

Liturgical Worship for Church Planters

by James Tiefel

Introduction

Put yourself in the shoes of poor Pastor Luther. He wasn't thirty years old when the grim reality hit him that a good share of his world's population was depending on his efforts for its hope of heaven. Their numbers were staggering; their spirituality was worse. People had almost no concept of a biblical Christ. Only a few parents had any ability to pass on to their children even the simplest Christian doctrine or the most basic Christian morality. The average man was more interested in food for his table than food for his soul and, together with the average woman, spent most of the day scraping for what would be gone by the next day. There was a fear of hell and a desire for heaven in almost every home, but the overwhelming point of view held that something resembling morality could avoid the one and gain the other. As Luther contemplated reaching these masses, he realized he would find little help from the organized churches of his era. He was surrounded by a belly-serving clergy that was directing more souls away from Christ than toward him. Church hierarchy was more interested in social and political endeavors than in spirituality. The mega-churches offered little more than ceremonial glitz and artistic entertainment. Things were not much better on the local scene. It was the rarest shepherd who did anything else but turn searches inward, toward their own reaction and response to God. Then there were the mystics, coming at the people from outside the church, who joined the language of Christianity to non-Christian superstition, much of which was surely cultic in nature. Academic circles were infiltrated by humanism. In most cases, government was devoid of anything resembling moral leadership. When Pastor Luther looked out at the streets of his society, he saw much more than a lethargic church body needing a little spiritual renewing. Instead he saw millions and more who required a radical religious transformation. For all intents and purposes, these were men, women, and children who did not know Christ and his forgiveness by faith and who were bound by Satan for hell.

It is impossible to know, of course, how deeply Luther worked at strategic planning and five-year programs. We have no idea if he had a master plan in the early 1520s which he felt would allow him to serve the people of his world. He claimed no divine revelations (and even the famous satanic revelation is probably nothing more than a good story!). He was not impelled by inspiration in the same way Peter or Paul were. And his handling of the peasant uprising proves he could be overly idealistic. The man made mistakes. On the other hand, we know that he prayed a great deal and that he studied the Scriptures more. From his writings we gain a clear picture of his understanding of and attitudes toward the gospel and the means of grace. More than any of his followers then and now he deserved to wear the hat of doctor of theology which he insisted himself belonged only to the man who grasped the doctrine of justification.

This is the man we find in the 1520s looking for a way to proclaim the gospel which, to his joy, he had so recently discovered for himself. He was not a practical theologian at heart; he was certainly not infallible. But his field was not so different from ours and he loved the gospel as much as any of us. What did he do? Where did he begin the monumental task which stood before him?

He began with corporate worship. Every other proclamation tool except for his translation of the New Testament came after his work on worship: the catechisms, the Old Testament translation, the confessions, the sermon books. And what style of worship did he determine to use? He used the style we call still today liturgical. In both of his worship orders,

the *Formula Missae* and the *Deutsche Messe*, he employed the time-honored worship order of the western Christian church, the *Liturgy*. Along with the Liturgy came the historic progression of the Ordinary and the Proper, the church year and the Sacrament of the Altar. He was not interested in one traditional form; the two orders are very different. It was a style to which he was committed, a style which focused Sunday by Sunday and year after year on the words and works of Christ, carried to Christ's people in Word and sacrament.

From the onset, Luther made it clear that this was a purposeful decision, and not at all born out of convenience or pragmatism. Nor did he lean toward liturgical style only because he loved traditional forms. He was actually going against the contemporary grain with his worship opinions. Ulrich Zwingli was in the process of setting a standard in Geneva which was decidedly non-liturgical. There were strong voices even in Wittenberg urging radical worship reforms. In numerous locations throughout Germany other reform-minded pastors were drawing large followings by rejecting everything but a simple New Testament style of worship. Luther surely noticed what appealed to the masses. He also understood how easily the ceremonies inherent to a liturgical style could obfuscate the gospel; they had, in fact, often replaced gospel proclamation. He insisted that "when God's Word is not preached, one had better neither sing nor read or even come together."¹ There were dozens of good reasons why Luther might have chosen something besides liturgical form as a vehicle for gospel proclamation, but in the very first sentence of his very first treatise specifically on the subject of worship, he made it clear why he was heading where he was:

The service now in common use everywhere goes back to genuine Christian beginnings, as does the office of preaching. But as the latter has been perverted by the spiritual tyrants, so the former has been corrupted by the hypocrites. As we do not on that account abolish the office of preaching, but aim to restore it again to its right and proper place, so it is not our intention to do away with the service, but to restore it again to its rightful use.²

In the introduction to his Latin service, he was even clearer about his determination:

We therefore first assert: It is not now nor ever has been our intention to abolish the liturgical service of God completely, but rather to purify the one that is now in use from the wretched accretions which corrupt it and to point out an evangelical use.³

With that fairly lengthy prelude, I refer you to the title of this essay: "Liturgical Worship for Church Planters." There is almost a contradiction in terms in that phrase. Not much of what you are reading by or about the pastors of growing churches advocates a liturgical style of worship. David Luecke insists that "liturgical renewal [in recent history] has not been associated with a burst of church growth,"⁴ and urges liturgical Lutherans to "package their [gospel] offering better."⁵ Walther Kallestad, who looks out at over four thousand worshipers Sunday by Sunday at his Lutheran Community Church of Joy (ELCA), recently wrote, "If we are absolutely honest – what most churches do on Sunday morning is not working."⁶ No church planter worth

¹ *Luther's Works*, Vol. 53, p. 11.

² *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁴ David Luecke, *Evangelical Style and Lutheran Substance*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1988) p. 109.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁶ Walther Kallestad, "Entertainment Evangelism," in *The Lutheran*, May 23, 1990, p. 17.

his salt can avoid dealing with the implications of that opinion. Fact is, most church planters don't need experts to tell them that. In their own ministries, and even more in the ministries around them, they see what draws and what does not draw people to worship. WELS church planters are by no means the only church planters affected by this non-liturgical point of view. The Methodist editor Keith Pohl recently wrote that he is "afraid the battle is over." According to him, the popular, non-liturgical style has won and has moved to local churches. "I suspect that many of our churches are copying what they see. 'Come worship with us and be entertained.'"⁷

So here is the outreach-explorer, aching to carry the gospel of Jesus to a dying world, reaching for forms and methods which allow him to do that as well as he can. Both conventional wisdom and personal experience lead him away from his liturgical moorings. And now comes this ivory-towered seminary professor (with absolutely no church planting experience, we might add) encouraging "Liturgical Worship for Church Planters."

It is precisely because I lack your experience that I began this presentation with the Luther prelude. It surely could not have escaped you that outreach explorers doing ministry at the end of the 20th century do not face a very different world from the theologian-reformer who did ministry at the beginning of the 16th century. The people of our society are not much more caught up in paganism, hedonism, subjectivism and humanism than were the people of Luther's era. There were voices then as there are now advocating a radical reform of worship styles and principles. Yet Martin Luther, perhaps our situational brother as much as our confessional brother, did worship in the form and style called liturgical. Why he did that and how he did that 450 years ago can be very helpful to you and me in 1990. The paragraphs which follow mean to help outreach-explorers understand the value of liturgical worship and to assist them in using it in their ministries.

Part 1: Liturgical Worship: the Work of the People

The Greek word that gives us our word liturgy (*λειτουργία*), as well as its close companion *λατρεύω*, emphasize the response of the believer to God. The former is the more formal term, signifying a public response; the latter is the more general word for serving. Especially in the patristic literature, both words are used for the public worship of the Christian community and both emphasize that the worship experience is the people's work. Corporate worship is something that faith-filled people do.

What faith-filled people do at worship is pray, praise and give thanks. And yet, we must not presume that such activity is the only form of worship, nor even that these are the highest forms of worship. Believers worship God best when they listen to him. Luther wrote:

As God at first gives faith through the Word, so he thereafter also exercises, increases, confirms, and perfects it through the Word. Therefore the worship of God at its best and the finest keeping of the Sabbath consist in exercising oneself in piety and in dealing with the Word and hearing it.⁸

Because they understood that letting God speak to them was the highest form of worship, German Lutherans called corporate worship *Gottesdienst* – the service of God to the people. We therefore find two primary ingredients in public worship: God speaking and people responding. Carl Halter coined what may be the perfect definition of corporate worship when he wrote,

⁷ Martin E. Marty, "From the Editor," in *The Christian Century*, October 8, 1990.

⁸ *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, compiled by Ewald Plass, 3 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959) p. 1545.

“Worship is a joyful concern with God through Christ.”⁹ God’s people love to hear God speak and they love to speak to God. Whenever we think about the church’s worship, we need to keep both of these elements in mind.

