

Fostering The Devotional Life That Leads To Spiritual Renewal

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INTRODUCTION

It is naive to assume that the call for spiritual renewal, issued by the 1987 convention of our Synod, was greeted by all our pastors and teachers with uncompromised joy and unbridled enthusiasm. The fact is, not a few have been eyeing the program with certain suspicions. What causes the suspicion is that each of us has had a healthy dose of church history in our educational careers, and most of us realize that piety programs have often brought more harm to God's church than help. Thomas A. Kempis, the 15th century mystic, encouraged his followers with beauty and clarity to imitate the life of Christ but at the same time underscored the emerging Roman Catholic contention that such imitation merited God's grace. Considering what religious life was like at the end of the 18th century, we can feel some sympathy for the revival prophets who trumpeted the call for spiritual renewal. But when we see how both the First and the Second Great Awakenings (along with John Wesley's Methodism) turned the attention of believers away from the work of the Savior and toward the efforts of the individual in both their salvation and conversion, any sympathy quickly becomes antipathy. Billy Graham has spent his entire adult life inviting millions to forsake unrighteousness. Only God knows how many unbelievers have come to faith because of Graham's clear gospel witness—and only God knows how many believers have become confused because of Graham's decision theology. As far as church history goes, one does not need many fingers to count the piety programs that began and eventually ended in a way that pleased God and edified his people.

The granddaddy of all piety programs is, of course, Pietism. Born in the lands of Luther in the 17th century, Pietism was a reaction to problems in the Lutheran church which were very real. As time passed, however, it became obvious that the Pietists were not only encouraging sanctification but also de-emphasizing justification. Not the Means of Grace that carried the message of justification but evidences of new birth and outgrowths of conversion became the key to renewal. The focus, therefore, "was not on the external word of the gospel, but on the internal working of the sanctified heart." ¹

The loss to the Lutheran church of both the centrality of justification and the primacy of the Means of Grace was, as we would expect, devastating. Confessional integrity became unnecessary for the Pietists and they soon joined the camp of the Reformed. The de-emphasis of the gospel eventually made Scripture all but irrelevant, and thus the step from Pietism to a Bible-denying Rationalism was a small one. By 1817, the 300th anniversary of the Reformation, much of German Lutheranism had all but lost Christ, his forgiveness, his Word and his Sacraments. But for the grace of God (and some of God's leaders) the American sons and daughters of that kind of Lutheranism would likely have lost the same.

Our understanding of the pitfalls of Pietism has done nothing to inspire confidence in spiritual renewal programs. And renewal efforts do not come off any better on the contemporary scene than they do on the stage of history.

It has not been possible, for 25 years and more, to ignore the influence on the Christian church of the Evangelical movement. The Evangelicals have attacked both the liberal theology of the mainline Protestant denominations and the libertarian lifestyles of the Woodstock generation. Their objective is to reestablish in America a Christian ethic, that is, a return to the Bible and to biblical morality. They are, as we all know, masters at communication. Evangelical bookstores, found in almost every large city, stock their shelves with inexpensive, easy-to-read books and manuals which address issues Americans have on their minds. Evangelical emphases, rhymed into catchy lyrics and accompanied by upbeat, contemporary music, drift (and sometimes rock) over Evangelical radio stations. Evangelical preachers enjoy a virtual monopoly in television and radio broadcasting.

The appeal of the Evangelicals is overpowering to any Christian who takes his religion seriously, mourns the loss of traditional values and decries the pollution of American youth. There are, of course, a lot of people like that in the Wisconsin Synod. Not a few of our members have taken the plunge into the Evangelical stream. Many more, while they remain Lutheran, surely are sympathetic to the Evangelical cause. And it isn't easy to gain the emphases of the movement. Who among us is opposed to the kind of morality the Evangelicals are defending? Are we not also pro-Bible, pro-life and pro-family?

If there are those, even in the ranks of our own pastors and teachers, who have difficulty from time to time sorting out the good from the bad in the Evangelical movement, it makes perfect sense that our lay people often will have difficulty as well. In a 1983 article in the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* Prof. David Valleskey offered this quotation from the pen of Martin Scharlemann:

Our Lutheran heritage is threatened not only from the left, by historical critics and their followers, but also from the right, by fundamentalism (evangelicalism). In fact, at the moment, the latter is, by all odds, the more menacing because so much of it sounds very biblical, and also because so many of our fellow conservative Lutherans hear fundamental preachers and read "evangelical" literature with Lutheran eyes and ears, so to speak, and thus feel at home in the materials.

Valleskey then asked:

Is Scharlemann's observation correct? Ask yourself: What books are our WELS people reading? If they frequent the Bible bookstores in our larger cities, virtually all the books on the shelves come from the pens of evangelical or fundamentalist authors. If they are invited by a friend to visit another church, chances are that it will be to visit one of the booming fundamentalist churches in the community, which are usually very aggressive in their outreach and don't hesitate to proselytize from other churches. And chances are that people will like what they read and enjoy the message they hear because of its biblical orientation and apparently "Lutheran" ring.

