the blood of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins? Is it not Christ Himself? Aren't the words the words of the Holy Spirit whom Christ has given to His church on earth? The preaching, the baptism, the absolution, and the Holy Supper are all the treasures of Christ. The real preacher is Jesus.

The fundamental doctrinal error of the Church Growth Movement is that the church is edified and grows by means of Christians sharing their spiritual gifts with one another. This is not so. The way God calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies his church on earth is through the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. Whatever gifts we have or do not have within us cannot be the means by which the church is sustained. God doesn't save you by what God does in me. But when I tell you the gospel, God most certainly

does save you by the words that he speaks through me. We must be crystal clear on that score. The word must be preached.

The fact that the word must be preached and that Christ himself has instituted the preaching office does not mean that the written word is not a means of grace when anyone reads it. A sinner who is spiritually blind, dead, and at enmity with God can be born from above by reading a Gideon's Bible in his hotel room all alone. The reason we need the preaching of preachers is because this is a gracious divine institution. It is not because the word of God gains its power from the office of the one called to preach it. Any Christian who can read the Bible can give to others the words of eternal life when need requires it. The preacher has nothing to say or to give that doesn't already belong to the whole church and to every individual Christian. It is perfectly true that one must be called by God through the church in order publicly to preach, teach, or administer the sacraments, but this by no means implies that the power of God's gospel and sacraments depend on that call into the public preaching office. The power of the gospel and the sacraments inhere in the gospel and sacraments. The preacher brings nothing to the preaching, the absolution, or the sacraments. He is nothing more than the voice that God uses.

Do you need a pastor? Yes! Do you need any specific pastor? No. You need the voice, the words, the water, the bread, and the wine. The brand doesn't matter. What you need is Jesus. This is what the Divine Service is all about. You need Jesus. This need is the most powerful argument we can make for retaining the historic liturgy. The historic liturgy we have inherited from the fathers is far too precious for us to substantially change or set aside. We cannot prove this by trying to find biblical proof texts that tell us we must do this or that whenever we gather together. The Bible isn't a rulebook for Christian worship. And we cannot prove that we should keep the historic liturgy by appealing to the authority of church tradition. We are not bound by church tradition as if it has any normative authority over us.

A Christian will respect tradition even as a Christian will respect his father and mother. We honor the church and her traditions, if for no other reason than respect for the family. Listen to Luther's considered sentiments on this subject. Explaining how he wanted to wean the people away from some of the bad practices of the Roman Church of his day, he wrote:

Therefore, I have used neither authority nor pressure. Nor did I make any innovations. For I have been hesitant and fearful, partly because of the weak in faith, who cannot suddenly exchange an old and accustomed order of worship for a new and unusual one, and more so because of the fickle and fastidious spirits who rush in like unclean swine without faith or reason, and who delight only in

novelty and tire of it as quickly, when it has worn off. Such people are a nuisance even in other affairs, but in spiritual matters, they are absolutely unbearable. (AE, 53, 19)

If Luther would caution a careful and slow correction of the errors of the papacy, how much more should we be cautious of innovations in our day, especially if they serve no essential purpose. There are many reasons for being respectful of the tradition we have received. First of all, there is nothing contrary to God's word in the Divine Service that we have received. Those who would favor replacing it with something new should have a better argument to offer than that new is better than old. If there is nothing unscriptural about the historic service, it should not be abandoned.

Furthermore, when most of it is taken verbatim from the Holy Scriptures themselves, one can hardly argue that it is irrelevant to our needs without accusing the Bible of the same thing. Besides, there is a sense of unity that comes from saying the same words in the same canticles, hymns, psalms, creeds, and responses that have been used in the church for hundreds and hundreds of years.

Still, we must stop short of insisting that the traditional liturgy must be followed because it is traditional. We Lutherans acknowledge the Bible alone as the source and norm of all doctrine in the church. We accept without any reservation the ecumenical creeds and the Lutheran Confessions because these creeds and confessions agree with the Holy Scriptures which are God's inspired and inerrant word. We do not recognize church tradition as being a norm for doctrine and practice. Practically speaking, the historic liturgy does serve as a norm or standard of what we believe for the simple reason that people know it, say and sing it, and cherish it in their hearts. But as a matter of Lutheran principle, we cannot ascribe a normative authority to any particular liturgical form, except obviously insofar as that form contains the Holy Scriptures and the Creeds and Confessions of the church.

