

# The Lutheran Liturgy: An Adiaphoron?

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There comes a time when the stack of articles copied from periodicals has to be sorted through and the wheat separated from the chaff. The author was at that task recently when he rediscovered an article that appeared in a 1995 issue of *Lutheran Theological Review* (Vol. VII: 1 & 2). The article, written by Prof. Roger J. Humann, is entitled "The Lutheran Liturgy: An Adiaphoron?" A quick perusal brought to mind what had attracted my attention when I read the article the first time.

*Lutheran Theological Review* is produced by the faculties of two Canadian Concordias, one in St. Catharines, Ontario, and the other in Edmonton, Alberta. Both seminaries, as well as the church body that supports them, are in fellowship with The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod and share Missouri's doctrinal position and theological emphases.

The article is one of many being written in LCMS circles these days that pleads with pastors and congregations to retain the Lutheran Liturgy. One is sympathetic to these pleas, of course. Word has it that hundreds of congregations in the LCMS (and apparently a few in Missouri's Canadian sister synod) have traded in their old liturgy for contemporary praise services. (Humann outlines a typical service: Opening Thought, Praise Time, Psalm, Service of the Word, Prayer, Closing Blessing.) The anti-liturgical movement in Missouri even has its own systematician, Pastor David Luecke (*Evangelical Style and Lutheran Substance, The Other Story of Lutheran Worship*), and its own hymnal, *The Other Song Book* (Dave Anderson). The alarm is shrill as authors sense that the drift away from the Lutheran liturgy is also a drift toward Pietism/Evangelicalism.

Prof. Humann made several excellent points in his article, but what attracted attention was his approbation of two consistent emphases one finds in recent LCMS articles on worship. The first of these is a rather odd definition of the German word *Gottesdienst*, the word Luther and the confessional writers regularly used for congregational worship. The second is the odd way in which the Lutheran Confessions are used to triumph the use of the liturgy.

In its linguistic and etymological sense, *Gottesdienst* is closely related to the Greek word *leitourgia* (and to a number of other Greek words or Greek translations of Hebrew words) and signifies the service the believer offers to God; the verb is *gottdienen*. The New Testament uses this family of words to describe the faith-life of the Christian, and Luther follows the pattern. The worship Paul encourages in Romans 12:1, for example, is *latreia*; in Luther's German translation the word is *Gottesdienst*. In the Large Catechism Luther calls true honor and worship (*Gottesdienst*) of God "that the heart know no other comfort or confidence than in Him" (*Triglotta*, LC 16). It is natural that words used to describe the entire faith-life of the Christian should also be used to describe what happens when he gathers with other Christians to summarize his faith-life, and so we also call our corporate assembly worship, that is, response or service to God. This is the basic definition of both liturgy and *Gottesdienst*.

Both the Scriptures and Luther recognize, of course, that no one can truly worship without the saving and empowering activity God affords through the means of grace. Paul encouraged the Romans to offer their spiritual act of worship "in view of God's mercy" (Romans 12:1), mercy he had proclaimed in the first eleven chapters of the letter. Luther's Third Article explanation summarizes this perfectly: "I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in (worship) Jesus Christ my Lord, nor come to him. But the Holy Ghost has called me by the gospel." The public assembly of the church includes, therefore, not only the congregation's service to God, but also God's service to the congregation. When Luther wrote about the corporate assembly in the Large Catechism he wrote about the *Gottesdienst* at which "we come together to hear and treat of God's Word, *and* [italics not in the original] then to praise him, to sing and pray" (LC 84). Other Lutherans have described this two-fold nature of public worship with the terms sacramental and sacrificial. When Christians gather for public worship, God talks to them and they talk to God. The church's worship,

its liturgy, its *Gottesdienst*, is rightly defined as dialogue. While this is not the linguistic or etymological definition of *Gottesdienst* or liturgy, it is the dogmatical definition, and it is, of course, the correct dogmatical definition.

In much of the liturgical literature flowing out of Missouri these days, one senses that both the etymological and the dogmatical definitions of worship are being overlooked. Prof. Humann adds this in a footnote on the first page of his article:

The term "liturgy" is used in this study in its narrow sense to designate the church's primary service, namely, The Holy Communion. The term itself connotes the "public service" which God renders to His Church in Word and Sacrament and *not* [italics are in the original] the "peoples' work" which is so often asserted.

Humann was quoting another LCMS pastor, John Pless, when he wrote, "At its very heart, then, the liturgy is 'the public service that God renders to his church in Word and Sacrament.'" Numerous citations could be adduced here.

