

The Presider Is a Poet: The Art of Presiding in Liturgy

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Introduction

In 1903 the Russian czar Nicholas II noticed a sentry posted for no apparent reason on the Kremlin grounds. Upon inquiry, he discovered that in 1776 Catherine the Great found the first flower of spring there. "Post a sentry here," she commanded, "so that no one tramples that flower under foot!"¹

Sometimes we get into a rut, don't we? We follow a routine for so long that we forget the reasons for what we do. Often such forgetfulness is harmless. For example, many of us prefer to squeeze the juice from a wedge of lemon over a filet of fish in order to bring out the flavor. However, very few of us realize that the practice originated in Europe during the Dark Ages and that the lemon juice was not to titillate taste buds, but to dissolve any fish bones the medieval diner might have inadvertently swallowed during the course of the meal.²

We also tend to forget what certain figures of speech have come to mean. Many people like to "chew the fat," but few know that the phrase, from the time of Shakespeare, refers to the practice of hanging strips of bacon to dry from pegs positioned near a window facing the street. Anyone who saw the bacon knew that they had an invitation to stop by later for an evening of stimulating conversation while "chewing the fat."

It is interesting to learn the history of our customs and figures of speech. Jerry Seinfeld and George Carlin, in fact, have made millions entertaining us with the quirky contradictions of our culture.

It's not so funny, however, when the presider forgets the rationale for the rubrics of liturgy. We could all share stories of presiders whom we suspect have fallen into rote ritual because they have forgotten the meaning of a rite. Certainly our members must wonder at times what's going on up there when the action, the gestures or the impromptu commentary of the presider don't seem to be in sync with what the liturgy intends to communicate. "Why did the presider sing 'And also with you' with the congregation after he had just greeted us with 'The Lord be with you'?" "Why does the presider turn his back on the congregation when we pray?" "Why was the presider's introduction to the lesson longer than the lesson itself?" "Why did the presider have us stand to listen to the Gospel, but not for the other lessons?" Because of such questions, from time to time it is good to step back from the routine and evaluate the rationale for the rubrics of liturgy.

Since it was released in 1993, *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* has found its way into nearly every pew of every church in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.³ The reaction to the new hymnal has been positive. One rarely hears complaints anymore about chanting the psalms and many consider some of the new liturgies and hymns to offer a refreshing variety.

Because of such changes, especially in the liturgies, *Christian Worship* has led many pastors to reexamine the rubrics of presiding at public worship. The danger is that we pastors are not thinking through the issues as fully as we should and so are presiding with a style that doesn't jibe with what the liturgy intends to communicate. In fact, presiders who are approaching the liturgy with a misguided concept of what Lutheran worship is, may actually be militating against the message of the gospel by the way they preside in liturgy.

Good Liturgy Is a Living Poem

¹ Graig Brian Larson, ed., *Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), p. 264.

² David Louis, ed., *2201 Fascinating Facts*. (New York: Greenwich House Crown Publishers, 1983).

³ According to Northwestern Publishing House over 95% of WELS congregations are using the new hymnal.

Presiding in liturgy is more than just reading the right words at the right time and in the right place. Author and poet Kathleen Norris writes in her New York Times Best-seller and Notable Book of the Year, *The Cloister Walk*, “Good liturgy is a living poem, and ceremony is the key.”⁴ It is obvious in her book that Norris does not realize, as we do, that the power of liturgy lies in the Holy Spirit working through Word and Sacrament, yet as an outsider looking in she realizes, as we ought to, that how a faith community does liturgy can either help or hinder what the community gets out of liturgy.

This is important for the presider to understand. There is more to liturgy than just going through the motions, doing the “rite thing for the rote reason.” The pastor must preside in such a way that the gospel rings out loud and clear. How he guides public worship can either give the gospel wings so as to enable faith to soar or he can serve the gospel up like a clump of hash on a wooden shingle and wonder why his people don’t come back for more.

Presiding is an art. As with any art, certain principles and axioms guide the artist in his/her craft. The presider is a poet. In order to confirm this thesis, this paper will affirm the primacy of public worship, examine the significance of non-verbal communication, and propose ways in which the pastor can preside with a style that best reflects the God he approaches and represents in public worship.

Worship Is the Primary Activity of the Church

The poetry of presiding begins with the conviction that public worship is the primary activity of the church. The word worship comes from the Old English word for *worth-ship* (to ascribe worth) and is the adoration, love, and devotion rendered to one who is worthy of such honor.⁵ God demanded it in the first and foremost of his ten commandments. We freely offer it as our way of saying “thank you” for his grace and mercy.

While it is true that in everything we do we worship God, for in everything we do we give God the glory,⁶ from the Garden of Eden to John’s apocalypse God makes it clear that he also wants his people to make public, corporate worship their priority. God placed the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the center of the Garden of Eden both as a means of grace and as plantings of piety around which Adam and Eve centered their thoughts and actions in obedience to God. Now the tree of life is at the center of those who worship the Creator in heaven.⁷ Ancient Israel didn’t consider it a waste of money to decorate the temple in Jerusalem with extravagant accouterments.⁸ They knew mission work would get done because God’s presence in a temple reflecting his glory inspired them to share the gospel of a gracious God.⁹ Since the birthday of the Christian church, followers of the risen and ascended Christ “continued to meet together in the temple courts”¹⁰ as they “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers.”¹¹

Since worship is everything we do and public worship is our priority, therefore every other ministry of the church, although important in its own way, takes a back seat to corporate worship. Finally, after all, public worship is the only thing we do here on earth that we will be doing in heaven.¹² Public worship is the primary

⁴ (New York: Riverhead Books, 1997), p. 266: This book is notable in that Norris would not be considered an overly religious person, yet she and many others like her have found the presence of God in Word and Sacrament in the worship assemblies of liturgical communities.

⁵ Philip Pfatteicher, *A Dictionary of Liturgical Terms* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991), p. 131.

⁶ “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31).

⁷ Revelation 22.

⁸ 1 Kings 7 & 8. Cf. esp. 8:66.

⁹ Psalm 96.

¹⁰ Acts 2:46.

¹¹ Acts 2:42.

¹² Although largely symbolic, John’s vision of heaven impresses on us the central importance of public worship (cf. esp. Revelation 7, 19 & 21).

activity of the church on earth. Consider what John Stott wrote in his commentary on 1 Timothy 2:1 (“I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone -”):

As he has “urged” Timothy to remain in Ephesus to combat error (1:3), so now he exhorts him to give priority to public worship; “I urge, then, first of all, that...prayers...be made for everyone.” “First of all” refers “not to primacy of time but primacy of importance” [Guthrie, 1990, p.74]. For the church is essentially a worshipping, praying community. It is often said that the church’s priority task is evangelism. But this is really not so. Worship takes precedence over evangelism, partly because love for God is the first commandment and love for neighbor the second, partly because, long after the church’s evangelistic task has been completed, God’s people will continue to worship, a “priestly service” in which converts “become an offering acceptable to God” (Rom. 15:16).

