Worship the Lord

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Confessional Perspectives on Worship

Worship Develops: Some Historical Reflections

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The Lutheran Reformation has been called a *conservative* reformation because Luther sought to retain those historic forms and practices that could be retained without error. Luther's overall concern was pastoral. He did not want to rip from the common people those things that aided their worship and to which they had grown accustomed. He introduced change only after careful instruction.

Luther wrote to the Christians in Livonia, "For even though from the viewpoint of faith, the external orders are free and can without scruples be changed by anyone at any time, yet from the viewpoint of love, you are not free to use this liberty, but bound to consider the edification of the common people, as St. Paul says, I Corinthians 14 [:40], 'All things should be done to edify,' and I Corinthians 6 [:12]. 'All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful,' and I Corinthians 8 [:1], 'Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up'" (LW 53, 47).

The great Reformer understood that externals are not essential in the life and work of the church, but merely serve as aids. That attitude was evident in his remarks about clerical garb. "We have passed over the matter of vestments. But we think about these as we do other forms. We permit them to be used in freedom, as long as people refrain from ostentation and pomp. For you are not more acceptable for consecrating in vestments. Nor are you less acceptable for consecrating without vestments" (LW, 53, 31). Luther himself at times wore full liturgical garb, at other times his monk's robe, and at others an academic gown.

Luther produced two orders of worship, the *Formula Missae* and the *Deutsche Messe*. However, he did not insist on their use. In Christian freedom each Lutheran territory produced its own forms, although often they were patterned after these two efforts by Luther. Luther was pleased with these developments. He saw no need for absolute uniformity. For instance, he was not inclined to have a rite for confirmation in Wittenberg because of the overtones of the Roman sacrament, but he did not object when rites for confirmation were developed elsewhere.

The Leipzig Interim

In many Lutheran territories the trend was toward simplification of the historic rites and the use of the black gown in worship. When the Leipzig Interim demanded the reintroduction of more ornate vestments and medieval liturgical practice, strong voices were raised in opposition. The Gnesio-Lutherans recognized that although these things were matters of adiaphora, giving in to the demands meant compromising gospel freedom. The Formula of Concord agreed with their position.

The concern of those who opposed the provisions of the Leipzig Interim was pastoral. They feared that by giving in to these demands the laity might be led to believe that the Reformation was a mistake or misguided. These Lutheran leaders believed that rites should be simplified to prevent superstitious understanding. Amsdorf suggested that altars should be free-standing so that the words of institution would be a gospel proclamation to the congregations. He wanted to avoid any impression that the minister with his back to the congregation was reciting some sort of secret or magical formula.

The Prussian Union

Lutheran liturgical practice began to decline during the age that Pietism was in the ascendancy (ca. 1675–ca. 1740). The decline accelerated during the Enlightenment (ca. 1740–ca. 1830). The

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Continued on next page

doctrine and practices of the Lutheran Reformation were pushed into the background as pietists and rationalists downplayed doctrine and exalted personal experience and human reason.

The early 19th century saw a reawakening of confessional Lutheranism. Claus Harms (1778–1855) sounded a clarion call on the occasion of the 300th anniversary of the posting of Luther's Ninety-five Theses by reissuing them and adding ninety-five theses of his own. Harms wrote his theses because of the proposed Prussian Union, rationalism, and the influence of philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). As the forced merger of Lutherans and Reformed proceeded in Prussia, confessional Lutherans began to find their voice.