When we come to grips with the two-fold nature of public worship, we will arrive at the conclusion that only Christians can worship. No prayer, confession, acclamation, not even a desire to hear God speak is true worship unless it flows from faith. When the psalm writer encouraged Israel to “sing to the LORD a new song” he was urging the people to sing the song that came from the new heart of faith. Worship which does not come from such a heart is nothing more than civic righteousness. The Jews of Jesus’ day worshiped without that heart. Jesus said of them: “You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he said about you: ‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain...’” (Matthew 15:7-8). It is not the sound of the worship that counts, but the source. Jesus told the Samaritan woman: “God is a spirit, and his worshipers must worship him in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24). The noted liturgical scholar Peter Brunner understood that God must act before people can act. In his book *Worship In the Name of Jesus*, he wrote:

The congregation’s service before God becomes real by reason of the fact that that God Himself presents the congregation with the act of service as His gift. If God does not arouse us to His service through the Holy Spirit, all that we do in worship remains dead.¹⁰

It is true that nothing in our worship activity serves God unless it has first been given to us by God. All that we do in worship is God-pleasing service only insofar as it issues from the Spirit poured out over us.¹¹

The entire idea of inviting an unbeliever to “worship” is almost ludicrous. Imagine encouraging a Unitarian to join in singing “I know That My Redeemer Lives.” Think of the idea of leading a Mormon in the Nicene Creed (“God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God”) or asking an Arminian Baptist to confess that he is “by nature sinful and unclean.” “Come join us for worship” is an invitation which, in many cases, surely borders on encouraging hypocrisy.

It becomes obvious with that review why the church of both the Old Testament and the New Testament never considered corporate worship to be an important forum for evangelization. Even in what was likely the greatest mission era of church history, the first two centuries after Christ, we find the Savior’s witnesses looking for opportunities to proclaim the good news away from their public worship. Only after instruction had begun were the non-baptized invited to the Word section of the service (the part of the service from Introit to sermon was even called the “Mass of the Catechumens”). The pre-baptized were not allowed to even observe the mysteries in the communion section (the “Mass of the Faithful”) until after instruction and baptism were done. Referring to corporate worship, Werner Elert wrote:

Admission was not just for anybody...The gathering for worship in the early church was not a public but a closed assembly, while the celebration of the Eucharist was reserved for the saints with the utmost strictness.¹²

⁹ Carl Halter, *The Practice of Sacred Music*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955) p. 6.

¹⁰ Peter Brunner, *Worship In the Name of Jesus*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1968) p. 197.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

Despite his deep commitment to the common man and his determined effort to make liturgical worship something in which the common man could easily participate, Martin Luther did not consider the Sunday service to be the primary entrance level for many in Germany who literally were non-believers.

The German service needs a plain and simple, fair and square catechism. Catechism means the instruction in which the heathen who want to be Christians are taught and guided in what they should believe, know, and do, and leave undone, according to the Christian faith.¹³

The practice of the New Testament Church was not essentially different from that of the Old Testament. Instruction by the fathers and, later in history, by the rabbis in the synagogue, preceded participation in the rites of the tabernacle and temple. It can be maintained by even a cursory study of church history that never until the dawn of American Revivalism did the church consider its corporate worship to be an appropriate forum for evangelization. Rather, it understood that initiation into the Christian faith was accomplished more easily through some form of education.

It stands to reason that worship, which is essentially an inter-action between God and his people, is not going to work well as a replacement for witness, which is essentially an action by God towards people who are not his. Think of the vast difference between worship and witness. Worship expects a response and is formed in such a way as to demand a response. Witness, while it prays for a response, accepts only what the Holy Spirit creates. Because worship involves believers, it sets a full banquet of God's means of grace. Imagine trying to witness to a non-believer by means of Baptism and the Supper! Worship includes a review of all God's sacred secrets. Witness demands simplicity and clarity. Consider the vast differences between the letter to the (believing) Hebrews and Peter's Pentecost sermon to unbelieving Hebrews. Consider as well the difference between Peter's sermon and Paul's witness to the Greeks at the Areopagus.

The point is that the objectives of corporate worship and evangelism are not the same. Therefore, the forms and methods used to reach these objectives cannot be the same, either. No teacher worth his salt would dream of using a twenty minute discourse, emptied of questions and visual aids, to implant Bible teachings on the minds of a classroom full of energetic fourth graders.

But the worship leader understands that a sermon works very well for reviewing God's truth and for motivating God's people, especially since the people at worship come from various stages of life and are at various ages and educational levels. In the same way, the wise worship leader does not give to the churched what is essential for the unchurched, and the wise evangelist does not give to the unchurched what is essential for the churched. Worship is *λειτουργία*; witness is *κήρυγμα*. Both are essential in the faith-walk of the disciple, but each is essential at a different point in that walk. Church planters need to come to grips with the difference between the two, both as to objective and methods.

Does this mean that outreach-explorers ought to stand guard at the doors of their rented public school gymnasiums and refuse entrance to any unchurched or non-WELS visitor? Of course not. It does mean that we ought not put too many of our outreach eggs into the corporate

¹² Werner Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1966) pp. 75-76.

¹³ *Luther's Works*, Vol. 53, p. 64.

worship basket – and this is advice not just for church planters but for pastors of established congregations, too.

We have tended in the past to use a front-door approach with prospects and searchers, and there was a time when this was the best approach in most cases. When America was still a Christian nation, the Christ-centered sermons our pastors preached to their members satisfied what most visitors wanted. Although the visitor might have been of a different confessional stripe, he likely as not knew about Jesus and was searching for a way to heaven. Add to this the observation that a generation ago the WELS was primarily a preaching synod. Until the mid-1940s our corporate worship was decidedly non-liturgical and non-sacramental. The order of service in most of our congregations was very sparse; into the 1950s respected WELS pastors were denouncing the “high church” liturgy of *The Lutheran Hymnal*. Babies were most often baptized in private ceremonies, not in the service. The Lord’s Supper was offered no more than four or six times a year, and then often in a separate service preceded by a confessional address. Even if a visitor did wander into a communion service by chance, our close communion policy was not likely to be so different from that of the church of his heritage. Much has changed in fifty years. The historic Lutheran liturgy has been stuck in our heads since our youth. Church year preaching is our ultimate style. Both pastors and people have come to value the Sacrament and desire to receive it often. Baptisms are invariably a part of Sunday worship. But in the same span of time during which the WELS progressed toward liturgical fullness, the society around it digressed into liberalism, humanism and hedonism. The average visitor may come to our churches looking for salvation, but not the kind of salvation we’re offering. There is a good chance he will not understand even the simplest theological terms, and whatever brush he’s had with America’s syncretistic denominations will have left him totally unprepared for our exclusivity in both doctrine and communion practices. The front door may still be a valid entrance point for some searchers, but at the very least it should be only one of several entrance points. And if a church planter has begun to lead his gathered sheep into liturgical worship, it is imperative that he spend a good share of his time developing side-door approaches to reach the sheep which are still not found.

By side-door approaches I refer to anything which is not corporate worship but which may attract the interest of the people in the community. Side-door approaches may be molded with both actual spiritual needs or perceived needs in mind.

The preeminent approach in the first-mentioned category is adult Bible study. Church planters ought to be able to give to more spiritual searchers several options for finding answers to life’s questions from the Word. These classes ought to be taught under optimum teaching/learning circumstances. Introductions which present real maladies, questions which lead students into the text of the Bible and discussion statements which allow participants to interact on the basis of scriptural principles are vital for these classes. Hour-long lectures serve only very specialized situations. Outreach-explorers will want to take a careful look at their Bible Information Classes and determine whether the course’s length and depth is a deterrent to enrollment. (Our traditional approach to adult confirmation/instruction has tended to favor long and detailed courses. Shorter courses can work well if both the pastor and the participant see the BIC as only the first step in a life-long study of Scripture. The concept will leave us with poorly trained members only if congregations fail to establish an expanding and sequential Bible study curriculum.)

Side-door entries which are molded to meet perceived needs are limited only by imagination, the community’s needs and the congregation’s man-(or woman) power. Courses on

stress management, successful parenting and loneliness are obvious attractions in some communities. A man very much involved with the formation of our synod's vision statement, Conrad Frey, sees daycare as the preeminent side-door approach of the 90s. Social opportunities, sports activities (e.g., aerobics classes) and English language courses fall into the same category. Obviously, none of these offers a direct and immediate gospel witness, but all create opportunities for an eventual evangelization.

Church planters who work at developing side-door entrance points will also lead the sheep they have to be aware of and equipped for friendship evangelism. When visitors do come to worship, the apparatus for immediate follow-up by pastor and members will be firmly in place.

In this author's opinion, it is altogether possible for us to let worship be *λειτουργία* for the sake of the churching believers, and yet not feel bound thereby to write off the unchurched and non-believers. A commitment to serve both the mature and the immature does, however, demand extra work, a degree of creativity and even, perhaps, a willingness to challenge a few pre-conceived notions. The men our church has called to be outreach-explorers possess abilities in all three areas.

