

The Use of the Liturgical Arts in Corporate Worship

By James P. Tiefel

We are being honest when we admit that art needs to be justified. Perhaps it is better to say that the cost of art needs to be justified. The homemaker who spends hours finishing a craft project needs to justify the time she spends. The voters assembly which resolves to purchase stained glass windows needs to justify the money it spends. An analysis of the essence of art has its place in theoretical (and theological) literature, but such an analysis does not necessarily justify the cost of art. Considering both the physical and spiritual plight of the world's billions, the expenditure of \$53.9 million on a Van Gogh painting of flowers at a recent auction needs to be justified, if not by the spender at least by the society which allows a painting of flowers to be considered so valuable. Christians feel the necessity of such justification even more than do non-Christians. We are aware that time and money as well as art are gifts of God to be used according to his design and for his purposes.

The purpose of this article is to offer a justification for the cost of the liturgical arts which are used in the corporate worship of our churches. Our definition of "liturgical arts" may be wider than that of some. We include the animate arts, that is, music, ritual, architecture, light, symbolism, modes of expression, and the like, as well as the inanimate arts, for example, the instruments for music, stained glass, artifacts of brass, silver, gold, wood, fabric and others. In short, we include as "liturgical arts" anything which is more than the bare Word of God. Justification of one of these justifies the rest. We mean also to defend the cost not only of purchasing these arts (the cost of money) but also of studying them (the cost of time) and of encouraging their use among God's people (the cost of talent). Our justification means to be wide enough to apply to the ministries of any of our congregations but also to point specifically to our ministry at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.

The Basic Principle

When St. Paul wrote to Titus at Crete, he summarized the purpose of God's plan of salvation:

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in the present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good (Tit 2:11–14).

God's redemptive act in Christ had the dual purpose of freeing people from the slavery of Satan, sin and death and renewing them to live as children of God. Martin Luther offered another summary of that truth when, after reviewing the cost and effect of Christ's redemption, he exclaimed, "All this he did that I should be his own, and live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness." Jesus himself pointed out that he would redeem mankind not only *from* something but *for* something when he said, "I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit" (Jn 15:16).

This redemption becomes personal and this renewal possible as the Holy Spirit creates, sustains and gives power to faith. If human beings are to enjoy the fruits of redemption and produce the fruits of renewal, then faith is vital. Without faith the creature remains determined to effect his own redemption and is, therefore, disinclined and, in fact, unable to live for God. Without faith no one possesses true freedom or produces genuine fruit. What the Holy Spirit uses to create and sustain faith is the means of grace, the Word and sacraments. Only where these means are in use can there be faith. Therefore, only where these means are in use can there be appropriated redemption and appropriate renewal. Take these truths one step farther: in view of what Scripture teaches, the public ministry has no higher task than to bring the means of grace to bear on individuals. When Christians come together to divide God's gifts of time, talent and treasure wisely, they can find no more worthy recipients of these blessings than those which proclaim and display the means of grace.

Faith and the Word

There is no simple way to define faith or to explain how the means of grace effect and affect faith. Faith is not a part of man's essence as intellect, emotion and will are essential functions of his soul. Since God is the only one who can observe faith, he is the only one who knows its workings and methods.

Yet faith is not separate from those qualities which are intrinsic to human beings. Faith may not be like the intellect, emotions and will, but it is not separate from them. In fact, faith rules the intellect, emotions and will. Therefore, when we observe how sensations come to bear on human intellect and how they affect human emotions and the human will, we are also observing how the Word may affect faith. We cannot be privy to all the mysteries of either the Word or of faith; these remain hidden in part in the mind of God. It would be foolish, however, to ignore principles which are based on the observation of the human mind. After all, the mind was created by the same God who creates faith, which rules the mind. It cannot be assumed (nor ought it be assumed) that the divinely created human mind reacts to human words in a completely different way than divinely created faith reacts to the divine words of Scripture. That there are differences is obvious. That there are similarities is testified to by Scripture itself, by the fathers and by simple common sense.

Human psychology has observed that volition (the will) is affected by two factors: intellect (knowledge) and emotion (feeling). We human beings take action on the basis of what we know and how we feel about what we know.

The teacher who understands this principle strives, therefore, to solidify the knowledge and to affect the emotions of his students to the best of his ability. He seeks to solidify knowledge because he realizes the benefits of such knowledge. When his students have a clear conception of one or another fact or principle, they are able to recall the fact, make judgments on its basis and change its application in various circumstances. In order to assist his students to form clear conceptions, the teacher must help them gain vivid perceptions. The wise teacher knows, however, that vivid perceptions are best gained when more than one of the human senses record the initial sensation of the fact or principle. Teachers are constantly looking for ways to illustrate the fact they are teaching. They realize that the more senses they touch with the initial sensation, the more vivid will be the perception. As the perception becomes more vivid, the conception becomes clearer and will be more useful to the student.