This emphasis on the priority of worship has particular importance for us who are called “evangelical” people. For whenever we fail to take public worship seriously, we are less than the fully biblical Christians we claim to be. We go to church for the preaching, some of us say, not for the praise. Evangelism is our specialty, not worship. In consequence either our worship services are slovenly, perfunctory, mechanical and dull or, in an attempt to remedy this, we go to the opposite extreme and become repetitive, unreflective and even flippant.¹³

Eugene Peterson put it this way in his commentary on the Song of Moses and the Song of the Lamb in Revelation 15:

Worship is the essential and central act of the Christian. We do many other things in preparation for and as a result of worship: sing, write, witness, heal, teach, paint, serve, help, build, clean, smile. But the centering act is worship. Worship is the act of giving committed attention to the being and action of God. The Christian life is posited on the faith that God is in action. When we worship, it doesn’t look like we are doing much—and we aren’t. We are looking at what God is doing and orienting our action to the compass points of creation and covenant, judgment and salvation.¹⁴

The Poetry of Presiding Flows from an Understanding of Who God Is

If worship is giving God, glory because he’s worth it, then it is important that the pastor develop the poetry of presiding from a correct understanding of who God is and what he has done. For in public worship

you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel...Therefore,...let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.¹⁵

Having this knowledge will guide the presider in how he approaches and represents God in liturgy.

The presider understands that God is both transcendent and immanent. In other words, he is a God who is at the same time very far away and very near. He is a jealous God, punishing the children of the fathers to the

¹³ *The Message of First Timothy and Titus: The Life of the Local Church* (Leicester, England: Intervarsity Press, 1996), p. 59. An Evangelical Anglican, Stott’s homiletics book *Between Two Worlds* (Eerdmans) is recommended reading at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.

¹⁴ *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John & the Praying Imagination* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), p. 140.

¹⁵ Hebrews 12:22-24,28,29.

third and fourth generation of those who hate him,¹⁶ yet he is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.¹⁷ He is a God of law and gospel, of sin and grace.

The poetry of presiding flows from an appreciation of how this God has dealt with those who ministered in his presence in the past. The presider knows for himself how Isaiah felt and acted when before the heavenly throne and in the presence of six-winged seraphs, smoke and the shaking thresholds of the temple God commissioned him to be his messenger to the Children of Israel. “Woe is me!” he cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.” With this event in mind the presider will choose his words wisely when departing from the printed text of the liturgy (if at all). He wants to speak those words which can only come from lips seared by a coal from the altar of God’s grace.¹⁸ The presider is familiar with what happened to Uzzah when he reached out his hand to steady the Ark of the Covenant as the Israelites under King David’s direction brought it back to Jerusalem from Kiriath Jearim. God struck Uzzah dead because he impetuously put his hand on the ark.¹⁹ With that event in mind the presider will handle the elements Word and Sacrament with careful reverence and respect. These are “holy things to the holy!”²⁰ The presider can identify with David, who sang:

Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song...Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker; for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care.”²¹

And so while presiding he exudes joyful thanksgiving in the house of the Lord.

The presider knows that he represents Christ and so will reflect his likeness while presiding. Like Jesus who with appropriately dramatic authority read the Scriptures in such a way that everyone in his hometown synagogue that day fastened their eyes on him in anticipation of what he was about to say,²² so he will read the lessons in an engaging manner—conversational not preachy, natural not affected, yet reverent not casual, practiced not unrehearsed. Like Jesus who dandled the little children on his knee and placed his hands on them in blessing,²³ so the presider ministers with the tenderness of a loving father.

The presider knows how to keep and communicate a balance between God’s transcendence and immanence, his distance and his nearness, his holiness and his love. He knows God is awesome, but not aloof, that he is close by but not cute, that although he’s our friend, he’s not our buddy. This balance could be expressed as “formal informality.” Or, if you like, “informal formality.”²⁴ Presiding with a balance between God’s transcendence and immanence is an art, just as rightly dividing law and gospel in a sermon is an art. The presider is a poet in that he leads liturgy with a style appropriate for the God he approaches and represents.

The Poetry of Presiding Flows from an Appreciation of Non-Verbal Communication

The presider is a poet because he realizes his, ministry is not only one of words but of actions. He recognizes the poetry of symbolic, non-verbal communication—of ritual and ceremony.

¹⁶ Exodus 20:5.

¹⁷ Exodus 34:6,7.

¹⁸ Isaiah 6.

¹⁹ 1 Chronicles 13:9,10.

²⁰ *The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus of Rome*. Beginning circa AD 215 the presider said these words while holding up the consecrated bread and wine for all the people to see.

²¹ Psalm 95:1,2,6,7.

²² Luke 4:13ff.

²³ Matthew 19:13ff.

²⁴ David Stohlmann, “Ministerial Style,” *Lutheran Worship Notes* (Winter 1991), Issue No. 20, p. 6.

Symbolic communication in public worship can be very powerful. There's no mistaking what a person believes when he or she makes the sign of the cross.²⁵ Kneeling helps the heart foster an attitude of humility and reverence, while standing brings us to attention as we joyfully meet Christ face-to-face by virtue of his resurrection.²⁶ Folding the hands while praying minimizes mental distractions, while praying in the ancient *orans* posture of prayer opens the imagination to the greatness of God's grace.²⁷ Making the sign of the cross over the elements during the Words of Institution has been a way to show the presence of Christ in the sacrament since the Middle Ages, but elevating the host and chalice during the Words of Institution, the more ancient practice affirmed and kept by the Lutheran reformers²⁸ and later orthodox theologians, also speaks powerfully of proclamation and consecration of Christ's presence in the elements.

Symbolic communication can be a very powerful aid to worship, but it can also be confusing, even destructive to faith. Whenever we say one thing, but do something very different, the action speaks louder than the words. Just see how convinced your wife will be if you say, "Honey, I love you very much!" while shaking your head "no." "The medium is the message" they say in television broadcasting. How, the presider moves and gestures during the liturgy says volumes about what he thinks of God and God's worshiping people. Sitting while slouching with legs crossed in plain view of the congregation seems more appropriate for a living room than the temple of God. Blessing the congregation with the sign of the cross as if painting the side of a house or guiding a 747 into its parking space draws too much attention to the movement itself and not to the concept the sign intends communicate. We must not underestimate the power of non-verbal communication. The people of God have come to be in the presence of the risen and ascended Lord. The way the presider leads their worship can either clarify or cloud that presence.