Part 2: Liturgical Worship: The Confession of the Church

The theory works pretty well on paper: assign worship to the believers, evangelism to the non-believers; use the front door for the churched, the side door for the unchurched. I realize that the reality is not quite so neat. The fact is that the unchurched want to come to church; they don't want to enter by some side door!

The contention that America is no longer a Christian nation is pretty convincing, but there is evidence which seems to suggest that many of those non-Christians are finding life pretty empty without Christianity. There are many unchurched people in our society who are searching for answers which they realize only God can give. The trouble is, they aren't sure where to find God. To look for him in organized religion makes a good deal of sense, but they see hundreds of organized religions on the horizon, each offering God in a slightly different package. The confusion which that segment of society feels must be obvious, and it is intensified by several additional factors. These unchurched likely have been churched at least once during their lives. They are unchurched now because their previous church experience failed to give them the answers they wanted to get. Add to that the likelihood that they are not quite sure what answers they wanted to get – or, for that matter, what questions they wanted to ask. There are two realities for millions of unchurched Americans: somehow, they do not feel at peace, and somehow, they feel religion must be able to supply what they're missing. They have no objective means to gauge what they're looking for and no objective means to judge what God must supply. And so they apply to their spiritual search the same yardstick their culture has led them to employ in other areas of life. They look for God in his various denominational appearances with one question in mind: Does this feel right? Tragically, the narcissism of contemporary American society has joined forces with the *opinio legis*. Richard Neuhaus offers this analysis of the situation:

Truth is measured by what is frequently called “expressive individualism.” The ability to express myself, to be in touch with my feelings, to find my own voice, in sum – To Be Me – this is what matters, this is substance.¹⁴

Although David Luecke writes from the opposite perspective, he agrees essentially with Neuhaus' analysis. We live in a culture, he contends, that “stresses personal choices to a previously unimaginable degree.”¹⁵ The Church Growth consultant Win Arn quotes from a study by the United Methodists which insists that churched and unchurched alike want a church where they will feel warm and comfortable.¹⁶

The implications for the church planter are enormous. Here are the realities he faces:

Most seekers of spirituality have almost no concept of what actually ails the human spirit, i.e., sin as guilt before God. Therefore, few are ready to hear about what cures the human spirit, i.e., a forgiving God. Many have had a try already at a “sin-forgiveness” religion and have found it lacking.

Most seekers are looking for a spiritual experience which makes them feel better about and with themselves. They are victims of a hedonistic environment which insists “If it feels good, it must be good.”

¹⁴ Richard Neuhaus, “The Lutheran Difference,” in *Lutheran Forum*, Reformation, 1990.

¹⁵ David Luecke, op. cit., p. 62.

¹⁶ Win Arn, “How To Attract First-Time Visitors,” in *The Win Arn Growth Report*, Number 24.

Most seekers search for this feel-good spirituality in church, i.e., at worship. If they fail to find it at one church, they will look for it at another.

An article in *Eternity* magazine summarized the situation like this:

Worship...fits right into the consumerism that so characterizes American religious life. Church-shopping has become common. A believer will compare First Presbyterian, St. John's Lutheran, Epiphany Episcopal, Brookwood Methodist and Bethany Baptist for the "best buy." The church plant, programs, and personnel are scrutinized, but the bottom line is, "How did it feel?" Worship must be sensational. "Start with an earthquake and work up from there," advised one professor of homiletics. "Be sure you have the four prerequisites of a successful church," warned another; "upbeat music, adequate parking, a warm welcome, and a dynamite sermon." The slogan is "Try it, you'll like it."¹⁷

The situation would be serious enough if only natural religion were leading society to its experiential concept of salvation. In many ways, however, the Evangelical movement has put an "organized religion" stamp of approval on a consumer approach to worship. The worship life of many Evangelical churches is characterized by a free, informal, charismatic style which breezily allows the worshiper a warm, personal experience. C. Peter Wagner describes this style of worship like this:

When a lot of people come together, hungry to meet God, a special kind of worship can occur. That experience is what I want to call celebration...The great camp meetings of a century ago, Finney's revivals, Billy Graham's crusades... – all these operated basically as celebrations. Christians love to go to them. They are a lot of fun.¹⁸

Given the societal scene, does it really surprise you that Evangelical churches are growing? It doesn't surprise the leaders of the Church Growth Movement. They notice what kind of worship makes church plantings succeed and suggest that any church which is interested in growth needs to adopt this free and informal Evangelical style.

What do these observations have to say to liturgical Lutherans? Liturgical worship, with its Western Rite, church year and sacramental emphasis can hardly be described as free, informal or breezy. If Church Growth theory is correct, we stand to lose most of our visitors for two reasons: They will not be attracted to our worship and they will be attracted to Evangelical worship. That is indeed a practical concern for outreach-explorers!

The situation presents a theoretical concern as well. Have the Evangelicals and their Church Growth supporters caught something Lutherans have missed? The LCMS pastor David Luecke pleads his case for the contention that they have in his book *Evangelical Style and Lutheran Substance*. Many in his church body and in the ELCA obviously agree. Richard Neuhaus recently passed on the rumor that there are more Missouri Synod students doing graduate work at Fuller Theological Seminary than at the graduate schools of the two Concordias combined. In some cases a literal war has broken out between the defenders of liturgical form and those who favor the Evangelical style. The rhetoric from both camps fills hundreds of pages. And no one ought to assume that WELS pastors are not carefully and critically examining both sides of the issue.

¹⁷ Duane Arnold and George Fry, "Weothscip," in *Eternity*, September, 1986.

¹⁸ C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow*, (Glendale, CA: Regal Books, 1976) p. 98.

There is also a theological issue here. Are some in our church trying to retain a liturgical style simply because that is our tradition? And here is a more serious question: Are we hindering growth because we have made a law out of what ought to be an *adiaphoron*? Have we erected a barrier to the Holy Spirit and his means with our Western Rite, church year and sacramental emphasis? This question gets to the heart of the issue: Ought we to change our style for the sake of carrying out the Great Commission?

The informal, non-liturgical style of worship we find in Evangelical churches was born out of a determined effort to rescue the perishing. It has its roots in the evangelistic era of the First and Second Great Awakenings. Those sources alone compel us to consider the validity of the style. Yet, as the following paragraphs will show, this informal style has as much to do with Evangelical theology as it does with evangelizing objectives.

Today's Evangelicals have their heritage in American Revivalism which began in the early decades of the 18th century. Revivalism first of all intended to call to repentance the smug mainliners of the eastern religious establishment and then to reclaim the vast numbers who had left the east for a better life on the frontier. The leaders of Revivalism never lacked for zeal. They were on fire against hypocrisy and for saving. In many cases unsophisticated and poorly educated, they nevertheless set the theological standards for religious life on the frontier and, although they would be surprised to know it, eventually influenced all of American Protestantism and especially the Evangelical movement.

From their battles with the eastern denominations these Revivalists developed a deep distrust of any sort of confessionalism. Like the German Pietists, they determined that the "orthodox" churches spent too much time with creeds and not enough time with Christ. But they were sternly committed to an inspired Bible and established their worship forms with the simplicity of the New Testament in mind. The Disciples of Christ leader Thomas Campbell wrote in the 1830s: "Nothing ought to be received into the faith or worship of the Church or to be made a term of communion among Christians that is not as old as the New Testament."¹⁹ Revivalism's dual emphases on the Christ of the Bible and on the simplicity of the New Testament served well for reaching the lost, but its anti-creedalism allowed it to become an amalgam of various Reformed emphases. From traditional Calvinism the Revivalists inherited a theological emphasis no Lutheran could accept. The law, to John Calvin the "moral equivalent of the gospel," was much more the pattern of salvation than the mirror of God's wrath. Rather than release from the guilt of sin, salvation became primarily freedom from the power of sin, and Christ, the Son of the Sovereign, became the empowerer of such freedom. From traditional Arminianism and John Wesley's Methodism the Revivalists gained their doctrines of man, faith and conversion. Free will gave man the ability to make a cognitive decision to choose for good or evil: a choice for evil left him with guilt before God; a choice for good gave him faith. Combine the Calvinism and Arminianism and you have Revivalism's emphasis on empirical results: Since salvation consists in the ability to obey the law, and since conversion is man's free choice, those who are actually converted will display an obvious life-style metamorphosis. That empirical change became the guarantee of conversion, the evidence of success. Now add to all this the general Reformed denial of Word and sacraments as the Spirit's means of grace, and you begin to understand why the great Revivalist Charles Finney made the essential test for worship forms a pragmatic one: Does it work to make converts? If so, keep it; if not, discard it. "Finney and his associates represent a liturgical revolution based on pure pragmatism," writes James

¹⁹ James F. White, *Protestant Worship: Traditions in Transition*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989) p. 174.