At the same time that teachers strive to solidify knowledge, they endeavor to affect the emotions of their students. They do this because they have observed that human beings react to knowledge with certain positive or negative feelings. The emotional reaction affects the will of the student, which, then, affects his behavior, his living. If a teacher can create in a student's mind a vivid perception of a principle and then help him to feel that the principle is beautiful or desirable, the student develops a positive attitude toward the principle and desires to put it into effect in his life.

These observations on human psychology are not outside theological use and application. The outline which our senior students follow in the seminary's dogmatics course states, "The mode of operation of the Word is both psychological and supernatural" (Part 2, p 32). Our homiletics instruction stresses not only content but also logical order and delivery. Education courses lay heavy emphasis on the principles of educational psychology. None of the emphasis comes from an effort to undermine the power of the Word of God. Stress is laid on these principles in order to rid students of an attitude which is, in fact, only a caricature of the doctrine of the Word, that is, an attitude which holds that since the power is in the Word, the Word may be proclaimed without any regard to how it is proclaimed and heard. Such a caricature overlooks the obvious fact that the same God who chose to reveal himself by means of human words created the human minds he intends to receive that Word.

When we look into Scripture, it becomes clear that our creating, redeeming and sanctifying God often operated with those same principles. God might have simply told Adam and Eve that he was a good and loving Creator. He chose to make the concepts of "good" and "loving" vividly clear by placing them into a beautiful garden. He could have instructed Moses simply to report his glory to the children of Israel at the base of Mt.

Sinai. He chose instead to let them see and hear his glory in the thunder, the lightning, the cloud and the trumpet blast. Israel's concept of divine glory was vivid, to say the least!

Jesus told poignant stories to illustrate the principles of his saving mission. Is it possible to imagine that the parable of the prodigal son was not intended to affect positively the emotions of Jesus' hearers so that they would have a more pleasant reaction to the father's—and thus to Jesus' Father's—magnanimity? Was it just for the sake of literary variety that the Holy Spirit led St. Paul to break forth in amazement at the end of Romans 11, "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!...", or was the Spirit using Paul to lead his readers to a more positive emotional reaction to God's wisdom and knowledge?

Many more examples could be cited, but the point is clear. The point is that God himself, the Creator of the divine Word, who knows better than any of us about the Word's unique power, did not hesitate to plant that Word in the minds and hearts of human beings with methods that are similar to those urged on us by human psychologists. Little wonder. Does it seem that the Creator of the human intellect, emotions and will should know less about his creatures than the creatures themselves?

The place of corporate worship

In corporate worship the church meets God in a unique way. It is not the only time the church meets God. Christians may gather primarily for the purpose of education; they are meeting with God, but they are not involved in corporate worship. Several Christians may come together for mutual edification or for the sake of personal proclamation (to witness or to discipline, for example), but their gathering is not corporate worship. A family may gather for devotions at the supper table. Their activity may be called worship, but it is not corporate worship in the strict sense of the term. In corporate worship a large part of the church in any one place gathers for public proclamation and public praise.

No one ought to assume that this public gathering either offers sufficient proclamation or affords sufficient opportunity for praise. Moses already urged Israel to proclaim the Word to its families day after day and hour after hour (Dt 6:7–9), and Paul encouraged the Corinthians to make even their eating and drinking statements of praise (1 Cor 10:31). That observation does not, however, demote the value of corporate worship. Knowing what he did about the need for a consistent application of the Word, Moses could still set down careful guidelines for Israel's corporate worship, and Paul took numerous opportunities to stress propriety and order in corporate worship. Consider, of course, that God is speaking through both Moses and Paul. Therefore, while corporate worship is not and ought not be the only time when believers gather around the means of grace, it is, according to Scripture, practically and theologically central in the life of the church and in the carrying out of the public ministry of the gospel.

In order to establish the objectives of corporate worship, we need to consider what corporate worship is not. Corporate worship does not have as its primary objective either education, evangelism or discipline. That all these occur when Christians gather in Sunday or midweek services cannot be denied. But the church has for centuries felt it wise to employ other forums besides the worship service for teaching, for witnessing to the lost and for correcting the erring. Corporate worship, therefore, takes for granted that the participants already are members of the body of Christ. This assumption was in place before the formation of the church's liturgy and calendar. Both temple and apostolic worship assumed a faith-initiation. The liturgy and church year grew out of that assumption.