But how Lutheran, how scriptural, are the messages from the evangelical-fundamentalist pulpits, podiums and printed page? ²

His answer to that final question is best summarized: "Not very!"

The Evangelical system, like Pietism, de-emphasizes and devalues the importance of both the gospel and the Means of Grace. Both systems, while calling for personal piety and spiritual renewal, while seeming thoroughly religious and eagerly enthusiastic, while achieving notable success and national growth, replace with other means exactly what the Holy Spirit himself identifies as the only means which can effect an imitation of God and a life of love, namely the gracious good news that comes to human beings that "Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." (Eph 5:2)

If there were any doubts in the minds of any of our pastors and teachers of the Wisconsin Synod that the "Christ for us," the gospel in Word and Sacrament, would remain the unmistakable emphasis of a synodical effort as spiritual renewal, those doubts were surely removed by the three essays which our conferences have been studying in the past months. In clear and careful language the essayists set forth the truth that there can be no renewal among us without the proclamation of the gospel.

True renewal will take place only as the objective gospel is maintained as central in the Christian's life. More than that, true renewal is expressed by Christians as they repeatedly return to the truth of justification as their greatest treasure. ³

In the Spirit's hands, law and gospel must work together to produce repentance and faith and a new life of thankful living. ⁴

We believe, don't we, that only as people are led deeper and deeper into this gospel will change occur in their hearts and lives? I hope so, because that's the only power God has given us and, therefore, that's the only power we need. ⁵

These authors reiterated what Scriptures, the Lutheran Confessions, Martin Luther and a host of theologians have maintained over the span of 3500 years. Seventy years ago Prof. August Pieper wrote:
Since the Church lives only from the Word, a true reconstruction of the Church cannot consist of a change or establishment of external factors, but only in return from all dead traditions to the original sources of knowledge and salvation, the revelation of God. ⁶

The whole matter is really very simple. When the gospel is proclaimed it never returns empty but accomplishes what God desires and achieves the purposes for which he sent it. Martin Franzmann catches in poetry the admonition we all need to ponder:

Preach you the Word and plant it home
To men who like or like it not,
The Word that shall endure and stand
When flowers and men shall be forgot.

We know how hard, O Lord, the task
Your servant bade us undertake:
To preach your Word and never ask
What prideful profit it may make.

The sower sows; his reckless love
Scatters abroad the goodly seed,
Intent alone that men may have
The wholesome loaves that all men need.
Preach you the Word and plant it home
And never faint; the Harvest Lord
Who gave the sower seed to sow
Will watch and tend his planted Word. ⁷

There is a tragedy in all this. The tragedy is not that the gospel does not work nor that we are failing to proclaim it. God himself promises that the gospel works and his promise is substantiated as we see fruits of faith in the lives of thousands of our members. The gospel is being proclaimed in sermons and liturgy, in classrooms and counseling sessions, in hospital calls and evangelism visits, and in all of our schools on every level. The gospel is there and the gospel is working. The tragedy is that thousands in our Synod are not using faithfully the gospel. Our *Statistical Report* indicates that less than 46% of our members are in church on an average Sunday and less than 11% attend any sort of Bible class. Past reports (the *Statistical Report* no longer includes this information) indicated that the Sacrament was not received even once a month by the majority of our members. This author's parish days leave him with the clear impression that very few fathers and mothers in our churches organize any sort of family worship opportunity. It is likely that more individual Christians read the Scriptures privately than participate with others in household worship, but we fear that the number of these is not high. We would not be surprised if we discovered that the great majority of our people do not pray often or that, when they do, their prayers more often ask for additional blessings than recount the great blessings already received. (Prayer, of course, is not a Means of Grace. But prayer that reviews the love and mercy of Christ is surely also a proclamation of the gospel.) How unlike the lifestyle Moses encouraged is the situation in the homes of our members today!

These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at your home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (Dt 6:6-9)

How often do we find this attitude?

Oh, how I love your law! (the usual Old Testament term for the entire word of God) I meditate on it all day long. How sweet is your word to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth. (Ps. 119:97, 103)

I hesitate to be harsh in this assessment. August Pieper felt no hesitation in 1919:

In our Christian homes there is and remains very little of God's Word, hardly even the regular family worship with Scripture reading and prayer every morning and every evening. Yes, in some Christian homes there is no common prayer at all any more, neither spoken by the father, nor by the mother, nor by the children, particularly in such homes in which the children do not attend a Christian school. Even the table prayers have been discontinued in some families. The Bible is seldom or never opened. Only the grandmother still prays with her hymnal; all the rest either leave the hymnal at church, or they put it away immediately after the church services until the following Sunday; it only serves in the regular church service. —Is it not true? Yes, unfortunately I am speaking the truth now. What does this fact prove? It proves that the spiritual life, the faith, if it has not already died, is in the process of dying, is hardly a flickering light any more and will soon be extinguished entirely.⁸

What is lacking among us today is not, thank God, the pure gospel about Jesus Christ. The word is being preached and taught and the Sacraments are being administered rightly. What too many of our people lack is the spirit and faith of Mary who sat at Jesus' feet. What too many are missing is a longing for the message of Christ and the means that proclaim it. What too many are without—and some of us are among them—is a devotional life in the gospel. Such a devotional life includes fainting and yearning for the courts of the Lord in worship, eating and drinking at the Lord's table, growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ through Bible study and meditating daily on the word in prayer, whether standing, walking, lying down or getting up. The gospel works; the means to proclaim the gospel are in our hands. But the gospel cannot work if our people and we despise the means that carry it!