Even the medium of communication communicates a subtle message. And so it is important to the poetry of presiding to utilize methods of non-verbal, visual communication that underscore the purpose of public worship. Some have forgotten this and in the process subvert the place of worship.

They turn it into a place of entertainment that will refresh bored and tired consumers and pump some zest into them; or they turn it into a lecture hall on the assumption that what they know, they then do; or turn it into a platform for launching good works, shooting rockets of righteousness behind the enemy lines. Attention is subverted from what God is doing to what we are doing.²⁹

One of the principles of Lutheran worship is: "Let the gospel be the most important part of worship."³⁰ Most of us have come to understand that principle to mean "The sermon is the most important part of worship" or "Hearing the gospel is the most important part of worship." While that is true as far as it goes, we must

²⁵ The sign of the cross, which is made by touching the forehead, breast, left shoulder, right shoulder, is one of the most ancient ways of visualizing the gospel. John Chrysostom (d. circa 407) in a sermon on 1 Cor. 6:20 ("you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.") once said, "When, therefore, you sign yourself, think of the purpose of the cross, and quench anger and all other passions. Consider the price that has been paid for you..." Luther's advice in the Small Catechism was to begin one's prayers upon rising in the morning and retiring at night by making the sign of the cross and saying, "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." It is an effective reminder that one has been made a Christian by baptism and has been "marked as a redeemed child of Christ" (CW, p. 14).

²⁶ "We stand up when we pray, on the first day of the week.... This is not only because, risen with Christ and having to seek the things above (Col. 3:1), we call to mind the grace given us, by standing upright when we pray on that day consecrated to the resurrection, but also because that day itself seems in some fashion to be an image of the world to come" (St. Basil, *On the Holy Spirit*). The early Church in fact forbade kneeling for Holy Communion during the Easter season as it was a time of "rising in Christ."

²⁷ The *orans* (OH-ranns) posture is made while "standing with arms outstretched and uplifted, palms upward, lifting the body and spirit upward to God and welcoming God's Gifts as they descend" (*A Dictionary of Liturgical Terms*, p. 91). The posture reflects Psalm 141: "Let my prayer rise before you as incense, the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice" (CW, p. 55). The posture is appropriate for the Opening Prayer, Lord's Prayer, and Proper Preface (from "It is truly good and right," etc. until the *Sanctus*).

²⁸ Luther had this to say about it: "We do not want to abolish the elevation, but retain it because it goes well with the German Sanctus and signifies that Christ has commanded us to remember him" (American Edition, Vol. 53, p. 82).

²⁹ *Reversed Thunder* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), p. 141.

³⁰ Steven Geiger and James Tiefel, "The Basics of Worship," *Come Worship Christ Teacher's Guide*, Lesson 3, p. 1.

remember that the gospel is communicated to us not only by what we hear but also by what we see, taste, touch, and smell. In other words, God communicates sacramentally, through the visible, tangible Word. When an overemphasis is placed on hearing the Word of God—read, preached or sung—solely for the purpose of exhortation or evangelism, it can become easy to justify using communication methods which end up militating against what worship fully is. While it is true we learn from the Bible in divine services, public worship is not a Bible class. While visitors will be touched by the gospel in our services, worship is not an evangelism event. Worship is an interplay between God coming to us in Word and Sacrament and us coming to God in prayer and praise. Both complement each other when the rites, the ceremonies, the architectural setting and the musical style foster a mood of prayerful contemplation of God’s grace.

Certain methods of communication can detract from an atmosphere of prayerful contemplation of and meditation on God’s grace in a service. It may be cutting-edge communications technology to illustrate the points of a sermon with computer graphics displayed on a screen via video projector, but it also tends to turn worship into a Bible lecture. Chancel dramas, praise teams singing anthems up front as if on stage, video sermons, and prerecorded cassette tape accompaniments³¹ all tend to turn worshipers into spectators and the congregation into an audience. Another of the principles of Lutheran worship is “Let the people participate.”³² In general, communication methods which don’t allow for this principle ought to be avoided in Lutheran worship.

Good symbolic communication and ceremony stimulates the “praying imagination.”³³ Rather than boxing the imagination into a corner, effective signs, symbols or visual aids spur on a variety of messages. Take the processional cross as an example. Following it into and out of the worship hour stimulates a contemplation of its fullest theology. Not only do we remember the death for the forgiveness of sins which occurred there but we also think:

- ...we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.³⁴
- Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?...For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be rendered powerless, that we should no longer be slaves to sin...³⁵
- If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.³⁶
- Lift high the cross; the love of Christ proclaim Till all the world adore his sacred name.
Led on their way by this triumphant sign, The hosts of God in conqu’ring ranks combine.³⁷

Watching the video *Jesus of Nazareth* in a service cannot do the same thing so simply.

Recently Evangelicals have begun to recognize the shallowness of their worship and are hungering for something more. In the October 6, 1997, edition of *Christianity Today*, Gary Burge—a former Lutheran and now current professor of New Testament at the interdenominational Wheaton College in Illinois—has this to say about the movement as it applies to worship and symbolic communication:

³¹ The American Guild of Organists states “that the human element in worship leadership, whether it be from the lectern, pulpit or organ loft, is irreplaceable. Because worship is an encounter between the God of life and humans..., its modes of expression should be authentic expressions of living persons.”

³² *Come Worship Christ Teacher’s Guide*, Lesson 3, p. 2.

³³ Eugene Peterson provided me this phrase in his book, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John & the Praying Imagination* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988). I believe his approach to St. John’s Revelation applies to public worship, “I have taken the position that this book does not primarily call for decipherment, as if it were written in code, but that it evokes wonder, releasing metaphors that resonate meanings and refract insights in the praying imagination” (p. xiii).

³⁴ 1 Corinthians 1:23,24.

³⁵ Romans 6:3,6.

³⁶ Matthew 16:24.

³⁷ CW 579:2.

In reading my semester exams, I discovered that one particularly insightful student, Amy, wrote about worship: “I think that much of modern society has lost a sense of divine, holy space. This becomes obvious to me in our church architecture. The splendor and holiness of cathedrals which created the ultimate feeling of divine space has been replaced by gymnasiums and impermanent buildings....Plastic cups and folding chairs aren’t enough.”