From everything that Scripture tells us and from common sense itself corporate worship is best suited to afford a public review by God's people of his law and gospel and to offer an opportunity to God's people for public praise and thanksgiving. In terms of proclamation, corporate worship means to build up the foundation which has already been laid. In terms of praise, corporate worship means to allow a summary and a formalization of what the believer does in his life each day and each hour of each week. In short, corporate worship means to revitalize the faith of the believer with proclamation and to allow him to reiterate his faith-born life of praise.

The caretaker of souls dare not undervalue the place of corporate worship in the gospel ministry he has been called to oversee. There he meets most of his people most of the time, and there he feeds them with the bread of life. It may be tragic, but it is nevertheless true that corporate worship is for many of his sheep the only time during the week they hear the voice of the Shepherd.

Equally plain is the fact that corporate worship is where positive or negative emotions toward proclamation and praise are often formed. If the mode of proclamation elicits a negative emotional reaction in the believers, we dare not assume that the power of the Word will automatically lead him to desire more proclamation, either in church or at home. If the format of praise creates a negative emotional reaction, we cannot take for granted that the Word will lead the believer to a desire to praise again, either in church or in his life. That the Word has power to override such negative emotional reaction goes without saying; that we have a right to assume that it will do that is saying too much.

Sunday by Sunday the Christian pastor meets the believers whom the Holy Spirit has placed under his care. Leading worship is by no means his sole pastoral task, but it is one of his most important responsibilities. In corporate worship he edifies and inspires by way of public proclamation the Christian faith which has already been created and is already growing. His objective is that this faith might be strengthened to believe more confidently in the Savior's redemption and empowered to produce more consistently the fruits of faith.

The pastor's tool is the Word of God. While he cannot plumb the depths of the supernatural *modus operandi* of the Spirit and the Word (and daily prays that the Spirit might overcome his weaknesses), he begins with the assumption that the divine Word's way of acting on faith is not altogether dissimilar from the way human words act on the emotions and the intellect. He does not ignore what psychology and common sense have observed, namely, that knowledge becomes increasingly useful as it is solidified in the mind, that clear conceptions are formed on the basis of vivid perceptions and that vivid perceptions occur when more than one of the human senses is involved in the learning process. He has observed from the pages of Scripture that God himself as well as God's servants have employed these same principles. He comes to grips with the reality that human emotions react positively or negatively not only to the essence of a sensation but also to the form of a sensation and that the attitudes of his people toward the Word will likely be influenced to a greater or lesser degree by the reaction of their emotions. He understands that the same reality exists as he leads his people in public praise; their feeling toward praise in general will be influenced by their emotional reaction to the essence *and* the form of praise in church.

Therefore, while the pastor plans and leads corporate worship with a faith-born confidence in the living and enduring Word of God, he will strive to use the Word as God seems to have intended it to be used on the hearts and minds of the human beings he has created. The Christian pastor will use and will encourage the use of whatever is fitting to create vivid sensations of divine principles and place both proclamation and praise into forms which are fitting to affect the emotions of his people in a positive way.

The arts in proclamation and praise

We determined at the outset to justify the use and the cost of the liturgical arts in corporate worship. From what has been said it is apparent that nothing serves better to touch a variety of human senses, to create vivid perceptions, to help form clear conceptions and to effect positive reactions in human emotions than do the arts. If we announce from the pulpit that Jesus rose in splendor from the grave and then point the attention of our people to a stained glass rendition of the resurrection, we have made a vivid sensation which affects the eyes in addition to the ears and the emotions as well as the intellect. If we ask the congregation to stand while its sings "Stand Up! Stand Up For Jesus!" we have created a sensation which affects the body as well as the mind. If a trumpet accompanies the words, "A trumpet loud shall then resound,"ⁱ we have created a vivid sensation that will be recalled longer than if the organ alone accompanied the words. Dozens of similar examples could be offered.

Again, to the point: the liturgical arts, both animate and inanimate, assist the pastor in solidifying the truths of Scripture which he announces to his people. They help him affect their emotions positively as they

hear those truths. That the Word has the power to do this on its own is to be taken for granted. That the pastor will seek whatever means he can find to impress the Word on the hearts of his people ought to be taken for granted as well.

Consider how often God employed art for this very purpose. The lesson that was to be learned from the temple and its appointments or from the garments of the high priest are lessons which were a “shadow of the things that were to come” (Col 2:17). But notice how God solidified the perception of those shadows when he wanted the Messianic conceptions to be understood. The cost of the temple in today’s money has been estimated to run into billions of dollars. Such was the cost not of Israel’s extravagance but of the Holy Spirit’s own design.