The most powerful argument for retaining the historic liturgy in the essential form in which we have received it is that it is what we need. It's how a sinner is justified by faith alone. It's how the restless soul finds rest and peace in the wounds of Jesus. Forgive me for being so pragmatic, but I believe we should stay with what works. Please consider two undeniable truths that must determine for us what will happen during the Sunday morning service. First, a sinner needs to find a gracious God. Second, Jesus, who shed his blood for us, is that gracious God who receives sinners, has fellowship with them, and serves them.

A sinner needs to find a gracious God.

Two men went up to the Temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, "God, I thank You that I am not like other men – extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess." And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me a sinner." I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. (Luke 18:10-14)

The tax collector cried out for mercy. The word for mercy used here specifically calls for the turning away of God's just anger. The sinner knows God has every right to condemn him but he pleads the blood shed between the cherubim on the mercy seat, that is to say, he pleads nothing but the blood and righteousness of Jesus. He offers nothing but his sin. He makes no bold promises. He is filled with shame and guilt and failure. He bows his head in utter spiritual helplessness.

"Lord, have mercy upon us. Christ, have mercy upon us. Lord, have mercy upon us." I would like to suggest to you, brothers and sisters in Christ, that there is no other possible way for us to approach God. We come with nothing whatsoever. As the hymnist writes:

I have naught, my God to offer,
Save the blood of Thy dear Son;
Graciously accept the proffer:
Make his righteousness mine own.
His holy life gave He, was crucified for me;
His righteousness perfect He now pleads before Thee;
His own robe of righteousness, my highest good,
Shall clothe me in glory, through faith in His blood. (ELH, 182,
stanza 6)

You cannot take the Kyrie out of the service. It is the presupposition for everything that follows. The Divine Service is where God serves sinners by justifying them. That's what Jesus himself teaches us. The tax collector went home justified. This is one of the very few times that our Lord Jesus uses that

word, which is more frequently used by St. Paul. Jesus here tells us the purpose of going to church: to be justified, to receive the forgiveness of sins. A sinner needs to find a gracious God.

Second, Jesus, who shed his blood for us, is that gracious God who receives sinners, has fellowship with them, and serves them.

Then He came to Simon Peter. And Peter said to Him, "Lord, are You washing my feet?" Jesus answered and said to him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this." And Peter said to Him, "You shall never wash my feet!" Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me." (John 13:6-8)

What did Jesus mean? Why was he so insistent? While it is perfectly plain that Jesus was giving them an example that he wanted them to follow, it is also clear that Jesus was insisting that Peter submit to being washed by him or he would not be clean. He says to Peter, "He who is bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you." (John 13:10) Jesus is using the physical washing of feet as an illustration of a spiritual washing away of sin. Whether or not this is a sacramental allusion to the washing of Holy Baptism is not as important as the simple fact that Jesus insists that he serve us and if he doesn't serve us we will not be pure and clean. We must not think that we can live in the presence of God and worship him unless God in Christ humbles himself before us.

We were not there when they crucified our Lord. Jesus serves us by bringing us there. He speaks and he acts through what happens in the Divine Service. His word and sacrament join us to where we were redeemed by his holy blood. The water of Holy Baptism washes us clean with the blood of Jesus. We invoke the holy name in which we were baptized, confident that God is present to serve us. According to the new man created by the Holy Spirit we love this precious service of Jesus. In our old sinful flesh we resist the service that God insists on rendering to us. We want to justify ourselves. But if we will not be served by Jesus, we have no part of Jesus.

The Divine Service need not keep every single feature that it has in the form we have received it. But we need to consider what is taking place here if we were to choose to change it here and there. Do we know that it is Jesus serving us? Do we understand that what is taking place is not a Christian commemoration of an absent Jesus who will come back some day, but the real down to earth work of a present Jesus who is serving us in the here and now precisely in the way we need that service? He is here to wash the filth away. Not the dirt from the body, of course, but he is here to save us through his baptism, giving us that good

conscience that his resurrection provides. He is here to join himself to us in holy service.