Is it possible for us, the pastors and teachers of the Wisconsin Synod, to foster this devotional life? We submit that it is very possible. And we propose that the tool we can use to foster this life that lives in the gospel of Jesus is nothing more, but nothing less, than the gospel itself. A devotion to and a love for the Means of Grace are not less the fruits of faith than are any of the loving attitudes and actions that flow out of a believing heart. If it is true that only the gospel can incite the latter, it is also true that only the gospel can enliven the former. It was the gospel, the promises of God, which prompted David to long for the courts of the Lord. It was the gospel, the good news about Jesus, which moved the Christians in Berea to examine the Scriptures every day. Special drives and programs may be able to call attention to the importance of the Word and Sacraments, but nothing besides the gospel itself can effect the process of leading our people deeper into the Spirit's sources of power.

You who are reading these words have been called into a ministry that has as its task the handling of the Keys, the Means of Grace. Ours is a representative ministry, carried out on behalf of the people who have called us. It is a public ministry in which we serve a group of people. The gospel also can be proclaimed apart from the public ministry to foster a devotional life. For instance, Christian fathers are not functioning in the public ministry when they encourage a devotional life in their families, but they surely are proclaiming the gospel. We dare not underestimate the value of private proclamation that is, after all, the responsibility of every believer. But since these paragraphs are addressed to public ministers of the gospel, it is the public ministry that holds our attention. We contend that, by proclaiming the gospel in that public ministry, we can foster a devotional life among the people we serve.

We public ministers own a variety of ways and places by which and in which we can proclaim the gospel. This author likes to call these proclamation forums. Primary among these are corporate worship (which includes preaching), education and private ministrations. All of these forums have the similar objective of communicating the good news, but each one also has a particular objective. We will propose in the lines that follow that each of these forums works to foster the devotional life of believers in its own unique way. The

three, therefore, are not alternatives in gospel ministry, but rather a unified whole. They comprise a complete program of public ministry among believers and work together to encourage God's people to be devoted to the Means of Grace. We have used these three forums before. In fact, if anyone gets the impression that he or she is about to encounter a rehashing of what is already known, the impression is correct. There will not be in the pages that follow much that is new. For this the author makes no apologies. I agree heartily with the man who wrote recently: "It's high time we dusted off the tools, of our rich spiritual heritage and put them to work in peoples' lives."⁹ If this essay does no more than dust off a few tarnished treasures, it will have served its purpose.

If a true spiritual renewal is to occur in our Synod, there must exist among our people a devotional life which lives in the gospel of Jesus Christ proclaimed in Word and Sacrament. So it is our task to foster such a life. Our tool to accomplish this is the gospel itself which we employ in the public ministry.

CORPORATE WORSHIP

It is really not a debatable point that corporate worship is the primary forum for gospel proclamation among believers. The implications of God's creation timetable, the divinely-ordained Sabbath laws of the Mosaic code, the customs of the New Testament church and contemporary society's concept of week and weekend all point to the preeminence of a once-a-week opportunity for extraordinary spiritual activity. The practical fact of the matter is that Sunday worship is where pastors meet most of their people most of the time and where believers interact with other believers more often than at any other time.

Despite its importance corporate worship cannot be the only forum in which believers come into contact with the gospel. It was not this in the Old and New Testament eras and it cannot be this today. The fact that worship often is the only regular gospel forum in the lives of our members is a weakness to be overcome, not to be accepted. If this weakness is accepted among us, then, realistically, we must be prepared to undertake a radical reevaluation of our worship practices. If the worship hour is to be the only contact people have with the gospel week by week, we must be willing to use that hour better than worship allows. Pastors who serve in exploratory missions have come to realize that people who devote only one hour to the Means of Grace a week cannot and must not spend that hour singing hymns, doing liturgy, listening to lectionary sermons and receiving the Sacrament. For these pastors the worship hour needs to be a time for teaching.

The principles under which Lutheran worship operates are built on the presupposition that worshipers have been and are being taught in the Word. Lutheran worship assumes that the worshipers are Christians who possess by faith an intellectual understanding of and an emotional commitment to God's plan of salvation in Jesus Christ. Lutheran worship takes for granted that worshipers are growing in the Word outside of corporate worship and are living a life of praise. When Christians are already growing in the Word and when they are living for Christ, corporate worship has an important and necessary function in their lives and is a vital part of the public ministry.