What is going on? What deficit, what paucity of experience in their world is not being met? What drives this irony, this rejection of “liturgy” and this embrace of things that undergird every liturgy?

In our zeal to be practical and relevant, perhaps we have missed something....somewhere the mystery of God has been lost....many worshipers come looking for more than fellowship, exposition, and exhortation. They seek an experience of “the holy.” They come looking for awe and reverence, mystery and transcendence.

My students and colleagues are looking for worship that weds dignity and spontaneity, worship that is theologically informed and liturgically intentional. My students and friends are migrating to new spiritual homes. They are looking for...worship services that do not push them into the world merely to be better Christians, but services that become a divine refuge—a divine encounter that lifts their lives and souls to an entirely new plateau.³⁸

We Lutherans have had it all along. Because God meets us in Word and Sacrament we gladly celebrate the mysteries within settings and ceremonies that touch not only the intellect but also the praying imagination.

Lutheranism Affirms the Poetry of Public Worship

Luther once said regarding the sacraments, “God never proposed to set up his worship in this world without external means.”³⁹ Lutheranism recognizes that Christ communicates with us by what we taste, touch, see and smell as well as by what we hear. God blessed ordinary earthly elements to be conveyors of his grace. We are a sacramental church. This is important to understand because just as word, water, wine and wheat are the God-ordained tangible vehicles of his love for us, so man-made signs, symbols and ceremonies can communicate the gospel of God. The presider is a Lutheran poet, therefore, because he uses ritual and ceremony to communicate the gospel.

Lutheranism has always recognized the validity and importance of ceremony in public worship. How the official confessions of the Lutheran Church speak about worship and ceremony will influence how the WELS pastor thinks about presiding in the liturgy:

At the outset we must again make the preliminary statement that we do not abolish the Mass, but religiously maintain and defend it...And the usual public ceremonies are observed, the series of lessons, of prayers, vestments, and other like things.⁴⁰

The Fathers had these reasons (good order and symbolic communication of the gospel) for maintaining the rites and for these reasons we also judge it to be right that traditions be maintained....We cheerfully maintain the old traditions...we can truly declare that the public form of the churches is more becoming with us than with the adversaries...It may be judged that we diligently maintain...godly ceremonies and good church-customs.⁴¹

³⁸ pp. 22,24,27.

³⁹ St. L. Ed. III, p. 1691ff.

⁴⁰ *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, XXIV:1.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, XV:21 & 38.

...the Mass is retained among us, and celebrated with the highest reverence. Nearly all the usual ceremonies are also preserved....⁴²

...with a very grateful mind we embrace the profitable and ancient ordinances....⁴³

...in large part, the ancient rites are diligently observed. For it is a false and malicious charge that all the ceremonies, all the things instituted of old, are abolished in our churches.⁴⁴

Only those things have been recounted whereof we thought that it was necessary to speak, in order that it might be understood that in doctrine and ceremonies nothing has been received on our part against Scripture or the Church Catholic.⁴⁵

Ceremony, or symbolic, non-verbal communication gives flesh to what we believe. And so the use or non-use of ceremony in public worship is a matter of confession. Luther Reed offers these pertinent thoughts:

The distinctive differences in doctrine held by different churches may not be evident in the private lives of their members, but they will inevitably appear in the public worship of their congregation. Doctrines and principles of worship are proclaimed not only from the pulpit, but from the altar, from the pew, from the organ bench and choir room; in Liturgy as truly as in Confessional Symbol; in rubric often more clearly than in text; in manner, gesture, posture as surely as in spoken or printed word. Everything is pregnant with meaning when one learns to read it aright. We understand not the mannerisms of strangers, but the simple tone of voice, the glance of an eye, or the most trivial gesture of a dear friend conveys deep significance. So greater intimacy with the forms of devotion may reveal to us qualities hitherto unperceived.

It is a very superficial opinion, oft expressed, that there is little difference between Churches. "We all are going to the same place." it is said;...A Lutheran is not a Romanist, a Quaker or a Methodist. We have a distinctive doctrine, a distinctive apprehension of God's revelation, as have they; and our cultus, or form of worship, as expressing our belief, is just as distinctive in character.⁴⁶

The Lutheran presider ought to take such an observation to heart because as his title implies,⁴⁷ he is in charge of guiding and guarding the assembly's public worship. Because of the theological character of the liturgy, presiding demands more than learning skills in group leadership. The liturgy "is our theology embodied, enlivened, incarnated. Our praise of God ('doxology') is our doctrine of God ('theology')."⁴⁸ This means that presiding is "a theological activity, containing and conveying embodied and enacted theological assumptions."⁴⁹

Lutheranism Is a Part of the Church Catholic

Lutheran theology is distinctive from other denominations. The presider makes this most clear in the sermon. And it will show itself in how we administer the means of grace in public worship. However, there are

⁴² *Augsburg Confession*, XXIV:1.

⁴³ *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, VII:34.

⁴⁴ *Augsburg Confession*, XXI:4 & 5.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, Conclusion.

⁴⁶ "Our Distinctive Worship—The Common Service and Other Liturgies, Ancient and Modern," in *Memoirs of the Lutheran Liturgical Association*. Vol. 1, 1906.

⁴⁷ The word preside comes from the Latin *praesedere*, to sit in front. It means to "occupy the place of authority or control, as in an assembly, meeting, etc." (*The Random House College Dictionary*, 1975). The term is preferable to liturgist or worship leader because it expresses the fullest concept of the pastor "managing and guiding the actions, words, and proclamation of the Church gathered for worship" (*Come Worship Christ, Adult Teacher's Guide*, Lesson 3, p. 2).