White. “The test for worship is its effectiveness in producing converts.”²⁰ To this add a dose of 20th century liberalism and you have a summary of Evangelical and Church Growth thought which is not, I think, inaccurate:

Salvation is freedom from whatever keeps one from a happy life. Robert Schuller says, “Find a need and fill it.”

Christ is the Empowerer for meeting these perceived needs in Evangelical worship. “Jesus is held up as the Giver of new life, the Performer of miracles...the source of power for new God-pleasing living.”²¹

Conversion is a free, cognitive choice and is, therefore, accompanied by empirical evidence that the choice for salvation has been made and that Christ, the key to problem solving, has entered the picture.

Not the means of grace, but environment, ambiance, and circumstance move people to a cognitive choice for salvation.

Since conversion includes empirical evidence, the environment, ambiance and circumstance must be molded so that they are able to produce the empirical evidence.

The non-liturgical Evangelical worship style is based on perfect Evangelical logic: Since salvation is what man perceives he needs, since salvation is attained by a cognitive decision, since the decision includes empirical evidence, since the evidence is brought about by environment, ambiance and circumstance, people determine the form of worship in Evangelical churches. To put it simply: Culture sets the liturgy.

We have described the contemporary American culture and its philosophy as being a blend of self-serving narcissism and the *opinio legis*. We have pointed out the culture’s disenchantment with a “sin/forgiveness” religion and its antipathy toward the traditional denominations. We are well aware of the entertainment industry’s influence. We know about our society’s lust for leisure, its love of instant pleasure and its refusal to make lasting commitments. These are the forces which combine to make our culture what it is. And it is this culture which determines the style of Evangelical worship!

Given the presuppositions, it is little wonder that Evangelical worship is informal, casual, breezy, laid back, non-traditional (although often including the nostalgic), encouraging of no commitment and including music in popular styles. Evangelical worship intends to make people happy, to put them at ease, to allow them to feel good. When they feel good, they will be eager to give themselves to Christ and so to gain his power for becoming what they want to become. In many cases, what also makes people feel good is a de-emphasis on sin as guilt, Christ as Redeemer and God as justifier. The Church Growth guru C. Peter Wagner writes approvingly of Robert Schuller’s ministry:

He rarely quotes the Bible because he did a research project some years ago and discovered that unchurched people in Orange County don’t believe the Bible. So he directs his sermons to their felt needs such as the family, their job, their

²⁰ Ibid., p. 177.

²¹ David Luecke, op. cit., p. 77.

financial situation, their self-esteem or their emotions, explaining how Jesus can meet those needs.²²

Wagner's conclusion? "If you can serve a diet of positive sermons focused on the real felt needs of the people, you will be preaching for growth."²³

It is not within the scope of this essay to present a thorough analysis of Evangelical and Church Growth theology and methodology. There are several excellent studies available, and every WELS outreach-explorer ought to read at least one of them.²⁴ I hope that this short summary has proved the premise, however, that Evangelical churches are not non-liturgical only or even primarily because they are evangelistic but because a non-liturgical style matches their theology. Their style is their substance!

Lutheran pastors need to come to grips with the reality that not culture but God sets the liturgy. Obviously, I do not mean that in an absolute sense. Martin Luther reestablished the New Testament principle that form in worship is the free choice of the church. When he presented his German order to the people of his day he wrote, "We heartily beg, in the name of Christ, that if in time something better should be revealed to them [i.e., to other Christians] they should tell us to be silent, so that by common effort we may aid the common cause."²⁵ But to gain from Luther that, in worship, any style will do, is to misread Luther. Werner Elert says this about the Reformer:

No matter how strongly he emphasizes the Christian freedom in connection with the forms of this rite, no matter how much he deviates from the form handed down at the end of the Middle Ages, no matter how earnestly he warns against the belief that external customs could commend us to God, still there are certain ceremonial elements that he, too, regards as indispensable.²⁶

What Luther was not willing to abandon, as both his Latin and German services show, was the basic structure of the historic Christian rite, which included the church year and the Sacrament. In short, Luther was committed to liturgical worship. "For among Christians," he wrote, "the whole service should center on Word and Sacrament."²⁷ The Augsburg Confession and the Apology, composed within a decade after he established his worship principles, echo Luther:

The Mass is retained among us and is celebrated with the greatest reverence. Almost all the customary ceremonies are also retained. (AC XXIV:1-3)

²² C. Peter Wagner, *Leading Your Church to Growth*, (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1984) p. 177.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

²⁴ Three studies are suggested:

Harold Senkbeil, *Sanctification*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1988).

David Valleskey, "Evangelical Lutheranism and Today's Evangelicals and Fundamentalists," in *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 30, Number 3.

David Valleskey, "The Church Growth Movement: An Evaluation," essay submitted to the Conference of Presidents, 1990.

Although the essayist does not necessarily agree with all of the author's conclusions and applications, Pastor Robert Koester presented an excellent evaluation of Reformed thinking in his dissertation, *Law and Gospel: The Foundation of Lutheran Ministry With Reference to the Church Growth Movement*, 1989. Copies can be secured from Pastor Koester.

²⁵ *Luther's Works*, Vol. 53, p. 90.

²⁶ Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, p. 325 (translated by Larry Vogel in an article in *Concordia Theological Journal*).

²⁷ *Luther's Works*, Vol. 53, p. 90.

So in our churches we willingly observe the order of the Mass, the Lord's day, and the other important feast days. With a very thankful spirit we cherish the useful and ancient ordinances. (Ap VII and VIII:33)

We can truthfully say that in our churches the public liturgy is more decent than in theirs. (Ap XV:38-40)

The Lutheran fathers understood what their sons need to understand: The Lutheran Church is not liturgical only or even primarily because this has been its tradition, but because liturgical worship confesses its theology.

In every way the liturgy points the worshiper away from himself and his culture and toward his Savior on the cross. The liturgy always presents sin as damning guilt, Christ as atoning mediator, God as justifying Father, conversion as free gift and means of grace as Spirit's tool. Therefore, the liturgy continually presents Christ in action for the world: "Lord, have mercy," "Glory be to God on high," "I believe in God, the Father..." "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God..." "O Christ, Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world." The liturgy carries the worshiper through Christ's birth, appearing, victory over Satan, passion and death, resurrection, ascension and the commissioning of his church. The liturgy offers to the believer what Christ told the church to offer, his body and blood, given and shed for the forgiveness of sins. The liturgy does not care so much how people feel about Christ, how they choose Christ and what they do for Christ. It cares instead that Christ felt enough love for the people to choose to give up his place in heaven and come down to suffer and die. When it comes to the Christian response, the liturgy expects what God has promised: "My Word will not return empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:11). The liturgy allows for response and even expects response, but it correctly puts justification before sanctification and allows the means of grace to promote sanctification according to the Spirit's desire and will. ("It produced a crop – a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown" Matthew 13:8.) In every way the liturgy presents *Christus pro nobis*. Compare this liturgical text (presented as a replacement for the *Gloria in Excelsis* in the new *Service of Word and Sacrament*) with the testimonials, life-style preaching and popular music so often found in Evangelical worship:

O Lord, our Lord, how glorious is your name in all the earth.
Almighty God, merciful Father, you crown our life with your love.
 You put away our sin;
 You comfort our spirit;
 You make us pure and holy in your sight.
You did not spare your only Son, but gave him up for us all.
O Lord, our Lord, how glorious is your name in all the earth.
O Son of God, eternal Word of the Father,
 You came to live with us;
 You made your Father known;
 You washed us from our sins in you own blood.
You are the King of Glory, you are the Lord! O Lord, our Lord, how glorious is
your name in all the earth.

As liturgical worship confesses what the Lutheran church believes about Christ, so it confesses what we believe about the Word. Because Lutherans believe that the Holy Spirit works

through the Word to create, maintain and strengthen faith, they value the “pattern of sound teaching.” And nowhere is the pattern of sound teaching more important than in the forms of corporate worship. For this reason the orthodox Lutheran church of the past and present views its liturgy as a precise (though not exhaustive) confession of biblical theology.

Someone has properly called the hymnal the “layman’s Bible,” for it is in hymns and liturgy that the majority of Christians regularly review the teachings of Scripture. Even before the Reformation the church realized the influence worship forms had on Christians. Luther’s enemies were convinced that, by means of his hymns, Luther’s followers were singing their way into hell. They understood the centuries-old principle *lex orandi, lex credendi*, i.e., the pattern of worship is the pattern of faith. It was precisely for the cause of sound doctrine among the people of the medieval church that the Nicene Creed was added to the liturgy and the Festival of the Holy Trinity to the church year. Lutherans have carefully observed the same principle. In the years following 1817, orthodox Lutherans in Germany furiously opposed the Prussian king’s pan-Prussian agenda because they realized that the addition of only two words, “Jesus said,” before the distribution formula (“Take eat, this is my body...”) was a sellout to the king’s Calvinistic citizens. Lutheran leaders in Germany and in the United States (e.g., Wilhelm Loehe and Charles Porterfield Krauth) realized that the Lutheran church could not reclaim its orthodox heritage and repudiate Pietism and Rationalism without the liturgy. The *Common Service* (“Page 15” in our hymnal) was the result of their determined efforts.