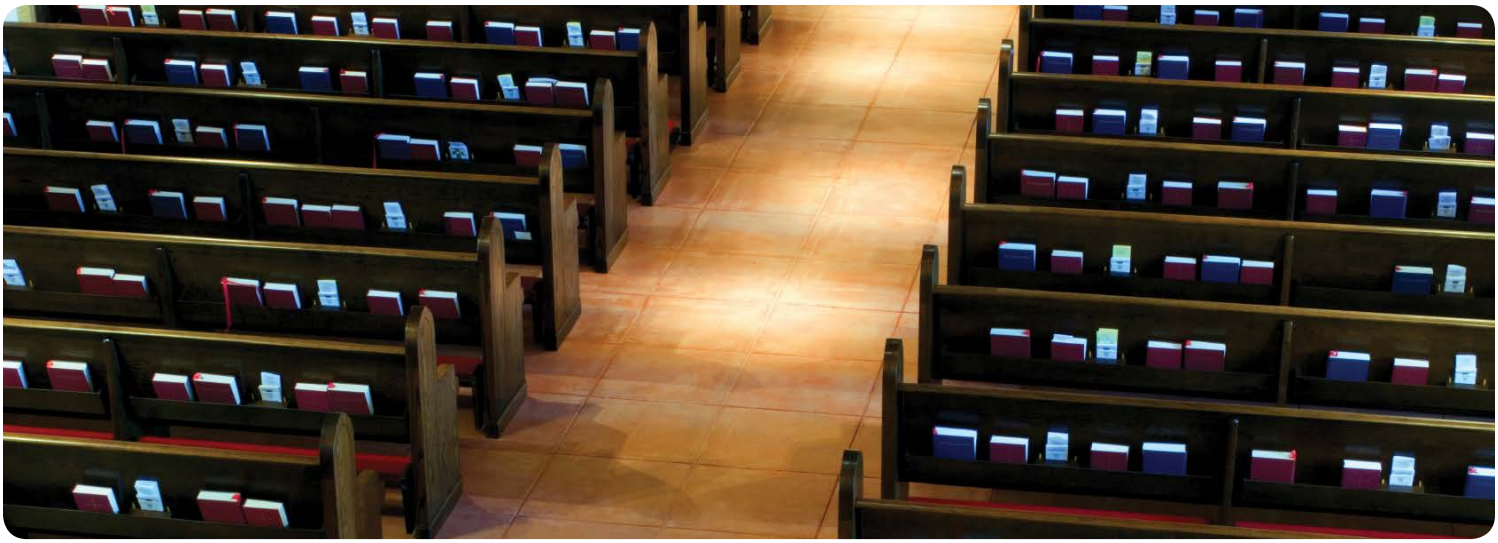
Frederick William III of Prussia (1770–1840) had a problem. For two centuries his family had been Reformed rulers of a predominantly Lutheran territory. Frederick was troubled that he could not partake of the Lord's Supper with the majority of his subjects or with his Lutheran wife. He set out to change things.

His 1811 order that all clergy wear a black robe seems to have met with little opposition, probably because this was already a long-standing Lutheran practice in many parts of Germany. His 1822 Union Agenda, however, was another story. Interestingly enough, liturgical scholars credit Frederick's agenda with a return to better liturgies of the past. Lutherans, however, objected to it because the words of institution were presented in a way that would allow both Reformed and Lutherans to read in their own understanding of the real presence. The effects of the Prussian Union ultimately resulted in the establishment of free churches and the emigration of confessionally-minded Lutherans to America. The confessional revival also spurred interest in a recovery of the Lutheran liturgy.

Lutheranism in America in the 19th Century

When German Lutherans began to emigrate to America in large numbers in the 1830s and the decades which followed, they brought with them a bewildering variety of hymnals, service books, prayer books, and practices that they were used to in the various territorial churches. One scholar has estimated that in Saxony alone there were seventy-five different hymnbooks in use.

The immigrant pastors and people who made up the early Wisconsin Synod came from various parts of Germany. So there was little uniformity in the hymnals and service books they used. The vast majority of the early pastors were sent out by pietistic and unionistic mission societies.



Because of their training and the conditions they found in frontier America (especially if they served multiple congregations and preaching stations), these mission society emissaries conducted simple services with an emphasis on preaching. In the absence of musical instruments, pastors and cantors (*Vorsänger*) led the singing. The first congregations to have organs installed seem to have been St. Mark's in Watertown in 1857 and Grace in Milwaukee in 1858. J.P. Koehler describes the early worship in the Wisconsin Synod in his *History of the Wisconsin Synod*.

> The order of service at the beginning was very simple. Responses were seldom if at all used, and when they were used, the pastors seldom chanted the versicle. They opened the service by speaking the entire Adjutorium ("our help" etc.) without congregational response. Then followed the Hymn, Collect, Scripture Lesson, and Creed, possibly responded to by the congregation with Amen or Hallelujah. After another hymn followed the Sermon, with the General Prayer and special Supplications, then a closing hymn, the benediction, and closing verse. The Communion Service was distinguished by the Agnus Dei and the Sanctus (Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod*, p. 70).