⁴⁸ William Seth Adams, *Shaped by Images: One Who Presides* (New York: Church Publishing, 1995), p. 120.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p. 5.

and will be similarities in the forms of our worship with those of other denominations. This will happen so far as their theology is in tune with our theology of Word and Sacrament. Don't bemoan the fact. Give thanks to God for it. The similarities in our worship forms are a testimony to the universality of the Church throughout the world and throughout the ages. There is "one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."⁵⁰

Luther understood this principle. He intended his reforms not to create a new church, a sect, but to restore the Church of his time to an evangelical base. To him the issue of worship forms was not one of denominational loyalty or identification, but of using forms which best communicate the ancient gospel in a contemporary setting. James Tiefel emphasizes this point when he writes in *Christian Worship: Manual* regarding Luther's approach to liturgy:

Thus, in both the *Formula Missae* and the *Deutsche Messe*, Luther honored the traditions of the Christian church and considered them to be a faithful witness to the voice of the gospel. More than just a conservative nature led him to keep the church's past practices. He carried on the traditions because his congregation, together with those of the early church, were members of "one holy Christian and apostolic Church." A common faith invisibly united them, and Luther intended that they should be united visibly by a common form of public worship:

"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."⁵¹

It should come as no surprise then that the Confessions breathe a more catholic (i.e. universal, the Church throughout the world and throughout the ages) spirit than what we are accustomed to or even comfortable with. Because the Augsburg Confession declares: "in doctrine and ceremonies nothing has been received on our part against Scripture or the Church Catholic"⁵² we have to come to grips with the fact that the Lutheran Church will look and feel more "Catholic" than it will "Protestant" or "Reformed." C.F.W. Walther offers this defense of the Lutheran liturgy's connection to catholic forms:

We refuse to be guided by those who are offended by our church customs. We adhere to them all the more firmly when someone wants to cause us to have a guilty conscience on account of them....It is truly distressing that many of our fellow Christians find the difference between Lutheranism and Papism in outward things. It is a pity and dreadful cowardice when one sacrifices the good ancient church customs to please the deluded American sects, lest they accuse us of being papistic!

Indeed! Am I to be afraid of a Methodist, who perverts the saving word, or be ashamed in the matter of my good cause, and not rather rejoice that the sects can tell by our ceremonies that I do not belong to them?

...We are not insisting that there be uniformity of perception or feelings or of taste among all believing Christians neither dare anyone demand that all be minded as he. Nevertheless it remains true that the Lutheran liturgy distinguishes Lutheran worship from the worship of other churches to such an extent that the latter look like lecture halls in which the hearers are merely addressed or instructed, while our churches are in truth houses of prayer in which the Christians serve the great God publicly before the world.⁵³

⁵⁰ Ephesians 4:5.

⁵¹ *Worship in Theology and Practice*, eds. Gary Baumler and Kermit Moldenhauer (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993), pp. 25-26. Prof. Tiefel quotes Martin Luther in Vol. 53, p.20 of Luther's Works, American Ed.

⁵² *Augsburg Confession*, Conclusion.

⁵³ *Essays for the Church*, Volume 1:194.

Don't worry so much if our services are similar to what one would experience in a Roman Catholic church. The Roman Catholic Church is a sacramental church just as we are. In fact, one could argue that the worship reforms implemented by Vatican II have established a more Lutheran practice than our own present practice. Who could disagree with the following pronouncements from the second session (1963) of the Second Vatican Council?

Sacred Scripture is of the greatest importance in the celebration of the liturgy. For it is from Scripture that the readings are given and explained in the homily and that psalms are sung; the prayers, collects, and liturgical songs are scriptural in their inspiration; it is from Scriptures that actions and signs derive their meaning. Thus to achieve the reform, progress, and adaptation of the liturgy, it is essential to promote that warm and living love for Scripture to which the venerable tradition of both Eastern and Western rites gives testimony.⁵⁴

The treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly, so that a richer share in God's word may be provided for the faithful.⁵⁵

...The Church, therefore, earnestly desires that Christ's faithful, when present at this mystery of faith, should not be there as strangers or silent spectators;...They should be instructed by God's word and be nourished at the table of the Lord's body;⁵⁶

The Church earnestly desires that all the faithful be led to that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations called for by the very nature of the liturgy. Such participation by the Christian people as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (1 Pet. 2:9; see 2:4-5) is their right and duty by reason of their baptism.⁵⁷

The musical tradition of the universal Church is a treasure of inestimable value, greater than that of any other art. The main reason for this preeminence is that, as sacred song closely bound to the text, it forms a necessary or integral part of the solemn liturgy.⁵⁸

Not all Roman Catholics are happy with such statements. Conservative Catholics voice opposition to Vatican II reformations because they feel their church has lost its distinctive theology of the sacrifice of the Mass. In a publication from the Vatican itself one historian recalls the reaction of many to the liturgical reforms of Vatican II:

...the general impression given to those in the pews was of a ceremony aimed at enhancing sociability and diminishing the old Mass's sense of sacrificial offering. It raised the question, for those who had attended Anglican or Lutheran services, whether the ghosts of Cranmer or Luther had a hand in its creation.⁵⁹

The fact of the matter is that a convergence of worship practices is taking place across denominational lines. Evangelicals are beginning to use processional crosses and incense and Episcopalians are allowing for

⁵⁴ *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, Chapter I, III, A. 24.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, Chapter II, 51.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, Chapter II, 48.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, Chapter I, II, 14.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, Chapter VI, 112.

⁵⁹ "Weakland: 'A New Battle'," *Inside the Vatican*, August-September 1997, p. 17.

more freedom of expression in ritual prayer.⁶⁰ For better or for worse, the sun is setting on the day when denominations could be identified by their particular rites, ceremonies and worship settings.⁶¹

While a group of Christians has the freedom to fine-tune the details of just how exactly they will approach God in public worship,⁶² at times it may become necessary for them to give up their freedom when a pure confession of the gospel is at stake.⁶³ The Lutheran Church has done so in the past. In our day and age, however, because there is a convergence of worship traditions taking place across all denominations, especially among liturgical traditions, it would be impossible for us to use only those ceremonies which other church bodies are not using. Should we avoid wearing an alb and stole only because it looks Catholic? If that's the only criterion, then what about speaking the creeds or the Lord's Prayer? What about standing for the reading of the Gospel or coming forward to the altar to receive Holy Communion? The Catholics speak and do those things. Just where do we draw the line? Methodist pastors wear black Geneva preaching gowns. What are we going to do about that? If we avoid or employ ceremonies as only a reaction to what heterodox church bodies are doing or not doing, we will end up with lowest common denominator worship. We will end up a sect separate from Christianity.

The challenge for Lutheranism is to keep her distinctiveness while confessing her allegiance to "one holy Christian and apostolic Church." The answer is not to blindly copy what other denominations have found successful nor is it to adopt a reactionary posture to heterodox church bodies. After having addressed the issue of worship forms in connection with the influence of Calvinism in America, E. Arnold Sitz offers this timely warning and encouragement in an essay delivered at the Fifteenth Biennial Convention of the Southeastern Wisconsin District (Thiensville, Wisconsin, June 24-27, 1946):

...we shall meet the powerful impact of Reformed and Calvinistic influence, not by compromising or fraternizing with it—that would be...taking a long step away from Lutheranism back toward the dominion of the Antichrist—but only if we of the Lutheran Church address ourselves faithfully to the chief duties of its ministry.