Corporate worship has as its objective to review and underscore the primary facts about Jesus Christ and to solidify them in the hearts and minds of believers. Worship as we understand it does not—really, it cannot—plumb the depths of the applications of the law or the implications of the gospel. What worship can do is to lead Christians each week to the timeless truths which are essential if faith is to survive. And since faith is something that is both intellectual and emotional, worship means to carry those timeless truths to both the head and the heart, to the intellect and the emotions. As we communicate the gospel to their minds and feelings, we nourish believers with the daily bread all Christians need. That bread revitalizes them after a difficult week of trial and temptation and strengthens them to return once again to their world and to live for Christ and their fellow human beings.

This was surely the objective the Lord had in mind when he established the forms for Old Testament worship. What happened at the tabernacle and in the temple was not primarily instructional but inspirational. Fathers instructed at home and rabbis instructed in the synagogue. In Israel's corporate worship God used symbol, sight, sound and even smell to solidify the concepts of sin and atonement that the people had been trained to know. Their worship poured those facts into the very fiber of their heart and soul.

We might compare the situation in the early New Testament church to that which exists in the exploratory missions we mentioned previously. The apostles needed to teach basic truths before they needed to solidify them. But already in the first century believers were including in their worship assemblies the Supper, psalms, hymns, spiritual songs and exalted language to underscore the truths they had come to know. As the church grew in numbers, church leaders composed forms for worship that could review those same truths for many believers gathered together at one time. The order of worship that we use today was firmly in place by the 4th century. The church year has changed very little since the 5th century. The concept of a lectionary (a series of repeated lessons) was in place by the time of Jerome (ca. 400). Throughout the centuries the church encouraged artists to symbolize the truths of Scripture in works of art. None of these forms was the gospel itself; but attached to the gospel or carrying the gospel, these forms met the objective of the corporate worship forum in which they were used, that is, they helped to review and underscore the primary truths about Jesus Christ and to solidify those truths in the hearts and minds of believers.

Martin Luther understood the place of worship in the lives of Christian people. He knew how much believers needed the gospel and he knew they needed to have the gospel touch their hearts. This is why Luther and the Lutheran Confessions speak so highly of the historic liturgy, the Christian church year and lectionary preaching. For the same reasons Luther maintained that music, after theology, was God's greatest gift to humanity. If anyone ever understood that the forms of worship lie within the free choice of the church, it was Luther. But he also understood that some worship forms are better than others in meeting the objectives of corporate worship. For Luther, the choice of the form had little to do with tradition or cultural history. What mattered to him was how the form carried the gospel and how it edified the believers in both head and heart.

Corporate worship, the gospel forum that claims to be preeminent in the public ministry, demands attention and analysis on the part of all our pastors and teachers. This is especially true because of the worship climate we find ourselves in today. Our church body, though united in doctrine, has its share of worship innovators on one side and worship traditionalists on the other. We can find professional church workers and lay people in both camps. There are among us some that want almost nothing to do with *The Lutheran Hymnal* and some that want almost nothing besides *The Lutheran Hymnal*. Brothers and sisters who have joined us from fundamentalist churches are pulling in one direction and those who have left the camp of the liberal Lutherans are pulling in another. Some among us are heartened by the informal warmth of Evangelical worship and others are horrified by it. The majority of our membership is standing in the middle of this gulf, searching not only for the right answers but even for the right questions.

The essay has several questions to propose. The first is this: Is the objective of corporate worship that has been owned by the Christian church for centuries still valid as we enter the third millennium after Christ? As we have mentioned, it was this objective the church fathers had in mind as they framed the forms we still use in worship today. If the objective is no longer valid, if, for example, the objective of corporate worship is primarily teaching or evangelizing, then we must be prepared to find forms that meet these objectives in an optimum way. We cannot assume that forms that the church prepared with one objective in mind will be able to meet a different objective.

If the objective is still valid—and we assume that in the great majority of our congregations it is valid—we are ready to ask another question: can the worship forms which orthodox Lutherans have used historically continue to meet the objective for corporate worship we have accepted as valid?

Since the time of the Reformation Lutherans have used a liturgical form of worship. We inherited that form from the early church and have continued to use it, with only one notable interruption, ever since. Liturgical worship is built around the liturgy—not a liturgy but the liturgy of the western Christian church. That liturgy includes each worship day two Means of Grace (Word and Sacrament), two functions of faith (receiving from God and giving to God) and two opportunities for review (a weekly review in the Ordinary and an annual review in the Proper). This liturgy depends on the church year; it is the calendar which determines the lessons, the sermon, the hymns, the psalm, the prayers, the service music, the paraments, etc. This combination of Word and Sacrament, church year and liturgy, proclamation, praise and prayer serve wonderfully to review and

underscore the essential truths of the gospel. In fact, the service literally obligates such for both the worship leader and the worshiper. Lutheran liturgical worship is framed in such a way that the “Christ for us” cannot help but be proclaimed.