Our Wisconsin Synod fathers had to wrestle with what it meant to be Lutheran in America. In the early years of the synod's history the "American" Lutheran controversy was raging. The "American" Lutherans, led by men like Samuel Schmucker, believed that the only way for Lutheranism to survive in this country was to conform to the generic sort of Protestantism that had developed

here. They advocated revivalism and deplored liturgical worship. Schmucker and his colleagues sought to purge from Lutheranism everything that seemed to them to smack of Romanism. In 1855 they anonymously issued the General Synodical Platform with its American Recension of the Augsburg Confession. The Recension removed from the Augustana baptismal regeneration, the real presence in the Lord's Supper, and private confession.

> *Change in accord with sound principles is always in place.*

Schmucker sent the Platform to Lutherans throughout America including the Wisconsin Synod. Although our forefathers were "New" Lutherans who were willing to serve the German Reformed, they were not in agreement with the "American" Lutherans. The Wisconsin Synod convention in 1856 declared the Definite Synodical Platform to be "the definite suicide of the Lutheran Church."

The rejection of the Platform spared the young Wisconsin Synod from the effects of revivalism and the gutting of the Augsburg Confession. It was a good first step in the direction of confessional Lutheranism, but it did not solve all of the challenges in worship. The variety of hymnals brought to America by the immigrants created difficulties even within individual congregations as members brought their own hymnals to worship. Naturally the hymn numbers in the various books did not correspond with each other; different hymnals contained different hymns; and even when the hymns were the same, the number of verses included for each hymn was often different. Lutheran hymnals produced in America were of uneven quality. Most of these hymnals contained no liturgies. Pastors had an *agenda* with orders of worship and pastoral acts. The congregations had to learn responses by rote. Often there were no congregational responses.

In 1858 a teacher withdrew his acceptance of a call to John Muehlhaeuser's Grace, Milwaukee congregation because the congregation was using what was referred to as a "United Lutheran and Reformed Hymnal." Not only did the hymnal contain very few good Lutheran hymns, some hymns contained false doctrine.

Slowly Muehlhaeuser's brand of Lutheranism was replaced by a greater confessionalism. The arrival of pastors like John Bading, Philip Koehler, and Adolf Hoenecke began to change the theological direction of the synod.

It also seems as if some of the newcomers had a better understanding of worship than Muehlhaeuser. Koehler writes, "The Langenberg missionaries received a full and well-oriented course in liturgics and brought their own agenda along as part of their equipment, in many cases several of them" (p. 70). Bading and a few others had come from areas like Berlin and Hermannsburg which had "richer" liturgical forms than Muehlhaeuser knew in Swabia.

By the late 1850s and early 1860s concern was publicly expressed about the hymnal most commonly in use, the Pennsylvania Hymnal, often called the *Wollenweber Hymnal* after the name of the publisher. It was not a sound Lutheran hymnal. Some suggested the synod produce an agenda or service book so that there could be more uniformity among the congregations of the synod. The synod even went on record in 1857 to lend its support to the Ohio's Synod's request that the Pennsylvania Synod revise its agenda. Shortly thereafter the Wisconsin Synod came under some criticism for using the "rationalist Pennsylvania Agenda." In 1864 the synod approved the use of the new Ohio Synod Agenda. Wisconsin did not publish its own agenda until 1896.

After several unsuccessful attempts to find an acceptable hymnal for general use the synod decided to develop one of its own. By May of 1870 the new hymnal was ready. The *Evangel.-Lutherische Gesangbuch* contained 695 hymns of which most were identical to those in Missouri's *Kirchengesangbuch*. Almost immediately there were complaints about the doctrinal soundness of some of the hymns included. A committee quickly set about revising the hymnal. Two years later the revised hymnal was published. The new hymnal did not find immediate acceptance in the synod's congregations. St. Mark's in Watertown for one adopted the Missouri Synod hymnal and did not begin using the Wisconsin Synod hymnal until the 1890s. However, by the early 20th century the majority of the synod's congregations were using it.

Continuing Change

Perhaps the most dramatic change in worship in our synod was the change from German to English. Many saw the need for an English hymnal for the sake of the people and mission work. In 1911 the Wisconsin Synod published *Church Hymnal* which contained some orders of worship, but included only 115 hymns. It did not receive wide acceptance. In 1917 the synod published the *Book of Hymns* which contained 320. Unfortunately poorer quality English hymns became more popular than some of the better English hymns and English translations of the Lutheran chorales. J.P. Koehler's articles on the Lutheran chorale and the efforts of Fritz Reuter (1863–1924) and others at Dr. Martin Luther College gradually brought about a renewed appreciation of Lutheran hymnody.