These call for steeping ourselves in the word, in the confessions, and in Luther, studying them diligently;...In fine, the Lutheran Christian and pastor can best serve the kingdom of God here in America by—*being Lutheran*.⁶⁴

The presider is a Lutheran poet. His liturgy proclaims a theology of Word and Sacrament.

Naturally, because worship forms are ultimately adiaphora, there will be differences of opinion on just exactly how to approach and represent God in public worship. Cultural tastes will influence the details of how an assembly approaches God in worship. And the personality of the presider will be a factor. Often the issues are demarcated along so-called "high church" and "low church" lines. However, good liturgy is not a matter of processions as opposed to overhead projectors, of chasubles as opposed to cardigan sweaters, but of what is

⁶⁰ An interesting article on this phenomenon is entitled "From evangelicalism to Orthodoxy," U.S. News & World Report, Jan. 15, 1990.

⁶¹ Although the distinction is more dramatic when nonliturgical churches are compared to liturgical churches. In general those who hold to a sacramental theology will look more alike in their forms as compared to those who approach worship from a more reformed/rationalistic mindset.

⁶² "Therefore we believe, teach, and confess that the congregation of God of every place and every time has, according to its circumstances, the good right, power, and authority to change, to diminish, and to increase them (ceremonies)." *Formula of Concord*. Solid Declaration, X:9.

⁶³ "We believe, teach, and confess that in time of persecution, when a plain confession is required of us, we should not yield to the enemies in regard to such adiaphora..." *Formula of Concord*, Epitome X:4).

⁶⁴ "Calvinism: Its Essence and Its Menacing Impact upon American Lutheran Doctrine and Practice," in *Our Great Heritage*, Vol. III, p.649. In the same vein, Kurt Eggert, former Project Director for *Christian Worship*, highlighted this passage in a book from his collection which is now housed in the library of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary: "He (the presider) should learn how he is to serve God; how to praise and thank him. He must know the art and value of prayer. He must know the constantly renewing resource to be found in the Holy Bible. He develops for himself a pattern of Scriptural reading and meditation." *Growth in Worship* (Kurt J. Eggert Memorial Collection), p. 13.

appropriate for the worship of a God who is both our judge and Savior, both our Creator and Brother. One liturgical scholar put it this way:

Finally, it (worship) cannot be defined; it can only be experienced and, perhaps, described. If, however, we seek to penetrate to the essence of true worship, we shall probably arrive at some synthesis such as this, from whatever divergent viewpoints we may begin: Worship is joyful concern with God through Christ.⁶⁵

With that and all of the previous points in mind, let us now examine some aspects of presiding which can affirm the message of the gospel by making and keeping worship a “joyful concern with God through Christ.”

The Poetry of Pacing and Silence

The prophet Habakkuk wrote: “The Lord is in his holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before him.”⁶⁶ Use silence to the advantage of the gospel. There is no lack of words in worship, but so often there is little opportunity to let the words sink in. One way to “let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God”⁶⁷ is to use periods of silence at key times in the service to meditate on the word of God just spoken or sung. This means that the pace of the service ought to slow down.

That’s not easy to do given the society in which we live. Our society constantly bombards us with an endless onslaught of information and entertainment. In machine gun-like, rapid-fire succession the TV attacks us with wave after wave of sit-coms, soaps and made-for-TV movies. There is hardly time to think as commercials play tag with the program they’re paying for. “Dead air” means a loss of thousands of dollars in advertising revenue. In such a culture it is not surprising that the presider would feel uncomfortable with silence and prayerful meditation and so rush through the liturgy as if changing channels with a remote control: “For-God-so-loved-the-world-that-he-gave-his-one-and-only-Son-that-whoever-believes-in-him-shall-not-perish-but-have-eternal-life-this-is-the-word-of-the-Lord-alleluia-your-word-is-a-lamp-to-my-feet-and-a-light-for-my-path-alleluia,” etc. Slowdown! Pacing and silence in liturgy help set an atmosphere of prayer and meditation on the mysteries of God’s grace.

Even the secular prophets are crying out for us to slow down. In a recent article in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* Philip Chard writes:

When you view the impact of the information explosion on human beings, it seems far less about accessibility, communication and knowledge, and far more about light-speed lifestyles and hyper-stimulation....Today, many of us run on two speeds—pause and fast forward, and the pauses are fewer and farther between.

More of us do everything on spin cycle: drive, eat, talk, work, think, walk, etc. Moments of repose, quiet contemplation, thoughtful discourse, and measured actions are rare.⁶⁸

Kurt Eggert has similar sentiments in mind when he comments on how to pray the psalm in *Evening Prayer*:

The service of *Evening Prayer* is intended to be a quiet service of reflection on the day coming to a close. If such an atmosphere of unhurried contemplation is observed from the beginning of the

⁶⁵ Carl Halter, *The Practice of Sacred Music*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955), p. 3.

⁶⁶ 2:20.

⁶⁷ Colossians 3:16.

⁶⁸ “‘Information Age’ is a speed rush to no destination,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 10 June 1997, Sec. F.

service, indicated by the pace and voice of the pastor, meditation after the psalm will seem natural and fitting. Another way in which the pastor may put worshipers more at ease is to leave the altar and seat himself in his clergy chair, indicating his personal participation in the meditation.⁶⁹

Vespers is the best time for unhurried contemplation of God's grace. Other times in liturgy when silence is golden are:

- after the presider invites the congregation to confess its sins.
- at the Prayer of the Day, just after the presider says, "Let us pray."
- briefly, but noticeably, after the reading of a lesson and before "This is the Word of the Lord" or "This is the Gospel of the Lord."
- after the singing of a psalm. Thirty seconds seems long enough after the psalm(s) sung in *Evening Prayer*.
- after the sermon.

The Poetry of "Less Is More"

The old adage "less is more" applies to presiding as well as to any other discipline. One place where "less is more" in the liturgy is the introduction to lessons. Be careful that what starts out as a helpful way to tie the lessons to the theme of the day does not turn into three sermons. Let God speak. A simple and effective way, for example, to introduce the first lesson for Pentecost 3, Year B, Genesis 3:8-15, would be like this: "A reading from Genesis, chapter 3." And then either simply read the lesson or set the scene with one or two succinct sentences, "God confronts Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden."