The New Testament church had little opportunity to employ many of the visual arts, but it was hardly unartistic. Paul encouraged the use of music in corporate worship and frequently added lines from what seem to be the first Christian hymns. The post-apostolic church, even before its corruption by Rome’s false doctrine, valued and employed artistic expression. The medieval church in some respects abused the arts, using them as much for veneration as for proclamation, although what little Christian doctrine was assimilated by the common people likely occurred by means of the arts of music, drama and stained glass.

The Reformation eliminated bad attitudes but not the arts. The Augsburg Confession makes that clear: “Nothing contributes so much to ... the cultivation of reverence and devotion among the people as the proper observance of ceremonies in the churches.”ⁱⁱ Luther’s reaction to the Wittenberg iconoclasts is, of course, well known. In a more general vein he wrote, “Nor am I of the opinion that the gospel should destroy and blight all the arts, as some of the pseudo-religious [fn: or super-religious, a reference to the enthusiasts who condemned and, when possible, destroyed sacred art of any kind] claim. But I would like to see all the arts, especially music, used in the service of Him who gave and made them.”ⁱⁱⁱ It can hardly be doubted that Luther subscribed to the old dictum of Plato, “I will let you make the laws for the people, and I will make their music,” when one reads:

If you want to revive the sad, startle the jovial, encourage the despairing, humble the conceited, pacify the raving, mollify the hate-filled—and who is able to enumerate all the lords of the human heart and the urges which incite a man to all virtue and vices—what can you find that is more efficacious than music?^{iv}

Much of the proper Christian use of and emphasis on the arts was lost to the Lutheran Church during the eras of Pietism and Rationalism. Our synod’s own Pietistic roots are perhaps part of the reason why artistic expression has not so often been widely endorsed and encouraged in the WELS. There are probably other reasons also.

Our first outstanding proponent of the arts, Prof. Joh. P. Koehler, who was largely responsible for the aesthetic design of the seminary buildings erected in 1929, left synodical service under a cloud. It could not be expected, given the circumstances, that his encouragement would influence the pastors of our synod in the same way that Dr. C. F. W. Walther’s encouragement of the liturgical arts influenced the Missouri Synod. Northwestern College, the training ground for almost all of our pastors, operated for decades with a “no frills, no nonsense” view of life. That attitude, along with the college’s gridiron tradition, served our synod well, especially in periods of depression and war, but it may not have been able to foster a deep appreciation among the rank and file of the students for either art or artists except in the area of music, where a strong Lutheran tradition was maintained. What may have caused more damage than any other factor was the impression gained by many of our pastors and laypeople during the middle decades of this century that art and liberal theology were bedfellows. The fact that members of Lutheran liturgical societies often were members of groups which were undermining the doctrines of Scripture and fellowship did art no favors in our circles. (One cannot help feeling that the devil purposefully attaches unsavory characters to art in an effort to disassociate the church from God’s wonderful gifts. Think how often art seems to be linked to the homosexual community in our society!) While most vigorous negative feelings have softened through the years, it may not be an overreaction to surmise

that there remain in our circles a well-intentioned suspicion of proponents of the liturgical arts and a general antipathy to at least some of the arts themselves. At any rate, it is overly optimistic to suppose that a majority of our pastors and congregations have been able either to explore in detail the benefits of the liturgical arts or to employ them fully in corporate worship.

The arts and the seminary

The worship courses which are offered at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary grow out of the presuppositions which are here expressed. They are intended not only to acquaint our students with the liturgical arts themselves but also to foster an appreciation for them and to encourage their use. There are two required courses for all students, one consisting of four quarter hours and the other of three. Both courses cover not only history but also theory and practice.

The junior course, *The Form and Function of Christian Worship*, follows this outline:

1. Corporate Worship in the Life of the Church
2. Worship in Spirit and in Truth
3. The Pastor as the Leader of Corporate Worship
4. Liturgical Worship
5. The Common Service: Analysis
6. Preparations for Worship Leadership
7. The Christian Church Year, the Year of Grace
8. The Moods of Worship (Historical Overview)
9. The Church Building: The Place of Worship

Besides attending lectures on these topics, students are assigned readings in Paul Lang's *What an Altar Guild Should Know*, conduct the liturgical portion of the service and produce a series of service planning worksheets, two of which are condensed into the "Worship Notes" section of a simulated Sunday bulletin.