Liturgical worship neither insists nor expects that every congregation will worship in lockstep formation. Not only our doctrine but also the liturgy allows freedom and variety. But since there is as much value in repetition as there is in variation, the liturgy offers an unchanging core which reviews the most important teachings of Scripture Sunday by Sunday. There is room in liturgical worship for some home-made forms. There may be good reasons to use from time to time what has not been tried and tested. There may even be a place for what is avant-garde, esoteric, unclear or simplistic. It is precisely so that there might be variety that the liturgy offers clarity in its unchanging core. And the liturgy serves even after false doctrine has entered the church. Like the unfortunates of Luther’s era, the poor people of the ELCA do not hear much of God’s Word from their pulpits. But in the ELCA as in medieval Europe, the liturgy proclaims the Word and gives the Spirit access to human hearts.

With this in mind the church has tended to look to its theologians to design its liturgical rite, just as it looks to theologians to draw up its confessions. Despite the fact that Luther encouraged freedom he never expected that all worship forms would come from the grass roots. The Lutheran Confessions clearly say that “the congregation of God of every place and every time has the power...to change such ceremonies in such manner as may be most useful...” (FC Ep X). They say just as clearly:

Pastors and bishops may make regulations so that everything in the churches is done in good order. It is proper for the Christian assembly to keep such ordinances for the sake of love and peace, to be obedient to the bishops and parish ministers in such matters, and to observe the regulations in such a way that one does not give offense to another and so that there may be no disorder or unbecoming conduct in the church. (Ap XVIII:53-55)

There are good reasons why a standard liturgical core has value in the church. One which is as important as any is that not all pastors or worship committees have equal ability to design

worship forms that are clear and precise as well as beautiful and appealing. Luther hesitated to produce a replacement for the historic Roman rite because he feared shocking the weak. But he hesitated more because he did not want to encourage a multitude of service orders from “fickle and fastidious spirits who rush in like unclean swine without faith or reason and who delight only in novelty and tire of it just as quickly when it has worn off.”²⁸ Perhaps you can understand why Luther added this admonition in his German service:

I would like to ask that this paraphrase or admonition follow a prescribed wording or be formulated in a definite manner for the sake of the common people. We cannot have one do it one way today, and another, another way tomorrow, and let everybody parade his talents and confuse the people so that they can neither learn nor retain anything.²⁹

Liturgical worship expects that the liturgy will be used and it expects that the liturgy will be right. As those expectations are met, the Lutheran church confesses what it believes about the Word.

Liturgical worship confesses what Lutherans believe about the Christian. This essay has reviewed the New Testament emphasis on worship as *leitourgia*, the people’s work. Luther, the champion of the doctrine of justification, was also the emancipator of the believer at worship. To a medieval church which had removed the action of worship from the believers and reserved it for a “spiritual” caste of priests, monks and nuns, Luther thundered:

All Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them except that of office. Paul says in 1 Corinthians that we are all one body, yet every member has its own work by which it serves the others. This is because we all have one baptism, one gospel, one faith, and are all Christians alike; for baptism, gospel and faith alone make us spiritual and a Christian people.³⁰

This is, of course, a summary of the doctrine of the universal priesthood of all believers. Luther made that doctrine come alive by leading the people to worship by means of both hymns and liturgy. He produced or borrowed settings for all the songs of the Ordinary (Kyrie, Creed, Sanctus, etc.) While his versions were paraphrases, 19th century Lutherans produced the musical settings of the historic prose texts we use in *The Lutheran Hymnal*. Add to the parts of the Ordinary the hymns, recitations (of the Confession and the Creed), responsive prayers and litanies (and, with the coming of the new hymnal, congregational settings of the psalms) and you see how the liturgy prompts and promotes the people’s work. And the work of the people is not only directed to God. By means of their participation the people also exercise their part in the ministry of the gospel as they “speak to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.” Consider how different the people’s action is in liturgical worship and in the non-liturgical forms used in Robert Schuller’s and D. James Kennedy’s churches!

Liturgical worship confesses what Lutherans believe about the church. It was already John Calvin who felt few ties to the church of history; he was not ready to emphasize either the church’s continuity or its historic witness. He insisted, for instance, that only psalms could be

²⁸ Ibid., p. 19.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 80.

³⁰ *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 44, p. 127.

sung in worship. His contemporaries maintained that the bread had to be received by the communicants with their hands and that they had to gather around the altar table, since such was the custom of the New Testament. Luther understood that the forms of worship found in the New Testament were descriptive but not prescriptive. Besides, he knew and valued the church's historical voice. Notice how often the fathers are quoted in the Lutheran Confessions. It was deeply comforting to Luther and his Wittenberg associates to know that their church was not a sectarian renegade, but part of the continuity of the "one, holy, Christian and Apostolic Church." In 1524, just as he was mulling over his worship principles, Luther wrote, "We teach nothing new. We teach what is old and what the apostles and all godly teachers have taught."³¹ With that idea in mind, Luther chose to retain the church's historic worship forms.

In the liturgy, 20th century believers repeat word for word forms which were repeated by believers in the second century. In the liturgy, WELS believers join with unseen and unknown believers throughout the world. Recently a pastor told me, "When you make those liturgies, make them as different as you can. I want my people to know instantly when they're not in a WELS church!" I wondered to what extreme he wanted us to go. Shall we eliminate the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer? The Catholics are singing "A Mighty Fortress" these days; should we keep that out of our new hymnal? In a recent essay Prof. Theodore Hartwig presented an eloquent (and more realistic, I think) summary of Lutheran thought on this issue:

In matters of outward form, past Lutheran practice...has avoided the sectarianism of going it alone, being different, striving for the unique. Thus Luther kept with the church year and the general structure of the Mass inherited from the medieval church...Though for confessional reasons, we live in a state of outwardly divided communions, the Christian church nevertheless remains a single, catholic community of believers confessing one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.

In this light would anyone want to gainsay that the sameness of outward form...has been a heartwarming and compelling witness to the true unity of the church?³²

Liturgical worship confesses what the Lutheran church teaches about the arts and music. Again, the difference between the liturgical Luther and the non-liturgical Calvin is striking. In the forward to Johann Walther's 1524 hymnal, Luther wrote:

Nor am I of the opinion that the gospel should destroy and blight all of the arts, as some of the super-religious claim. But I would like to see all the arts, especially music, used in the service of him who gave and made them. I therefore pray that every pious Christian would be pleased with this and lend his help if God has given him like or greater gifts.³³

Calvin, on the other hand, disallowed all but unaccompanied psalm singing and never encouraged the artists of Geneva or of Reformed Europe in any way or form.³⁴

³¹ *What Luther Says*, p. 861.

³² Theodore J. Hartwig, "The Creeds in Contemporary English," in *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 86, No. 3, p. 203.

³³ *Luther's Works*, Vol. 53, p. 316.

³⁴ Luther D. Reed, *The Lutheran Liturgy*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) p. 82.

The differences between Evangelicalism and Lutheranism are more subtle, but just as real – and just as in step with the theological emphasis of each. Lutheranism considers art to be a part of worship, and, therefore, calls for the giving of one’s best to God. Whether in music, poetry, sculpture, tapestry, or painting, whether in historic or contemporary form, Lutherans bring their art first to God. But Lutherans also bring their art for the benefit of their fellow believer and employ it in the church to affect intellect and emotion for the strengthening of faith. Thus art proclaims Christ and glorifies Christ at the same time. The mainstream of Evangelicalism looks at art in the same way it looks at all worship forms, i.e., with pure pragmatism: Does it “work” to meet the culture-influenced needs of the seeker? Even some Evangelicals despair over this point of view. Francis Schaeffer’s son Franky wrote recently:

Today, Christian endeavor in the arts is typified by the contents of your local Christian bookstore-accessory-paraphernalia shop. For the coffee table we have a set of praying hands out of some sort of pressed muck. Christian posters are ready to adorn your walls with suitable Christian graffiti to sanctify them and make them a justifiable expense. Perhaps a little plastic cube with a mustard seed entombed within to boost your understanding of faith. And as if this were not enough, a toothbrush with a Bible verse stamped on its plastic handle, and a comb with a Christian slogan or two impressed on it. On a flimsy rack are stacked a pile of records. You may choose them at random blindfolded, for most of them will be the same idle rehash of acceptable spiritual slogans, endlessly recycled as pablum for the tone-deaf, television softened brains of our present-day Christians.