But liturgical worship is much more than an intellectual review of objective facts. From its beginnings the liturgy has contained elements which are intended to carry the facts to the hearts of the believers. The language of worship includes beautiful prose and lofty poetry. Music always has been an essential part of the liturgy. The combination of emotional peaks and valleys in the service is not an accidental occurrence, nor is the liturgy’s speak/sing/speak/sing flow. Since the time of Luther the congregational hymn has had a strong influence on the heart. The hymn has encouraged organ, choir and instrumental music that means to carry the message of the hymn deeper into the hearts of the worshipers. The setting of the liturgy, a church building and a chancel, encourages works of art in glass, metal, wood, stone and fabric. The acoustics of the worship building allow the music of proclamation and praise to reverberate and echo into the hearts of the hearer. In sight and sound, through beauty and loveliness, liturgical worship expects to touch the hearts of the worshiper with the message of the gospel.

Wherever corporate worship has the objective of reviewing and underscoring the essential truths of the gospel and solidifying those truths in the hearts of believers, there liturgical worship is well suited and wisely chosen. This was Luther’s conclusion and it is also the opinion of the Lutheran Confessions. Our Lutheran church, like Luther’s, needs to be obligated Sunday by Sunday to proclaim “Christ for us” before “Christ in us,” justification before sanctification, objective fact before subjective testimony and Means of Grace before evidences of conversion. Liturgical worship—historic order, church year and sacrament—compel those emphases as they shape the proclamation of the preacher, organist, choir and worshiper. Non-liturgical forms can do this; history and experience say that they usually do not.

It is safe to assume that the majority of the pastors and teachers who are reading this essay are fairly comfortable with the traditional Lutheran worship emphasis. But especially the proponents of these principles need to ask another question: Are we using a liturgical worship form in such a way that it meets the objective of corporate worship? This is a question that cannot be answered on the pages of this essay. It must be asked within the framework of each congregation in our synod and by every pastor and teacher involved in worship leadership and planning. Perhaps a series of additional questions can help worship leaders in this analysis.

—Is the clear proclamation which is found in the liturgy joined by clear gospel proclamation in the sermon, lesson commentary, hymns and choir music or is that gospel compromised by law-oriented preaching, unclear commentary, overly-subjective hymnody and substance-less choir anthems? Whatever is God’s truth always edifies. Whatever is not truth always weakens, no matter where it is found and no matter who likes it.

—Do the day’s sermon and hymns match the focus of the lessons and the other parts of the Proper or are there so many subjects addressed on a Sunday morning that the worshiper can hardly know which essential truth is being reviewed? If pastors do not preach on the lectionary, they are wise to change the Proper; if they want to use the Proper, they ought also to preach on it.

—Is the language of the liturgy we use in our congregation communicating the truths of God’s word or are those truths disguised in language which, while beautiful and traditional, is no longer the language Americans speak or understand? Doctrinal conservatism is much more interested in clear communication than in noble traditions.

—Is the law being proclaimed from the pulpit in such a way that people are longing for and appreciating the gospel in the liturgy or does the preaching of the law leave the impression that a religious rule book is the necessary ingredient for a renewed life? It should not surprise us that members who gain this perception will consider the objectivity of the liturgy to be superfluous to their life’s goals.

—Is the gospel being proclaimed so that the “Christ for us” has relevance in the life of a Christian or is the gospel too often little more than a Messianic travelogue or an exposition of dogmatical truth? The liturgy has always anticipated a commentary on the lessons. It expects that the worship leader will

proclaim not only what the lessons say but also what they mean for life. If worshipers gain the impression that worship is nothing more than a rehash of yesterday's news, they will view the worship experience as being surrealistic and without value for their faith and life.

Without the slightest hint of intention, we pastors and teachers can compromise liturgical worship's determination to review and underscore the essential truths about Jesus Christ. Equally without intention we can hinder the way liturgical worship means to solidify those truths in the hearts of the worshipers.

—Do we accompany the various forms of worship with a style that is consistent with their content and function or are all our speech patterns and music dullingly similar? On purpose the liturgy has emotional peaks and valleys; the way we speak and the way we play helps to indicate these. The confession of sins is a valley; the absolution is a peak. Let the leader show this by the way he speaks those words. The Kyrie is a valley; the Gloria in Excelsis is a peak. Let the organist show this by the way the accompaniment is played.

—Are the hymns chosen for worship with a careful eye and ear to both musical mood and textual content or are they posted only for what they say to the head and not for what they do to the heart? Hymns are among the best tools we have to solidify truth in the hearts of Christians, but selecting them and playing them takes work, skill and knowledge. Pastors and church musicians are wise if they work together in this effort.

—Do we encourage a rich and full use of the arts in worship or is artistic communication among us poorly planned, quickly prepared and shabbily presented? The liturgy presents all the best of God's gospel gifts. Dare we accompany these blessings with less than the best of his creation?

These paragraphs have attempted to defend the contention that the use of a liturgical form of worship is valid and beneficial wherever corporate worship retains the objective to renew and solidify. History says that the loss of such a form may signal the loss of much more. We dare not fail to notice that Lutheran Pietists disavowed liturgical form precisely because they did not want to emphasize the objective truths of the gospel. For the same reason the Evangelicals have never adopted the liturgy, church year and the regular use of the Sacrament. Theological systems that hold that the key to renewal is an emphasis on the lifestyle of Christians are not going to adopt worship forms which emphasize the life of Christ. Liturgical worship has a proven ability to meet the objectives of corporate worship. Those who would abandon it must ask themselves "Why?"