> *While recognizing the need for Christian freedom, they also saw the value of greater uniformity as members visited and transferred to other congregations.*

The Wisconsin Synod's first seventy-five years saw little uniformity in worship with a variety of hymnals and orders of service being used even after the synod published an agenda and hymnals of its own. These hymnals and agendas were of unequal quality. Pastors had concerns about the theological soundness of some of the hymnals and service books. While recognizing the need for

Continued on back page

Christian freedom, they also saw the value of greater uniformity as members visited and transferred to other congregations.

Prior to the publication of *The Lutheran Hymnal* the Missouri Synod also saw little consistency in worship. A letter to the editor in Missouri's *The Lutheran Witness* in 1933 urged greater uniformity.

> In my home town there are about 25 churches of the Missouri Synod, and I do not know of two that use the same liturgy. Some pastors and organists have reduced the liturgy to the merest skeleton, while others have made a very elaborate affair out of it….
>
> I am fairly well acquainted in the U.L.C. churches in this and other cities, and I have yet to find one that does not strictly adhere to the liturgy as printed in their hymnal. That certainly is to their credit.
>
> Prior to 1916 my business caused me to travel a great deal in the United States. I always carried a copy of the *Lutheran Annual* with me, so that I could locate one of our churches if I had to stay in a strange city over Sunday. There again I found many varieties of liturgies. Some were translations from the German, while others had composed an entirely new one (*Lutheran Witness*, February 4, 1933, p. 57).

The *Lutheran Hymnal* of 1941 remedied the lack of uniformity in worship. It achieved a fairly rapid acceptance, if not a universal one. The Common Service became standard, but the commendable uniformity almost eliminated variety. Most congregations did not vary from page 5 and page 15, except perhaps for festival services often of the homemade variety. The introduction of *Christian Worship and Christian Worship Supplement* has greatly improved variety in worship while also providing uniformity.

Luther was always cautious to introduce change only after careful instruction. Leaders in our synod showed wisdom in the way both The *Lutheran Hymnal* and *Christian Worship* were introduced to the synod's congregations. They wrote articles for synodical periodicals and even produced samplers to help the laity become accustomed to the changes that would take place. Wise pastors had their people practice new hymns and settings as the hymnals were introduced.

The history of worship in our synod has been a history of change in forms, customs, and worship space. Church architecture today is vastly different from that of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. No longer do men sit on one side of the church and women and children on the other. The black Luther gown with beffchen gave way to the black (and sometimes white) Geneva. Some pastors have worn cassock and surplice. Today the alb is most common. Historical and liturgical research has recovered for us a rich Lutheran heritage. Contemporary interest in worship has resulted in new hymns, music, and a variety of musical instruments.

One liturgical scholar suggests that change in accord with sound principles is always in place.

> The genius of Lutheranism reacts not only against a casual or irreverent approach to God, but also against externality and display in public worship. We seek to approach God directly, simply, sincerely. The simplicity and forthrightness of our liturgy require corresponding qualities in its setting and rendition. Overelaboration, fussy decoration, excessive ceremonial, concertistic music are all out of harmony with the Lutheran understanding. A strong sense of historic values and of what is inherently worshipful, distinctive, and beautiful, however, is entirely in the Lutheran spirit.

Creative activity, controlled by established principles, should be encouraged. We must expect the liturgy itself to receive minor revisions from time to time—and possibly some development. Use and criticism will lead to compression and elimination, particularly in some occasional services. New collects and prayers will meet new needs. In the hymnal there will be subtractions and additions (Luther Reed, *The Lutheran Liturgy*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1947, p. 225–226).

History shows that there is value in both uniformity and variety. Common sense suggests stressing excellence and avoiding faddishness and offense.

Conclusion

History teaches lessons. From Luther we learn that there is nothing wrong with letting people enjoy what they are familiar with and there is nothing wrong with introducing change. Both require education so that people understand what they are doing. From the post Reformation era we learn that externals can give false impressions and cause offense. Caution must always be exercised. From our synodical fathers we learn that our worship forms and hymns must be doctrinally sound. History shows that there is value in both uniformity and variety. Common sense suggests stressing excellence and avoiding faddishness and offense. We must always ask, what is most useful to foster worship among our people? No doubt, the answer will be to use the best of the old and select the best of the new.

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