Will you be served? Or do you want to do it yourself? Do you want to take the Book and read it all alone, thinking that you don't need anyone preaching to you? But Jesus called men to preach, didn't he? Do you want to celebrate your faithfulness by thanking God for all the good things he has done in you? Well, consider if you will that the Pharisee did not leave the Temple a righteous man. He attended a "praise service" without the singing of the Kyrie. Have you noticed that so many contemporary "praise services" neglect the humble plea for divine mercy?

If you take a look at what God has bequeathed to us through our fathers in the liturgy we know so well, we will see Divine Service from beginning to end. The Kyrie is followed by the Gloria in Excelsis that promises precisely what we asked God in mercy to provide. Then, in response to our prayer in the Collect, God teaches us that heavenly doctrine from the Sacred Scriptures that shows us the way to heaven. Christian doctrine is never cold, dry, or irrelevant. It is life giving. This is why we love the great hymns of Ambrose of Milan, Martin Luther, Paul Gerhard, Thomas Kingo, and others who saw the poetry of the hymn as always serving the purpose of confessing and teaching the pure and saving gospel. By the way, little children love to learn the Lutheran chorales. It is a myth that they cannot. But adults who have learned to love them must teach the children. That requires pastors to promote them. When these children are old, they will derive precious little comfort from the lyrics of "If I Were a Butterfly." But any Christian, young or old, can gladly die with the words of "On My Heart Imprint Thine Image" on his lips.

Then, before the pastor preaches the sermon, we give him instructions on what to preach. Preach according to that pattern of sound doctrine contained in the Creed. He's not there to share his own unique pastoral insights. He is there to speak the apostolic word in which our fathers and mothers in the faith have continued steadfast since the day of Pentecost. Then, when the preacher preaches, we listen for the voice of the Holy Spirit.

The sermon isn't a religious lecture on how we may do this or that or the other thing to overcome whatever human problems beset us. It is and ought to be doctrinal. But it isn't just any religious doctrine. It is the revelation of the grace of God in Christ. It is an extended absolution. You go to church to learn what the world in its wisdom doesn't know and cannot teach. Every sermon should clearly reveal the blood and righteousness of Jesus that avails for all sinners. Jesus' words are spirit and life. Why? Because they are Jesus' words! The oral word from the pulpit, which is based on the written word of the Bible, is to reveal the Incarnate Word who shed his blood for all sinners. The sermon is a means of

grace. It is designed to give you eternal life. The sermon is more than a lesson on living. It is God giving us life. The sermon prepares you to receive the Sacrament.

Consider how beautifully the ancient Sanctus does so as well. "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Sabaoth, heaven and earth are full of they glory." That's a frightening thought, and if you read Isaiah 6 you will see how he responded to such a sight of the Holy Trinity in a vision with angels who had to cover their feet and their eyes. "Woe is me!" So cries Isaiah and so cries every sinner who must stand before the Holy God. But wait! What do we hear? "Blessed is He, blessed is He, blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord. Hosanna, hosanna, hosanna in the highest." Where is this holy God before whom sinners must flea in terror? He is riding on a donkey, a beast of burden. He will take upon himself the world's burden of sin and walk to the cross to bear in his holy body all our sin and shed his blood to wash it all away. And it is that very body and blood that he will give to us to eat and to drink so that we will know without any doubt that he forgives us all our sins. How could he not forgive us when he puts into our very bodies that by which he took away our sin, his very holy body and blood?

Then, so that we cannot doubt, but firmly believe, that we have met the gracious God who has condescended to serve us in our great weakness, God speaks the final words of peace in the benediction. "The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious unto you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace."