In fact, without making the list endless, one could sum up by saying that the modern Christian world and what is know as evangelicalism is marked, in the area of the arts and cultural endeavor, by one outstanding feature, and this is its addition to mediocrity.³⁵

That’s strong language, but Schaeffer is not the only Evangelical making that kind of statement.

Within the liturgy the Christian artist has opportunities to give his best to God and his Christ to his neighbor. The liturgy almost demands music; it encourages the choir and the cantor/soloist. It seeks beauty of language in prayers and hymns. It has room for respectable designs in architecture, symbolism and ceremony. In countless ways liturgical worship allows Lutherans to practice what they preach about art, which is a gift of God, they say, *ad gloriam Dei et aedificatio hominem*.

Ought we to adopt an Evangelical style of worship for the sake of carrying out the Great Commission? I can ask the question, but I cannot answer it for outreach/explorers. What I can do is what I have tried to do in Part 2 of this essay. I can point out to you that liturgical worship, with its liturgy, church year and sacramental emphasis, fits with what orthodox Lutherans have believed for more than four centuries. I can point out that neither Luther nor his conservative descendants chose a liturgical style only or primarily for the sake of tradition, but for the sake of confession. I can point out that the non-liturgical style of the Evangelicals is part of the substance of Evangelicalism. What I cannot say is that every liturgical denomination is also a confessional denomination, or that everyone who chooses a liturgical style chooses it for the right reason. Nor

³⁵ Franky Schaeffer, *Addicted to Mediocrity*, (Westchester, IL: Good News Publications, 1980) p. 22-23.

can I say that any WELS outreach/explorer who opts for a non-liturgical style is a flaming Evangelical! However, in the light of the evidence, I think we can and ought to ask him: "Why?"

This question becomes especially legitimate when we notice that even some Evangelicals are beginning to see the emptiness of their non-liturgical style. A recent issue of *U.S. News & World Report* included an article on the growth of liturgical churches. The article included an observation from a Church of the Nazarene pastor Randall Davey.

He found himself becoming increasingly dissatisfied with what he sees as the "chatty informality" and the "entertainment orientation" characteristic of much of evangelical worship. "I felt something was radically out of focus with a type of service that directed our attention to ourselves and what benefits we derive rather than to Christ."³⁶

It seems to me that there is a sad irony in the fact that some Lutherans seem to be moving toward a worship style which even long-time proponents of the style have found to be lacking.

³⁶ Jeffrey L. Sheler, "From Evangelicalism to Orthodoxy," in *U.S. News & World Report*, January 15, 1990, p. 59.

Part 3: Liturgical Worship: The Demand for the Best

If outreach/explorers retain a liturgical style of worship, are they destined for minimal growth at best and for the five-year foreclosure at worst? David Luecke and Walter Kallestad contend that perhaps they are, as we have noted. They are joined by a chorus of witnesses from Evangelicalism, from the Church Growth Movement and from that sector of Lutheranism which has been influenced by Church Growth thought.

WELS pastors can be comforted in knowing that this “conventional wisdom” is aimed not only at liturgical churches but at any church which takes the message of Scripture seriously. Conservative Protestants fall under criticism just as often as do liturgical Lutherans. We have reviewed the close connection between Evangelical style and Evangelical substance, and that review should have led you to understand that it is as much the life-style salvation which draws the unchurched to the Evangelicals as it is the non-liturgical style. Lutheran church planters may be intrigued by Evangelical worship style, but they have no desire to empty themselves of Lutheran substance. The reality is that the substance may turn away the unchurched no matter what style we use to package it. Recently I heard Pastor Robert Nordlee, an LCMS evangelism executive, tell a seminar audience that if we wanted to eliminate from our worship everything which offends the unchurched, we would have to eliminate the gospel! Nordlee contended that Lutherans may as well retain liturgical style because they are going to proclaim sin and grace anyway. He insists, by the way, that liturgical churches can grow.

There are many who agree with him. The same issue of *The Lutheran* which included Walther Kallestad’s article about Entertainment Evangelism featured four growing ELCA churches which are decidedly liturgical. Randall Davey’s Church of the Nazarene congregation in Overland Park Kansas, is growing, too, as *U.S. News and World Report* noted. The same article reported the spectacular growth experienced in the last several years by the Anthiochan Orthodox Church! Jeffrey Sheler concluded, “While no one expects ritualism to replace evangelical traditions, there is a clear recognition that the pendulum has begun to swing in that direction.”³⁷ Even the Pentecostals are experimenting with the liturgy, as *Christianity Today* reported just this last September. Randall Balmer noted that Evangel Assembly of God Church in Valdosta, Georgia, was, in 1987, “the only Pentecostal church in the nation to open its service with a procession.”³⁸ In a recent issue of the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* Dr. John Brug commented on an article in *Bibliotheca Sacra* (Dallas Theological Seminary) in which the author contended that the three aspirations which today’s church can and must address are the need for transcendence, significance and community. Brug noted that

the church can best address this need [transcendence] through worship which expresses a mixture of awe, wonder and joy at the close encounter with the living God. As Lutherans, we are especially equipped to address this perceived need for transcendence if we can communicate a fresh and 311 ear understanding of the depth and beauty of our worship tradition.³⁹

Even Lyle Schaller, the noted Church Growth consultant and author, has said that liturgical churches can attract people and grow, but he added – and right at this point we must take note – they must do their liturgical worship extremely well.⁴⁰

³⁷ Jeffrey Sheler, op. cit., p. 59.

³⁸ Randall Balmer, “Why the Bishops Came to Valdosta,” in *Christianity Today*, September 24, 1990, p. 23.

³⁹ John Brug, “Perceived Needs,” in *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 85, No. 4, pp. 303-304.

⁴⁰ Schaller’s comments were made to a meeting of the Lutheran Council in the United States of America just before the formation of the ELCA. They are mentioned by Larry Peters in his essay. Cf. note #42.

It shouldn't take a Church Growth consultant to tell us that. It stands to reason that God and our neighbor should receive our best as we worship. But for one reason or another, we have taken our inherited liturgical style and too often treated it like some embarrassing old antique: we don't like it, we don't know what to do with it, but we're stuck with it. I must admit that even before my work at the seminary increased my sensitivity in this area, I was appalled too often at how I saw liturgical worship abused in our congregations. I am not referring to a problem of actual inability; I am speaking about poor preparation, both for a specific liturgical service and for liturgical worship in general. It serves little purpose to present some catalog of testimonies, but this little article, clipped from a WELS congregation's newsletter, illustrates my point:

What do we, the church's current and future leaders, accept as tolerable for ourselves and others?

Sundays we "go to church" because "we're supposed to be there." We walk in and pick up a bulletin. Only nine typos this week! The ushers arrive after the church is already half full. After everyone is seated, they get to the real reason they came: to sit in the narthex and talk. We enter the nave. Dusty? What is that under the pew? The light bulb over the cracked window has yet to be replaced. Then we notice the quiet. Did the organ conk out again? No, wait, here she comes, books flying! "What a crazy week! No time to practice!" No kidding! We stumble through the first hymn as we take off our coats and comb our hair. The liturgy begins: "...that we are by nature sinful and unclean..." The glassy smooth flow is broken by the Scripture lessons. Is this the first time he's read them through? The choir is next. Something akin to dragging a fingernail across a blackboard. No wonder the good singers in the church don't join. The sermon text is read – and never mentioned again. In twenty-two minutes it's over. It sounded familiar, especially the story about the doctor's car...⁴¹

Obviously, the problems with worship are not that severe at every WELS congregation on every Sunday of the year, and one hesitates to generalize. But Larry Peters has noticed the same kind of problem in his Missouri Synod which some have noticed in our church body. He wrote:

Lutherans have generally not done a great job utilizing the resources for worship their liturgical forms provide. It is a sad truth that much Lutheran worship is dull, boring, and seemingly irrelevant. This is an abuse of the liturgical form and not a proper use of it.⁴²

Anyone who insists that visitors are "turned off" by liturgical worship must first ask himself if it is the liturgy or the way the liturgy is done which offends. If the charge has any validity that we have failed to put our best efforts into worship, we have come to a serious matter. If we give less than our best in worship, we offend God, for we take advantage of his gracious offer to receive our praise. But even more we offend our visitors, because we give them the impression that it is permissible to take advantage of God's grace.

Let's not dwell on the abuses, however, but rather on better uses of a liturgical style of worship.

⁴¹ *The Lion's Mouth*, newsletter of St. Mark's Church, Mankato, Minnesota, February, 1987.

⁴² Larry Peters, "Lutheran Worship and Church Growth," An essay prepared for and distributed by the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod's Commission on Worship.