In the middler course, *Music in the Parish*, students hear lectures from a selection of the following topics:

1. The Goal of the Pastor: Worship in Spirit and in Truth; The Requirement of Form in Worship; Priorities in Church Music
2. The Psychology and History of Music
3. The Pastor's Responsibility in the Music of the Church
4. The Music of the Old Testament; The Psalms
5. The Music of the New Testament; Gregorian Chant; Contemporary Psalm Tones
6. The Music of the Liturgy after the Gregorian Chant; Anglican Chant, Modern Chant, The Chant Dialog
7. The Congregational Song; Qualities of Excellence in Hymnology
8. Greek and Latin Texts
9. Luther and the Tunes of the Meistersingers
10. The Texts of the Hymns of Luther and His Contemporaries
11. The Texts of Paul Gerhardt and His Contemporaries
12. The Tunes of Johann Crueger; The Tunes of Pietism; The Isometric Chorale
13. The Life and Work of Johann Sebastian Bach
14. Subjectivism in Germany; The Decline of the Chorale
15. The Metrical Psalmody of the Reformed Church
16. Watts and Wesley: The New Testament Song
17. American Hymnody: The English Connection
18. American Hymnody: The German Connection
19. Lutheranism's American Hymns
20. New Features of Lutheran Worship

21. Choosing Hymns for Worship
22. The Hymn of the Day
23. Acoustics in the Ministry of Music
24. The Organ: Voices and Pitches
25. The Electronic Organ
26. Instruments in Worship; Handbell Demonstration
27. The Lutheran Choir
28. Christian Contemporary Music: Its Role in the Lives of Young Christians and Its Use in the Ministry of the Church

Besides these credit courses, all students attend several dozen seminar-type classes during the year in which they dialog with the instructor on practical, worship-related topics.

On the basis of the principles which have been enunciated in this essay, the seminary recognizes that the cost of art in terms of time is well justified. It is, finally, in corporate worship that many of the 417,000 members of the WELS receive their only weekly contact with the faith-empowering Word of God. It is in corporate worship that these thousands receive their primary instruction and motivation to be faithful stewards, eager evangelists, wise parents, loving spouses and devoted students of the Word. In an era when the learning process of people is increasingly dependent on what is seen and heard, the seminary believes it is vital that its students have a thorough knowledge of, a deep appreciation for and a determined commitment to any and all of those arts which are suited to carry the Word of God to human hearts.

On the basis of the same principles the seminary faculty in the spring of 1986 recommended to the board of control that the thankoffering to be gathered during the 125th anniversary year be designated for a new pipe organ in the seminary chapel, the seminary's daily worship center. In some ways the recommendation was pragmatic. The Wicks organ, installed in 1949, has become undependable. It no longer raises eyebrows when the morning's organist appears at the piano because the organ is "out."

But the recommendation was based on principle as well as pragmatism. A piano could indeed serve our basic needs. If students are to grow in their determination to employ the art of music in their ministry, however, they need to experience its benefits themselves. If they are to take seriously the advice that the arts are beneficial, they need to observe that their school practices what it preaches. Our students do not need to know advanced artistic technology, nor do they need to be artists themselves. They do need to know, however, what is proper and what is excellent, and they need to learn to appreciate what is beneficial for the ministry. In a small way the new chapel organ will assist in that training.

What is unfortunate is that the cost of the art of organ building is so high. Even instruments produced by medium-priced organ builders cost up to \$9500 for each of the instrument's stops. There are in our country many mission-less churches with excess funds which are willing to pay the high costs of raw materials and labor. Unfortunately, our churches which do have a mission see the same price tags.

On the other hand, we do well to be realistic when we consider the cost of art. Construction costs have soared, too. Think of the cost of operating a sports program in one of our elementary or secondary schools. Add to the list the cost of air conditioning, padded pews, new text book series, board and committee meetings and service vehicles. Surely the church has liberty to divide the Lord's gifts in whatever way seems best for the ministry of the gospel. In order to use that liberty wisely, however, the church must constantly ask the question: What best serves the ministry of the gospel? When one considers the place and the purpose of corporate worship, the function of the Word as it acts on faith and life and what Scripture teaches about human psychology, the liturgical arts merit a judicious share of the church's time, talents and treasure.

ⁱ *The Lutheran Hymnal*, 611, stanza 2.

ⁱⁱ A. C., Introduction to "Articles in Which an Account Is Given of the Abuses Which Have Been Corrected," Tappert, p 49; *Triglotta*, p 59.

ⁱⁱⁱ LW, 53:316.

^{iv} St. L., XIV, 430.