There are four reasons why there is no need to let the congregation know what verses will be read in a lesson. 1) It is probably already written in the service folder. 2) It is easier to remember simply the book and chapter (if only just the book). 3) Often it becomes verbal clutter (Does the congregation really need to know the full reference for the first lesson for Advent 1, Year B: Isaiah 63:16b,17, 64:1-8?). 4) Unless the congregation is going to follow along in a pew Bible, giving the reference to the verses gives the impression of being in a Bible class and not a worship service.⁷⁰

In recent years it seems we've felt a need to explain the liturgy during the liturgy. Often the impression is given that the presider is more the MC of a variety show than the one who guides his congregation in their worship together. Superfluous comments and gestures about standing, sitting or doing something the congregation already knows to do from habit or from a printed rubric in the hymnal or service folder detracts from worship and dumbs down the liturgy. It is enough to use a simple gesture of extending the hand palm up or down to indicate that the congregation should stand or sit. Sweeping motions as if pulling down a shade or lifting up a bucket coupled with verbal commands such as "The congregation may be seated as we sing the next posted hymn," add needless verbal clutter and detract from an atmosphere of meditation and prayer. Good liturgy doesn't need an excess of explanation. We just do it and are formed into more fully worshipping Christians because the words and actions communicate an obvious meaning.

It is interesting to note how even secular communicators recognize the power of sign and symbol and our penchant for explaining the obvious. Apply Tim Cuprisin's comments on the television coverage of Princess Diana's funeral to presiding. In an article published in the *Journal Sentinel* he wrote:

⁶⁹ "The Use of Silence," *Focus on Worship* (Summer 1992), p. 4.

⁷⁰ Some have questioned the practice of inviting the congregation to follow along with the lesson by reading it in the bulletin or a pew Bible. Listening to the word of God read by a skillful lector engages the imagination more than the intellect, therefore allowing the message to penetrate the heart and not just the mind.

While the debate over TV's coverage of the death of Princess Diana will rage on, there's no debate over the emotional power of television when it focuses on an event like her funeral. That power was diluted a bit by anchors who, at times, refused to be quiet and let the event unfold before our eyes. Still, the images overpowered the chatter, burning moments into our collective memory.⁷¹

At times it is helpful to remind the congregation of the reason why it is saying or doing something in the liturgy. It can be helpful to *occasionally* introduce the creeds by saying something like this, "With Christians throughout the world and throughout the ages let us confess the faith with the words of the Apostles' Creed." Before the congregation stands for the reading of the Gospel, the presider might say, "In honor of the words and works of our Savior, please stand for the Gospel." Such an introduction informs the congregation why they are standing for the reading of the Gospel as opposed to the other lessons and the sermon.⁷² In general the liturgy ought to be familiar enough that an excess of worded directions and explanations is not needed. The presider is a poet. Let the images from the liturgy itself stir up the praying imagination.

The Poetry of Looking Natural

Although our television culture has contributed to some poor presiding practices, we share a common interest with TV news reporters when the subject is how to look best when speaking in public. In a telephone interview⁷³ regarding how reporters use gestures in their on-screen reporting, Channel 12 news reporter Renee Riddle related that most television stations hire talent coaches to come in three to four times a year to give tips on how to look best on camera. According to the coaches the best way to look on camera is to look natural, yet professional, and to use the tone of voice and gestures one would use to tell a story to a friend. The last talent coach at Channel 12 summarized her report by saying: "Capitalize on the power of the non-verbal." If television reporters think it's that important to look right on camera, how much more ought the presider consider the importance of how he looks while presiding in the presence of God and his people.⁷⁴

One important area to give special attention to is how you use your hands while presiding. Like the face, hands can express nuances of meaning which would otherwise be lost if they were not seen. On the one hand, they can be a distraction during the liturgy. Some observations in that regard have already been made in connection with giving directions for the congregation to stand or sit. It can also be distracting to see a presider read a lesson with accompanying gestures like that of an actor rehearsing his script on stage. This is not to say, however, that the hands should hang limp (or stiff) at the sides. A gesture with the hand(s) can seem natural at some parts of the liturgy. Holding the palms out and upwards toward the congregation when saying "The Lord be with you" invites a more heartfelt "And also with you." And most of us are comfortable, with extending the hands, shoulder height, palms facing the people, at the Benediction. Pay careful attention to what your hands are doing, or not doing, during the liturgy. They have a way of touching, scratching and fidgeting at the most inopportune times. Therefore, the best place to keep the hands when presiding is in front of your waist touching each other.⁷⁵

In the book which set the standard for presiding since 1976, Robert Hovda coaches his readers with this definition of style in presiding:

⁷¹ "Simplest images tug hardest at hearts," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 7 September 1997, Encore Sec., p. 8B.

⁷² For a fuller explanation of the reasons why it might be better to have the congregation remain seated after the hymn of the day and before the sermon, see James Tiefel's article entitled "The Lessons in the Liturgy," in *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, 93, (Winter 1996) No. 1, p. 55.

⁷³ 12 September 1997.

⁷⁴ At its last meeting, 8 & 9 September 1997 in Kokomo, IN, the Chicago Conference of the WELS SE Wisconsin District voted to have the sermon critique committee also serve the conference by evaluating the liturgy and presiding minister at its conference services with Holy Communion.

⁷⁵ However, avoid the "figleaf" position, a posture adopted by body guards and those who are unsure about the safety of their private parts!

Good style in liturgy is the opposite of what is “put on” or “phony.” Good style is appropriate, honest, authentic,...⁷⁶

The Poetry of Liturgical Space and Setting

The architectural setting for a divine service influences the presider’s demeanor and approach to worship. A classroom with a card table for an altar at one end of it will have a different feel than a gothic cathedral and so the pastor presides according to the atmosphere or feel of the worship space. Big spaces call for big gestures and movements. Small spaces call for small gestures and movements.

Many WELS congregations today are worshipping in buildings constructed according to a design which is a mix between “neo-gothic” and “concert stage arrangement.”⁷⁷ In this arrangement the congregation sits in the nave while the pastor leads the service in the chancel as if on a stage. Following the example of the Middle Ages the altar is placed against the liturgically east wall of the chancel. Such an arrangement, for better or for worse, will determine how the presider moves and ministers in the chancel. Generally the rubric in our circles is to face the altar when performing the sacrificial portions of the liturgy and to face the people when performing the sacramental portions of the liturgy. East is considered the direction which Christians face in anticipation of Christ’s second coming. The altar is considered the symbol of God’s presence. And so we face the east and the altar while praying to God and speak from them while representing God.⁷⁸

There are some gray areas to this rule. Certain of the psalms have both sacramental and sacrificial elements to them. Rather than turn back and forth during the psalm to accommodate this, simply face either the altar or the assembly throughout the entire psalm. Also be aware that the preface and seasonal sentences of the eucharistic prayer in the *Service of Word and Sacrament* are no longer prayer but proclamation. Face the congregation when speaking those words up to the *Sanctus*.