I'll begin with the suggestion that the time has almost come to be done with the proliferation of home-made services and return to a unified liturgical pattern in our synod. For twenty years men like you have been coming to the conclusion that the liturgical service in *The Lutheran Hymnal* is inadequate for their purposes. The fact of the matter is, it is likely inadequate for all purposes. Unfortunately, we have not had much to replace it. During these last years we have entered what I call the "liturgical period of the judges, in which everyone does what is right in his own eyes." The Lutheran Hymnal has become one of many worship books and hymnals which pastors use as resources. These join to become a liturgical salad bar from which we take a little of this and a little of that. For ten years your essayist was as much involved in this as anyone. Let's face it: Hymnal revision was long overdue in our synod.

Within three years a new hymnal will be ready for our use. Already now we have several services we can use which will appear in that hymnal. I sincerely believe that these new services will serve your needs. In fact, they were composed with you in mind. But if they are going to serve you and your young congregation you will have to use them. A commitment to use them means that you have accepted the concept that there is great value in a repeated, theologically-precise liturgical core. I have already summarized how that concept squares with our doctrine of the Word. I repeat here that no one is asking for lockstep submission; I reiterate that both our doctrine and the liturgy allow for variety. But I encourage you with Luther's own words:

I pray all of you, my dear sirs, let each one surrender his own opinion and get together in a friendly way and come to a common decision about these external matters, so that there will be one uniform practice.

[For] those who ordain and establish nothing succeed only in creating as many factions as there are heads, to the detriment of Christian harmony and unity.⁴³

Is there, in this advice, the inherent implication that the new rites prepared for the hymnal are better in one way or another than those prepared in pastors' studies? I think not. But it stands to reason that a committee of seven men with wide-ranging pastoral backgrounds, with almost two-hundred years of combined experience, and with a deep interest in and a thorough knowledge of worship forms and theology are going to be able to produce something over a period of four years (with help from critical review and field testing) which has at least as much value as a form which is composed in a pastor's busy office late on a Thursday night. If you are willing to grant these new services at least an equal value, then the observation that their use will bring about some liturgical unity in our synod ought to tip the scales in favor of using them.

The second suggestion I intend to make has to do with the differences between liturgical and traditional. You have heard no pleas in this essay for the retaining of *The Lutheran Hymnal*. I have indicated that I feel its time has passed. Obviously, there are valuable jewels in that book which ought to be cherished, but at present many of them are being stored in linguistic and artistic styles which are outdated and passe. Let us beware of hanging on to those styles, even though, for the sake of tradition, many long-time WELS and former LCMS Lutherans encourage us to do so. The felt need for the "traditional" way can interfere with vital gospel proclamation as surely as can the felt need for stress management. As Lutherans dare not allow the latter felt need to overshadow the gospel, so they dare not let the former interfere with clear proclamation, either. It is one matter to retain a general worship style because it inherently confesses Lutheran

⁴³ *Luther's Works*, Vol. 53, pp. 46-47.

theology; it is another to retain a particular worship form because it has been our tradition. If David Luecke is thinking of worship which stubbornly retains forms only for the sake of tradition, he is probably correct when he writes:

I think Lutherans shape and package their gospel offering according to the felt needs of only a small segment of American society. That market is getting smaller...Can Lutherans package their offering better?⁴⁴

I think we can, and, as someone who has seen all of the new hymnal's services, I think we have.

My third suggestion concerns not the liturgical core, but that which surrounds the core. In this basket I include language, music, liturgical art (in brass, wood, tapestry, etc.), symbolism, ceremony and architecture. I plead with you to pay more attention to the gifts God has given to his church which serve as vessels for our praise and his proclamation. We have heard the charge that liturgical worship drives away the visitors. But I wonder how many artistically-sensitive searchers have left a WELS worship service disgusted by cheap, mundane and trivial language, music and art. We justify too much shoddiness too often. Holy shoddy is still shoddy! This has to do with what we do as worship leaders and what we allow as worship leaders. Francis Rossow wrote:

The foolishness of preaching consists in its content, not its style. What is foolish is our message, not the manner of communicating the message. The foolishness of preaching does not necessitate foolish preaching.⁴⁵

Years ago Martin Marty complained, "More junk, more tawdriness, more slipshodhood, more mediocrity is peddled in church circles than in many others. Yet are we not supposed to give God our best gifts?"⁴⁶ I must admit that it puzzles me that we build our WEFs with low, flat ceilings, install acoustical materials on walls and ceilings along with wall-to-wall carpeting (easier to maintain!), put up two wooden sticks above an 8' by 4' table covered with someone's borrowed table cloth, hang a felt-on-burlap banner, accept as a generous gift someone's discarded "Fun Machine 440" organ and then insist that liturgical worship doesn't work in our situation!

I have not been an outreach/explorer and I know that I cannot anticipate or appreciate all the problems you face as you design worship. Nor am I willing to reinvent the wheel. Therefore, I am going to quote extensively from two sources which offer guidelines and insights from men who have been where you are. First, from *Parish Renewal: Theses and Implications* by Pastor Paul Kelm:

Worship must be what the church does best, for in our worship we minister to the greatest number of our members and introduce visitors to our Lord. Our worship is still the most apparent statement of the "worth" we ascribe to our God. The challenge for Lutherans today is to combine the best of our tradition with contemporary communication, to be both faithful to Scripture and relevant to contemporary life, to touch head and heart with the message of sin and grace in an age of anti-Christian philosophy, to lift refugees from a jaded generation in praise to their God.

⁴⁴ David Luecke, op. cit., p. 72.

⁴⁵ Francis Rossow, *Preaching the Creative Gospel Creatively*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1983) p. 14.

⁴⁶ Martin Marty, in *Context*, July 1, 1975.

- a) Lutherans must strive for the best preaching possible. That is the product of quality time spent in text study and sermon preparation. Preachers need continuing education in homiletics. Those whose dominant gifts lie in other areas of ministry can benefit from published sermon studies. We need to be both open to the Lord as we study his Word and open to improvement in our crafting and delivery of the message.
- b) Lutheran worship should have clear liturgical progression and a “freshness” each week that is combined with familiarity. That requires easy-to-follow orders of worship, a “personal” tone by the officiant and his conviction that corporate worship is much more than sandwiching a sermon.
- c) Lutherans will want to offer the best instrumental and choral music possible. That will mean training opportunities for church musicians and the availability of music appropriate to a variety of abilities, occasions and preferences. That may mean more than one choir where possible, with varied musical styles. That may mean more than one musical instrument.
- d) Lutheran worship should combine warmth and reverence, avoiding the extremes of cold ritual and trivial fads. That means attention to detail so that slip-ups don’t distract our focus. That means also a style of leading worship that reflects God’s love for people.
- e) The Lord’s Supper should have deep significance and a clear focus on God’s grace. Churches may need to find better ways to prepare communicants for the sacrament than the sign-up sheets which have replaced the confessional service and personal “communion announcements” of an earlier generation.⁴⁷

Secondly, from an essay prepared for the LCMS Commission on Worship by Larry Peters:

It may come as a great surprise to many that liturgical worship does not mean a rigid formalism. The goal of liturgy is not to recreate a gothic cathedral setting or any other ideal. The goal of liturgy is to provide an outline of what is believed and to give the local community of believers the freedom to use that form as elaborately or simply as they choose and their context allows.

The responsibility for planning and presiding at liturgy is not an easy one. It requires a deep familiarity with the form, its options and opportunities, and a close familiarity with the local context, the people of a given congregation, their culture, and their roots. It is not enough for Lutherans to hide behind a book or a liturgical form expecting the unchurched to drop into the pews informed about and appreciative of the liturgy. We must work to present the form in a way which neither confuses nor confounds the visitor or new Christian. Examine some worship bulletins and you will find an array of directions, references, and technical jargon decipherable only to the active member of long standing.

⁴⁷ Paul Kelm, “Parish Renewal: Theses and Implications,” A document available through the Wisconsin Synod’s Spiritual Renewal office.

Lutherans must learn to use common sense and carefully present the liturgy so that its use is a joy instead of a burden.

No congregation can do all things well. Choose carefully what can be done well and build upon it. A simple, spoken liturgy is a much more eloquent spokesman for the faith than an elaborately sung liturgy which is done poorly. If the liturgy requires too many explanations, page turns, or verbal directions, it will distract and frustrate even the informed worshipper. Especially in the new mission, printing out the liturgy and hymns each week may be an important key to the success of the service.

Presiding at the liturgy is a gift which must be developed. Those leading worship need to remember that their responsibility is pivotal to the success of the liturgy. Plan carefully. Choose the themes to be emphasized and use all the resources of the liturgy toward that purpose. Be deliberate and construct each service intentionally. Effective liturgy and worship is never an accident. Plan for the flow of what is happening and help the service move logically from one part to another.