But those who want to retain a liturgical form of worship must ask themselves if they are using that form as it means to be used. Worship that is characterized by mindless formalism and dulling sameness is a caricature of Lutheran liturgical worship. There is no excuse for such a worship life and no need for it. Harold Senkbeil, author of the recent NPH publication *Sanctification*, wrote:

The Lutheran Church has a rich legacy to offer in its worship. Here is reality, not symbolism.

Here we have real contact with God; not as we come to him, but as he comes to us. He meets us in the proclamation of the Word. Here the Son of God distributes his actual body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. Here the people of God gather to offer him their thanks, their praise and their prayers.

It's time for a new initiative in worship. People are longing for God. Where are they going to find him? In the shifting sands of their inner life or on the solid rock of his gospel? How are they going to offer him their thanks and praise? With trivial methods borrowed from the entertainment industry or in worship forms that focus on the praise of God's gracious glory?

This is the kind of worship that lifts the heart while it exalts Christ. And this is what Lutheran worship does.¹⁰

Vital, vibrant gospel proclamation, the kind which Lutheran liturgical worship encourages, is the key to building and strengthening the faith of the members of the Wisconsin Synod. As Christians develop positive attitudes toward the Means of Grace, they will be moved intellectually and emotionally to return to worship. As

they find value for both head and heart they will be prompted to realize more and more that this Word in worship does great things for them: it applies to them, it moves them, it strengthens, edifies, empowers and heals them. When worship leads believers to know and feel that they have “walked with God today,” when they come to say more and more, “I rejoiced with those who said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord,’” their attitudes will be reflected in all other forums, within the public ministry and outside it, where the gospel is proclaimed.

These words found their way to the pages of a Lutheran periodical a few years ago:

Worship is central to growth and we dare not forget it. With all the attention we place on our efforts, our organizational know-how, our studies and surveys, let us never forget that the power by which God’s people live and serve him is the power that comes through Word and Sacrament. When congregations, like individual Christians, experience a lack of spiritual energy and enthusiasm, the reason may well lie in our neglect of the worship of God that centers in the joyful use and reception of his Word and Sacraments. Too often, our worship life has grown cold and we find ourselves spending more and more time on programs and less and less time in the Word.¹¹

CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

The objective of education in a congregation’s public ministry is not dissimilar from that of corporate worship. Like proclamation in corporate worship, proclamation in education means to impart basic truths about Jesus and his plan of salvation, to clarify God’s will for the life of the believer, to solidify concepts in the intellect and the emotion and to equip God’s people for works of service. It stands to reason that the proclamation of God’s word will have similar objectives in whatever forum it is put to use.

But worship and education are not exactly the same. Whereas worship means to review, education means to advance. Worship emphasizes basic truths, education plumbs the depths of law and gospel which are found on all the pages of the Bible. Whereas worship aims to meet the needs of the body of Christ gathered in one place, education can be molded to meet the specific needs of various age and social groups. Worship tends to be formal, education informal; if worship takes us into the courts of the Lord, education sets us down at Jesus’ feet. Worship calls for a rehearsed summary of the believer’s life of praise; education encourages spontaneous questions and comments on specific areas of life. Worship applies the message to the Christian life but education encourages Christians to make those applications themselves on the basis of Scripture. Although the wide variety of educational forums in our synod make a summary of objectives difficult, these likely apply to education on all levels:

- to impart to the student of the Bible an increasing number of scriptural facts and principles;
- to lead the student to discover those principles as he studies the Word;
- to help the student form clear and concise scriptural concepts;
- to encourage in the student an appropriate emotional response to scriptural concepts;
- to allow the student an opportunity to express those concepts and to apply them in a classroom setting.

Even a cursory examination of Jesus’ teaching style reveals that the Master Teacher had all these objectives in mind as he taught “as one having authority.” To a greater or lesser extent each of these objectives are being met in the elementary and secondary schools that dot the landscape of the Wisconsin Synod. May it never be that we overlook the singular blessing we have in our parochial school system. It is without doubt the envy of many other Christian denominations in our country. Our schools have been the training ground for many of our strongest lay leaders and for the vast majority of our pastors and teachers. Personally and professionally the readers of this essay owe to our schools—and to the Lord who provided them—a debt of gratitude.

Unfortunately, we cannot feel quite so joyful when we look at adult education in the WELS. It is probably safe to say that never in our synod’s history have more than about ten percent of our communicants

attended a Bible class regularly. In some of our congregations this percentage has risen dramatically during the past decade. But in many more an organized Bible study is part of the weekly schedule of only a faithful few.

Our synod has not died despite its lackluster adult education successes. The gospel, proclaimed in worship and personal visitation and solidified in Christian schools and homes, has borne fruit during the past half-century. But it takes only a little imagination to think about what might have happened and what could happen if more of our members were growing in the Word through regular study of the Scriptures.