As more congregations think through the principles of Lutheran worship, especially in conjunction with building or remodeling projects, the rubrics of facing the altar for prayer and the people for proclamation are being questioned. The questions arise particularly because more parishes are heeding Luther’s advice regarding the position of the altar:

In the true mass, however, of real Christians, the altar should not remain where it is, and the priest should always face the people as Christ doubtlessly did in the Last Supper. But let that await its own time.⁷⁹

Some consider the symbolism of turning to face the altar or, the liturgically east end of the sanctuary⁸⁰ to be awkward because in our culture to “turn your back on someone” is considered an insult. Others argue in response to this that worship loses the sense of God’s transcendence and overly accentuates his immanence when the presider prays facing the assembly. However, some worshipers would testify from their own experience that God’s transcendent majesty can be communicated well by the architecture and setting of the worship space, the style of music employed in the service and the presider’s demeanor without turning back and forth to the altar. In any case, treat the altar, one of the three most significant pieces of furniture in the worship

⁷⁶ *Strong, Loving and Wise* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1976), p. 63.

⁷⁷ James F. White, *Christian Worship in North America* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1997), p. 250, 259.

⁷⁸ When the altar is against the wall, it is considered to be at the liturgically east side of the worship space whether that side actually faces east or not.

⁷⁹ American Edition, Vol. 53, p. 69. Ironically, we WELS Lutherans been waiting so long to move the altar away from the east wall that the Roman Catholics have beat us to it!

⁸⁰ During early years of the church, especially in some churches in Syria, because the altar was in the middle of the building, not only the presider but also the entire congregation would turn their backs on the altar to pray facing the east, the direction from which Christ would come again in glory on the last day (in the spirit of Psalm 130: “My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning,” etc.).

space, with the reverence befitting the place from which we receive the very body and blood of Christ in the Sacrament of Holy Communion.⁸¹

The Poetry of Vestments

It would go beyond the scope of this essay to go into a detailed discussion of how musical style aids the poetry of liturgy,⁸² how it enables, in Luther's words, to "make the words come alive,"⁸³ however, it is within the scope of this essay and worth our time to discuss the presider's vestments.

Since the fourth century presiders at Christian worship have found it beneficial to wear special clothing to communicate the gospel. Over the centuries the Church has added or subtracted various vestments from the presider's ecclesiastical closet. However, the reasons for special vesture have not changed.

Ministers wear special clothing while leading public worship as a way to communicate role or responsibility. For the sake of good order it is important to know that while every member is a priest of God, not every member is a pastor or an assisting minister. When the pastor wears a gown⁸⁴ he communicates to his flock that he is their shepherd⁸⁵ and not an insurance agent trying to sell heavenly Horizon Plans. He is God's representative whose message is holiness and hope.

Vestments help write the poetry of liturgy in that they give us a sense that public worship is special. It is different from what we do in the world. Seeing the presider in a white alb conjures up visions of John's revelation of heaven where there "was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb...wearing white robes...made white in the blood of the Lamb."⁸⁶ Presiding in a black Geneva preaching gown has been likened to wearing a tuxedo—classic, commanding authority. Rather than being ostentatious as some maintain,⁸⁷ vestments help us to keep our mind on the message in a way that affirms God's gifts of beauty and ceremony.

Conclusion

Aside from the sermon, there are still 40 minutes in the divine service during which the presiding minister guides his congregation in prayer and praise and administers the sacraments. Those 40 minutes of presiding are just as important as the 20 minutes of preaching. Both aim to give glory to God. Both share the art of communicating the balance between law and gospel. Both seek to sink the gospel deeply into not only the intellect but the heart. Preaching does this mainly through verbal imagery. Presiding provides the added

⁸¹ Those who study liturgy are encouraging the use of "liturgical centers" that visually speak one simple yet powerful message. In other words, remove all the clutter that has accumulated around the font, pulpit, and altar and by placement in the worship space allow the furniture to highlight the means of grace it intends to carry. For example, removing the lid and increasing the space for water, place the font near the entrance to the nave as a visual reminder that through Baptism we receive access into God's family. Get rid of the flowers, offering plates, prayer pamphlets and cinder block-sized missal stand and move the altar away from the wall so that the presider can face the people. Provide only one pulpit/lectern proportionate in size to the altar and font, so that the sermon is not divorced from the read Word of God. Cf. James White's *Introduction to Christian Worship*, chapter 3, "The Language of Space."

⁸² Musical style does, however, set a mood for worship which should cooperate with a sacramental theology.

⁸³ Ewald Plass, ed., *What Luther Says*, Vol. II, p. 980.

⁸⁴ While the black Geneva (Calvin et al) has been the custom in the WELS for most of its history, versions of the ancient alb, stole and chasuble "have never passed wholly out of use in the Church of the Augsburg Confession" (Arthur Piepkorn, *Historic Vestments*, pp.119-120). Historic (in use since circa 400), symbolic (cf. Rev. 7), attractive (extending to nearly the ankles and not just past the knees, the free-flowing cut and color communicates a sense of beauty and joy) and economic (\$67 as compared to a \$259 pulpit robe at NPH) the white alb is gaining in popularity in our circles.

⁸⁵ As staff ministers become more commonplace in our parishes, it will be important for us to study the use of vestments (i.e. stole; chasuble, clerical collar) as a way to identify ministry, role or function of the congregation's paid, public ministers.

⁸⁶ 7:9,14.

⁸⁷ According to *Christian Worship: Manual*: "The man who leads the public worship of Gods people with a laissez-faire casualness does not serve God's people well, for he confuses them about the seriousness of both God's service to them and their service to God. His folksy leadership may do more to distract worshipers from the real purpose of worship than the ceremonial vestments he shuns because of their supposed ostentation (p. 101).

dimension of symbol, sign and ceremony. One could say that if forced to make a choice between preaching or presiding, preaching would have to win out.

However, such a decision is not being forced upon us and so we need to give presiding its due. The Lutheran pastor Wilhelm Loehe once said:

The Church remains what she is even without a Liturgy, she remains a queen in beggars' rags. It is better to give up everything else and to hold only the pure doctrine than to go about in the pomp and glory of splendid services which are without light and life because the doctrine has become impure. Yet it is not necessary to let the Church go in beggars' rags. Much better it is that her prayers, her hymns, her sacred order, the holy thoughts of her Liturgy, should be impressed upon the people.⁸⁸

The presider is a poet.
Work hard at the rhythm of the rubrics.

Soli Deo Gloria

⁸⁸ *Three Books Concerning the Church*, p. 8.

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