No tradition depends more upon the music of the service than does the Lutheran. Use competent musicians and be prepared to compensate them adequately and include them in the worship planning. Rehearse the liturgy with those who will lead it before the service and iron out any problems prior to the service time. It has been generally assumed by some that “good Lutheran hymnody” is unsingable while “gospel hymns” are known and loved by all (except pastors). There are both good and bad hymns to be found in Lutheran and Gospel hymnody. Hymns and choral music should be chosen for the content of the words, for the way the melody supports the text, and with an eye toward the musical ability of the parish musicians and the congregational singers. Good musical leadership can help a hesitant congregation through a difficult hymn while even the most singable hymn can be rendered impossible by weak musical leadership. If you are using contemporary “Scripture” songs, there is a difference between good and bad. Make sure you have an idea of the distinction and do not abandon traditional hymnody altogether.

Lutherans need to watch their vocabulary. Technical jargon exists in every group. Lutherans must become “bilingual.” Learn to use the language of today and especially of the growing evangelical churches as well as the tradition Lutheran liturgical and theological vocabulary. Sermons should express the faith less in terms of logical truth propositions and more through picture language. A good sermon not only appeals to the intellect but paints memorable pictures upon the canvas of the heart as well. Sermons should not be directed only to the emotions but Lutheran preachers need to preach more to the heart as well as the head. Preachers also need to be more attentive to the people and become more aware of how the listener is following the sermon. While some may be suspicious of preachers in general, most listen carefully to see if the preacher is genuine (believing what he says) and personal (identifying with his people and the message he proclaims). Good preaching, like good liturgy, is seldom an accident. Both require hard work.

Good worship is inspirational. When the liturgy celebrates the Good News of God's love in Christ Jesus, it should encourage, uplift, and inspire. No one wants to leave the church depressed. Part of the task of the liturgy is to encourage people to lose themselves in the adoration of God and in the grace God provides through Word and Sacrament. Reverence does not mean somber. The liturgy, like the sermon, will reflect the joy and excitement of the people leading and responding to it. If the people leading worship are stiff, wooden and unnatural, the liturgy will be stiff, wooden, and unnatural. We need to use the resources the liturgy provides to build community through a warm, welcome and natural style. When the person presiding communicates a warm, comfortable, personable style, then the liturgy will be seen as warm and welcoming and natural to the people using it. Those leading worship need to allow some of their personal excitement and joy to show through as they preside. An honest smile and an attitude of concern and affection should not be hidden behind a "pulpit tone" or a worship personality distinct from the personality of the presider outside the chancel.

We must be aware of who the congregation is. A congregation of young families is a different congregation than one made up of middle-aged and retired folk. Those planning worship must be cognizant of those who will be worshipping and how that affects the liturgy. Parents with small children cannot be expected to sit as quietly as an elderly group of people. They cannot juggle hymnals, bulletins, and inserts (can anyone?).⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Larry Peters, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-13.

Part 4: Liturgical Worship: Procession to Fullness

The preceding selections offer much to chew on, not just for church planters but for all WELS pastors. There are issues, however, which more closely address your specific situation, and I intend to speak about them informally on the basis of the following outline.

- A. Outreach/Exploratory situations obviously cannot begin with anything approaching liturgical fullness.
 - 1. The outreach/education concept was well-chosen and thoughtfully suggested
 - 2. Its weakness is that it does not offer “church” to those who are seeking worship as an entry level
 - 3. Worship decisions eventually need to be made

- B. The Seeker Service: a viable alternative
 - 1. The Willow Creek model
 - 2. Entertainment, but among conservative Lutherans, entertainment with a law/gospel core
 - 3. Cautions and concerns
 - a. In our enthusiasm to serve the felt need for entertainment and nonparticipation, can we avoid the temptation to serve the felt need of a life-style gospel rather than the *Christus pro nobis*?
 - b. Can we consistently avoid violating scriptural principles concerning church fellowship and the role of men and women in the church?
 - c. Can we convince less-than-strong members that the seeker service is not worship, but evangelism, and can we conveniently move then from milk to meat?

- C. Modified Liturgical Worship
 - 1. Luther’s *Deutsche Messe* approach: worship for the simple
 - 2. The new *Service of the Word*: a spoken liturgy with music supplied only by hymns; small choirs or cantor/soloist supplying liturgical music

- D. Wise and consistent efforts in worship education
 - 1. The new *Service of Word and Sacrament*
 - 2. Progression to fullness
 - a. The worship committee
 - b. One step at a time
 - 3. Hymn of the Month plan
 - 4. Worship-based Bible Information classes

- E. Strategic Planning for Liturgical Worship
 - 1. The dream of joining the church’s liturgical mainstream
 - 2. Anticipating a full use of the arts
 - 3. Liturgical church design
 - 4. Looking for musicians and artists

Conclusion

Despite everything you know about the slow working of the Word, the Spirit's own timetable and God's planting and watering promises, you want your little church to grow. Despite assurances to the contrary, you surely perceive the "five year plan" to be somewhat of a threat! You can't be blamed for feeling this way. Like the rest of us, you live in a growth-oriented society, and, sometimes, even the church gives the impression that success is gauged by numbers. You are only being consistent with your culture when you fret about growth. The fire in your heart for the lost only makes the fretting more real.

"It is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful." God calls us to faithfully proclaim Christ through the means of grace. God calls us to faithfully bring him our worship and to lead others to do the same. Faithfulness is faithfulness, whether God grants visible success or whether he does not. God has not asked us to grow the church. This task he has assumed for himself. He has asked us to be faithful and promised that, in his own way, he will be fruitful.

I submit to you that we can be faithful in both our proclamation and our praise through the vehicle called *liturgical worship*, a worship style which retains the core of the historic Christian liturgy, employs the church year and emphasizes the Sacrament. I believe this point of view is consistent with that of Luther (whom I have labeled our situational as well as our theological brother), as I have tried to show. I do not make liturgical style a law, as Luther did not, but like him I recommend it with what I feel is sound and scriptural logic. I also believe that history will show that the liturgy, carefully prepared and pastorally led, has contributed as much to the growth of disciples inside and outside the church as anything the church has ever done. This is true, I believe, because the liturgy showcases that which the Holy Spirit used to make disciples: Word and Sacrament. Harold Senkbeil defends the Lutheran liturgical style like this:

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. This is the real thing.

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 to offer him their thanks and praise? With trivial methods borrowed from the entertainment industry or in worship forms which focus on the praise of God's gracious glory? This is the kind of worship which lifts the heart while it exalts Christ. And this is what Lutheran worship does.⁴⁹

Our era is not the first in American church history in which Lutherans have been intrigued by the growth potential of a non-liturgical worship style. One hundred and fifty years ago Lutherans were also casting envious glances at the Evangelicals (then called Revivalists). Both America's lone seminary (Gettysburg) and its most influential Lutheran voice (*The Lutheran Observer*) were advocating the full use of revivalistic methods in worship.⁵⁰ It is interesting (and

⁴⁹ Harold Senkbeil, *Sanctification*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1988), p. 182.

⁵⁰ E. Clifford Nelson's church history text, *The Lutherans in North America*, includes this quote from an article by Benjamin Kurtz in the December 1, 1843 issue of *The Lutheran Observer*: "If the great object of the anxious bench [the emotional, revivalistic style] can be accomplished in some other way, less obnoxious but equally efficient

frightening!) to note that the same voices were denouncing the Augsburg Confession because it accepted the doctrines of baptismal regeneration and the real presence in the Lord's Supper! By God's grace (and by a few of his good men like C.F.W. Walther) Lutheranism reclaimed its Liturgy – and its confessionalism.

We stand at a crossroads in the WELS. In the name of outreach we have already adopted new fund raising techniques and substantially reduced the percentage of synodical dollars earmarked for worker training. We are about to embark on the concept of staff ministry which, in some cases, will assist pastors in outreach and in others will save pastoral graduates for outreach. There are surely half a hundred other ideas sitting on someone's drawing board or brewing in someone's cranium which will obligate us to challenge our thinking and our past methods. It comes as no surprise that corporate worship and the principles which stand behind it should also come under scrutiny for the sake of outreach.

Our church will have its eyes on you, church planters. As established congregations explore opportunities for outreach, they will take note of what outreach/explorers are doing. They will watch the pattern of those who are most committed to outreach – and many will follow it. By God's grace and with the Spirit's power, may you bring in a rich harvest and add many to the dignity and destiny of his elect. By God's grace and with the Spirit's wisdom, may you set a course for your church that will allow it to retain that which truly grows the church: Christ for us and the Spirit's means of grace.

– be it so. But we greatly doubt this. We consider it necessary in many cases, and we believe there are circumstances when no measure equally good can be substituted. Hence we are free to confess that we go for this measure with all our heart.” (italics in the original)