Despite the successes the Holy Spirit has achieved, we dare not put him to the test by avoiding the issue of adult education. It is true enough that the age we live in has much to do with our members' apparent disinterest in spiritual growth. But Satan has always been opposed to such growth and has found ways to discourage it in every age. The fact of that matter is that, despite his efforts, far more adults are involved in education in other denominations than in ours. A generation ago the church had to contend with a general adult disinclination to study. But adults in our society are going back to school in record numbers. When we see that adults are interested in growing and in growing spiritually, we are wise to review our adult education objectives and methods.

Perhaps one of the causes for our Bible class problems is that we have tended to be somewhat narrow in our objectives and somewhat dependent on one teaching method. The general objectives that were mentioned in a previous paragraph deserve study and review. If these objectives are valid, then we must be prepared to use teaching methods that enable us better to meet our objectives.

A study of the Savior's education objectives reveals much about his methods too. They were not unlike those of any good teacher. Despite the many volumes on various educational methodology, almost all teaching procedures fall within three categories: telling, questioning and discussing. Each has its value as pastors and teachers strive to meet the objectives of education in the congregation.

Telling is probably the most regularly used educational method in our circles, especially among our pastors. Telling enables the teacher to cover a great deal of material quickly and to assure that doctrinal integrity remains intact. An especially talented speaker can be a good teacher by telling. Telling likely makes students more comfortable than other teacher methods. They are obligated to do little more than listen. But telling has some decided weaknesses. Statistics show that students retain less than 5% of what they hear for the first time. Telling does not allow students the opportunity to express biblical concepts or to practice applying them nor does it involve students in discovering for themselves what the Bible says. Telling works well to add background material to a subject that is being studied and it allows the teacher to add a story or an illustration that clarifies a point. But the old adage has remained true through the centuries: Telling is not necessarily teaching and listening is not necessarily learning.

The second teaching method, questioning, is best used by the teacher to help students of the Bible discover for themselves how the Bible answers a question or addresses a problem. Questioning can be misused as surely as telling can. This is especially true if adult students are not prepared to answer difficult questions or if questions remain on the simplest level.

Discussing enables the teacher to get students talking about and applying the truths of the Bible in their own lives. Discussion fails to meet the objectives of education if there is no clear understanding of scriptural principles or if the teacher relies on the discussion to supply the substance of the lesson.

These three basic teaching methods have use in every educational forum, among the smallest children and the oldest adults. Pastors and teachers are wise to plan their teaching to include all three methods in one way or another.

A reevaluation of our objectives and methods will surely be helpful as we address the adult education issue. But it may not solve the problem completely. It is not likely that we will increase our Bible class attendance until we discover a way to solve the confirmation/graduation syndrome that is so obvious in our circles. The perception that education ends at confirmation may be the single greatest contributor to our adult education problems. It may also have the greatest effect on the minimal devotional life we find in so many of the homes of the WELS.

Because it is difficult to know where to lay the blame for this wrong understanding, it is nearly impossible to discover a solution for it. Perhaps we need to take a very careful and critical look at the whole matter of youth confirmation. A careful study of this custom may reveal that it holds more weaknesses than strengths and more liabilities than advantages.

Perhaps, in our teaching of children, we have leaned sometimes too far to the cognitive domain and leaned too far away from the affective domain. We orthodox Lutherans are sensitive to the importance of objective fact over subjective feeling and we are wise to hold to this sensitivity. But there is a careful and necessary balance between fact and feeling. It could be that our fear of overemphasizing emotions has led us to underemphasize them. If our teaching is only cold and calculating, it should not surprise us when our confirmands fail to take the joyful leap from catechism instruction to Bible class.

Perhaps we need to continually reassess the way we teach religion in both our elementary and secondary Lutheran schools. When course success is gauged by the number of facts remembered or the amount of passages memorized, students can hardly be blamed if they feel on their graduation day that they have also graduated from religion class.

There are surely other factors that have led us to the confirmation/graduation syndrome and other factors that impact on the adult education problem in general. But solutions must be sought. Adult Bible class is surely not the only gospel forum which is part of and which encourages a devotional life among our people, but it is a critical forum. It may not be saying too much that only to the degree that the adults of a parish are growing in the Word will anything else in the parish experience lasting growth and substance. If that opinion is even only partially accurate, it is enough to encourage a real effort in the area of adult education.

PERSONAL MINISTRATION

The old axiom has been repeated for decades: "A house-going pastor makes for a church-going people." And for as long as the axiom has been repeated, pastors have found it difficult to practice. August Pieper noticed that problem long before parish schedules became what they are today:

... the complaint that the pastors do not visit their people as much as they ought may have some merit ... It is a hundred times more difficult according to the Spirit, to follow up the individual and to practice private instruction and care of souls on him, as the shepherd's office requires in every form ... Our overload of work is doubtless a partial, but never a complete excuse for this.¹²

Prof. Pieper understood that there are some things which gospel proclamation in worship and education simply cannot do and which only personal ministration can do. Only personal proclamation can communicate specific law and specific gospel to specific individual situations. Only face-to-face ministry can proclaim the gospel to the weak and erring, the sick and homebound, the depressed and those enduring personal conflicts. Only in our largest congregations can specialized counseling for engaged and newly married couples, for singles and for single parents be done on a group level. Personal ministration is valuable even among those members who do not have specific or specialized needs. There may be no crisis to address in those cases, but faith is deepened and commitment to Christian living is strengthened when the gospel is proclaimed in the quiet setting of a member's home.