This is an odd definition of liturgy and *Gottesdienst*. It seems unacceptable linguistically, and it is inaccurate dogmatically, as has been pointed out. It is surely out-of-sync with what most orthodox Lutheran commentators say about public worship, most notably Peter Brunner and his definitive volume, *Worship in the Name of Jesus*.

One can be sympathetic with those who are taking a stand against the influences of Evangelical and Church Growth theology, both of which deny the efficacy of the means of grace and rely either on the emotions or psychology to bring about a life-change in individuals. We agree completely that the right proclamation of the gospel and the proper use of the Sacrament are the predominant part of worship. We share the confidence that the Holy Spirit works through these means to create and strengthen faith, even when that faith is not visible or its fruits apparent. We value the liturgy because it accents and highlights the means of grace. But we also believe that all of these scriptural truths can be emphasized and upheld without a contrived definition of liturgy and *Gottesdienst*—and can spare the confessional church the chuckles of those who understand that the definition is contrived. It may be that such a definition creates even more problems than it seeks to solve. If liturgy is said to be one-sided and nothing more than the service of God to the congregation, it is easily perceived that neither the activity of the worshipers nor the content of their response is very important. This weapon against "entertainment-style worship" seems fairly blunt; it may even encourage such worship.

Another oddity in recent LCMS writings defending the liturgy is the weighty reliance on the Lutheran Confessions. Under the subheading "The Lutheran Service is the Mass" Prof. Humann adduces several notable citations from both the Augsburg Confession and its Apology that speak with this spirit:

At the outset we must again make the preliminary statement that we do not abolish the Mass, but religiously maintain and defend it. For among us masses are celebrated every Lord's Day and on the other festivals, in which the sacrament is offered to those who wish to use it, after they have been examined and absolved. And the usual public ceremonies are observed, the series of lessons, of prayers, vestments, and other like things (Apol. Art XXIV: 1).

Many words have been written about Luther's determined effort to retain the historic Christian service in the churches of the Reformation. Many more have been written charting the formation of the Lutheran liturgical heritage. Luther had sound reasons for his desire to keep what had been passed on to the 16th century Church from the fathers, and the Lutheran Confessions adopted his rationale. But the historic setting of the Confessions cannot be overlooked in this discussion. The Mass (the worship rite of the western Christian Church) was the only rite 16th century Christians knew. When the charge that Luther was eliminating the Mass brought about confusion and fear among German conservatives, the confessional writers needed to say "we do not abolish the Mass, but religiously

maintain and defend it." 20th century Lutherans must read the Confessions as saying: "We have been accused of abandoning the liturgy; we have not abandoned the liturgy." We dare not read the Confessions as saying: "You dare not abandon the liturgy."

Confessional Lutherans understand that the Lutheran Confessions are *norma normata*, that is, they are the standard of doctrine and practice that is standardized by the Scriptures. Where Scripture does not establish a standard however, a standard cannot be made to be binding. Luther and the confessional writers believed that the means of grace alone create and strengthen faith. They believed that every believer has the right to approach God through faith in the one mediator, the man Christ Jesus. They believed in "one holy Christian and apostolic Church" that across ages and continents confesses "one Lord, one faith, and one baptism." They wrote of these truths in their confessions because they found these truths in the Scriptures, and so we are bound to accept these truths. Luther and the confessional writers believed that the historic Christian service encouraged an emphasis on these truths, and that the confession of these truths led them to use the historic Christian service. They came to this opinion on the basis of sound logic and careful study, and they wrote this down in their confessions. But since Scripture does not command the use of the historic Christian service, the Lutheran Church of the 20th century is not bound to use the liturgy.

The fact of the matter is that there are right and wrong reasons for using the liturgy, and there are right and wrong reasons for not using the liturgy. It is a reality that many Lutheran congregations have abandoned the liturgy. But the issue is not *that* a congregation abandons the liturgy, but *why* a congregation abandons the liturgy. The problem is not necessarily *that* contemporary praise services exist, but *why* they exist.

This writer wonders if a preoccupation with the definition of *Gottesdienst* (and an odd definition at that) or with statements from the Lutheran Confessions does not treat the problem only superficially. Time would be better spent and words more profitably written if we allowed Scripture itself to pierce through the faulty, malignant reasoning (most of it attached to Arminianism and the Church Growth Movement) that stands behind much of today's abandonment of the liturgy.