I believe that if we were to focus in on what God actually gives us in the Divine Service Sunday after Sunday, as often as we come, in every need of life, from youth to old age, we would likely avoid arguing over matters of indifference. Whether or not you cross yourself, put ashes on the forehead on Ash Wednesday, bow during the Creed to confess the incarnation (or is it the humiliation?) is not really that important. These are all helpful, useful things that we shouldn't reject. But if you haven't been taught these things in your youth you most likely won't be able to embrace them with any great affection. Maybe you will. Maybe you won't. Many Christians find deep comfort in the personal absolution that they receive from their pastors during private confession because that absolution is specifically applied to the sins that burden their conscience. They make regular use of this precious gift. Others are content with the public absolution pronounced at the beginning of the Service because they know it is directed to them personally and bestows full forgiveness of all their sins. No one should be judged because he prefers one or the other.

Sometimes a matter that is in itself an indifferent thing can become much more in the conscience of a Christian. I'd like to share a little part of my life with you to illustrate this concern before concluding my remarks.

I grew up in St. Louis, Missouri, on the campus of Concordia Seminary where my father was a professor. We moved from a parish of the little Norwegian Synod in northern Minnesota to the Missouri Synod in St. Louis during the summer of 1957 when I was four years old. Norwegian Lutherans from northern Minnesota generally don't cross themselves or bow to the altar every time they walked by it. In 1957 their pastors didn't wear clerical collars. They all wore black robes and they didn't think there was anything Reformed about it. That was a long time ago.

We attended Bethel Lutheran Church in University City. The principal of the school taught the 8th Grade boys how to be acolytes. It wasn't just a matter of going up there and lighting the candles. No, you had to go up to the Communion rail and bow from the waist. Every time you bowed, you had to bow deeply from the waist. Then you went right up to the Altar and bowed again. Then you lit the candles on the right side of the cross. Then you bowed. Then you lit the candles on the left side of the cross. Then you bowed. Then you walked back to the other side of the Communion rail and bowed again.

Years before I was old enough to serve as an acolyte my father had explained to me the symbolic meaning of bowing to the Altar. He said that in the Catholic Church they reserved a consecrated wafer on the Altar that they believed was the body of Christ. He told me that that was wrong. He said that the consecrated bread was not supposed to be used apart from the Sacrament itself. He said that we were to eat and to drink the consecrated elements, not to reserve them and bow down to them. He explained all about the Roman Catholic Corpus Christi festival.

I was thirteen years old, and I was in a quandary. I wanted to be an acolyte. On the other hand, I did not want to bow from the waist several times in front of the Altar. It would have been for me a violation of my heart felt Christian convictions. This was over thirty five years ago, but I remember it quite well. Every 8th Grade boy in the school took his turn serving as acolyte. I had looked forward to doing it. I told the principal about my dilemma and he told me we weren't bowing to the Altar, but to the cross. He said that it had nothing to do with the reservation of the consecrated host. It was simply showing respect to Jesus who died for us. When it came time for me to acolyte, I decided that instead of bowing from the waist several times, I would stop at the Communion rail and bow as I prayed a short prayer. That would be okay. I did so in as reverent a manner as I could, because I didn't want to cause any offense. Afterwards, I was told that I did not do it correctly. I tried to explain my conscience based objections to the principal,

but he insisted that it was necessary for me to conform. I served as acolyte one more time and I did as I had done previously, bowing only once at the beginning for a short prayer. That was the last time I ever served as acolyte.

We used to joke in our family about how Rolf got fired as acolyte at Bethel Lutheran Church.

But there is a serious point to this story with which I would like to conclude my remarks today. Symbols are powerful things because of the meaning we attach to them. The issue over which I was fired as an acolyte appears to be a silly argument over the symbolic meaning of bowing. But it had to do with something much deeper than a symbol. It had to do with conscience, something that lives very close to faith.

We need to respect the conscience of our brothers and sisters in Christ, even if we don't quite understand why they think as they do. The time and the place where God comes to us to save us by his gracious and life-giving service is not the place to put up unnecessary barriers in the way of weak brothers and sisters. Novelty for the sake of novelty may work in selling cars, but it has no place in God's house. Similarly, a liturgical correctness that imposes a long lost tradition that folks just don't want is not serving the gospel. Jesus did not come to be served but to serve. His Divine Service to us in the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments is too precious and too necessary for us sinners to treat lightly. Let us pray for humility, wisdom, and a sincere love for the pure and saving gospel of Christ so that we may in love contend for that which saves sinners: the Divine Service of our God and brother, Jesus.