For as valuable as pastoral care on an individual level is, today's public ministry may demand that lay people be called to assist the pastor in this work. Pastors will not want to give up this ministry completely, but especially the visitation of the weak, the homebound and the hospitalized can be shared with sensitive and spiritually mature laymen and women. Parish schoolteachers can help in this ministry by regularly visiting the congregation's school families and sharing a spiritual message with them. A little ingenuity coupled with a lot of determination can go a long way to discover and implement ways to carry the gospel into the homes of the people we serve.

CONCLUSION

It is not likely that anyone is going to discover a forum for proclaiming the gospel which is much different from or much better than the forums we are using now: corporate worship, Christian education and personal ministration. Nor is such a discovery necessary. These forums are where God's people have come into

contact with his word since the church came into being. There may be those who wonder, given the sad stories which mar the church's history as well as our synod's history, if these forums deserve the right to remain at the forefront of the public ministry. But the observation that they have not always seemed to foster the kind of faith and life we would like to see in the church dare not be the gauge by which we judge them. The gospel proclaimed in any forum does not always produce either the quality or the quantity of fruits we expect or desire.

As Luther developed his theology of the cross, he carefully pointed out that God is known and understood not in strength, but in weakness, not in an awesome display of majesty and power, but in the exhibition of a love willing to die on a cross. For the entire world to see the cross was a failure. But God stood at the foot of the cross and told his version of the greatest story ever told. What made the cross successful was not its appearance but God's promise.

So it is with the gospel. There is no debate among us that the gospel can have spectacular visible success. The conversions on Pentecost supply ample evidence. But the guarantee that the gospel works is not to be found in the successes of the gospel but in the words of God which stand behind the gospel, not in what is subjectively apparent, but in what is objectively promised. Paul wrote: "The gospel is the power of God for salvation."

If our efforts to foster a devotional life among the people we serve seem to be achieving scant success, there are many questions we might ask ourselves. Some of them have been asked on the pages of this essay. But this question dare not appear on any list: Should the gospel continue to have a general predominance in my ministry? Just before he concluded his lectures on the proper distinction between law and gospel, Dr. C.F.W. Walther said this to his students:

You may believe me when I say that in the entire course of the history of the Church there will be found few communions that have such achievements to show as our Synod despite its weakness and defeats. That is not due to our prudence, our hard work, our self-denial. The true reason is that we have really preached the genuine gospel to our people.¹³

Who knows how history will judge the achievements of the Wisconsin Synod? What we do know is this: If there is to be a genuine spiritual renewal among us, it will occur because the Lord of the church, through the gospel, rouses our members and us and not because of superior organization, better methodology and strategic planning. If we and our people develop a deeper love for the gospel and then a deeper devotional life in the gospel, it will be because the gospel itself has aroused us to sit at the feet of Jesus day by day and not because of hours of work, special programs and long essays.

God's people of every age have had to deal with the temptation that comes because the gospel sometimes produces only invisible successes. In frustration Moses struck the rock at Meribah instead of speaking to it. Elijah whined and complained at Mt. Horeb. Even Luther, the great systematizer of the theology of the cross, became discouraged in later life over Wittenberg's slowness to live the Reformation faith. We face the same temptation. To succumb to it will destroy the value of our ministries.

But there is another temptation which can destroy the value of our work. It comes in forms similar to this: "The power is in the gospel and not in our forms, methods and procedures. Therefore, we may proclaim the gospel without regard or concern for any of these." At first glance the temptation sounds remarkably similar to a confession of the truth. In reality it is not less a deception than were Satan's words to Eve, "You will be like God, knowing good and evil." This latter temptation was a half-truth and succeeded in leading Eve to violate God's plan for her life and God's world. The former temptation is a caricature of the truth and succeeds in leading us to violate God's design for the proclamation of the gospel. The caricature allows us to be content with out-of-date methods, satisfied with half-hearted efforts and disinclined to be continually analytical of ourselves and our ministry. No servant of God dare boldly assert "I am proclaiming the gospel" without humbly asking "Am I proclaiming the gospel as God would have me?" A determination to find the best ways to communicate the gospel and to employ the best forms and methods in today's ministry is not inconsistent with a sincere faith in the gospel. Francis Rossow wrote: "The foolishness of our preaching consists in its content, not in its style. What is foolish is our message, not the manner of communicating that message. The foolishness of

preaching does not necessitate foolish preaching.”¹⁴ Each of us must learn to be forever content with the successes of the gospel but forever discontent with his own or her own efforts to proclaim the gospel. Such discontent for us is nothing else but a burden of joy.

END NOTES

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