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CELEBRATING THE MOSAIC

A PERSPECTIVE ON LUTHERAN WORSHIP IN CANADA

Roger W. Nostbakken

My grandfather was a lay preacher, a Norwegian lay preacher. There are probably none of those left in Canada any more. However, 40 to 50 years ago he would go occasionally from place to place holding meetings, preaching to small groups assembled in homes; talking to people about their faith, visiting the sick and so on. Every summer we had “tent meetings” on his farm. Special speakers and singers were invited, pot luck suppers and lunches brought in. There, during the hot, dusty summers of the 1930s there would be music and song, sometimes tears and occasionally laughter as the attempt was made in that way to reach the community with the Gospel. During the rest of the year we depended on pastors to come by occasionally, perhaps once a month. Always the services were in the homes of our families. The music was a small reed organ or guitar (or the dog) and later pianos; the service book was the Concordia.

The style and the piety of those services were formative for me. As a child I did not go to church buildings to worship—we had none. They were only for the funerals of United Church or Catholic neighbors. We had no Sunday School, confirmation was taught by our fathers or not at all, and communion was about four times a year. Worship was not something done—it was experienced; it was not a form or ritual so much as a gathering for song, prayer, confession of personal sin and personal faith, and hearing a personally directed exposition. That deeply felt piety which was frequently expressed in the pietistic concern for a lifestyle which exemplified one’s faith was often typically expressed in the call for “varme hjerter” (warm hearts). Liturgical form, orthodox preaching, leadership by the clergy were set aside or incidental. What was important was a living faith, a spiritual experience, an alive Christianity. The

same Haugean piety and style suspicious of outward form was embodied in the constitution of a congregation in the first parish I served in the provision that “the minister shall neither chant nor wear a gown”.

Everyone could tell a story of something similarly unique; whether the unique piety or style of a particular ethnic tradition or the peculiarity of a particular congregation. All of these stories combine to form a part of the mosaic of cultural and pious tradition which presently characterizes Canadian Lutheranism, a mosaic which is to be celebrated. I can in no way separate myself from the piety of my personal family and ethnic roots. There is much in that which I have set aside or gone on from. It would be a mistake, however, to reject the basic concern for the living faith which underlay that whole stratum of Norwegian piety.

We need to reflect on the variety of our worship tradition—to consider its strengths, its weaknesses and offer some suggestions of what this means for the present and the future.

THE PRESENT SITUATION

Pluralism

We live in a society whose religious traditions are formed by much more than our minority Lutheran ethnic roots. Our society is in fact almost radically pluralistic. In addition to the main liturgical traditions of the Roman Catholic, the Anglican and the Lutheran churches, we are very much conditioned by the relatively austere tradition of the Reformed, i.e., Presbyterian and United Church. Many of us were raised in communities where the major Protestant influence was the United Church. They have a “service” rather than a liturgy and the worship is primarily non-sacramental, centering on the sermon and prayers rather than on a concept of the “Word” heard in proclamation and made visibly present in Sacrament. The influence of the Reformed attitudes in Lutheran worship is much more pervasive than one might think. In a typical United Church the pulpit sits squarely and dominantly in the centre of the “stage” or chancel. This sermon-centred view of worship strikes a resonant chord among some Lutherans who assume that this was behind Luther’s emphasis on the Word. But the richness of Luther’s incarnational theology of the Word “spoken” in the sermon, visibly “present” in the Sacraments and expressed in the “mutual conversation and consolation” of the Christian community is thereby often dissipated.

Of more recent influence is the burgeoning evangelical fundamentalist movement. With characteristic emphasis on changed lives, decisive commitment and spontaneity of expression together with a winsome appeal to youth and an “entertainment” concept of worship, their effect on worship patterns has also been decisive.

Within this context of North American religious pluralism, the assumption that the Lutheran Church is liturgical is today generally taken for granted. As a matter of fact, however, until recent years relatively little attention was paid to liturgy and to the nature of corporate worship. For many Lutherans, perhaps especially those under the influence of pietism, fundamentalism or their Reformed neighbors, the liturgy was virtually an adiaiphoron. What was really important was preaching and a more or less

regular, if infrequent, celebration of the Lord's Supper. Article VII of the Augsburg Confession was commonly invoked as confessional warrant for the assigning of liturgy to the status of handmaiden to the pastor's imagination. It was commonplace for pastors to subtract from the "order of service", to introduce innovations, or simply to improvise. The result was what Herbert Lindeman has called "liturgical chaos". This was reflected in nondescript church architecture, a high degree of subjectivism and romanticism in church music and a general sterility in the liturgy itself. Since the service was sermon-centred, pastors strove very hard to make the liturgy an appropriate setting for their homiletical performances. Many Lutherans too have regarded the Sunday worship, therefore, as a kind of religious entertainment with the pastor in the principal role and the choir as supporting cast.

Obviously a fundamental problem is the failure to understand the nature of worship as corporate, the action of the Christian community. Television evangelism in North America has unfortunately reinforced the view that worship is primarily a spectacle engaged in by professionals and watched by the masses who participate only at the invitation and under the direction of the clergy.

The theological poverty of such an attitude towards worship and liturgy is understandable in view of the fact that, until recently in most Lutheran seminaries in North America, "liturgics" has been a kind of poor cousin to other classes. Systematic theology has traditionally tended to overlook worship and has failed to present the relationship between liturgy and theology. Liturgy has indeed been regarded as the concern of certain specialists, but little effort has been made to understand the inter-relatedness of liturgy and theology. At many seminaries students who have tried to pursue this relationship have been regarded as liturgical cranks who were interested only in esoterica.

Discarding the Old

Another characteristic of the present has been a tendency simply to discard the old for the sake of novelty and change. This was perhaps more prominent in the 1960s and 1970s than at the moment. I can recall, however, in the early days of the change from the *Service Book and Hymnal* to the *Lutheran Book of Worship* one pastor earnestly affirming his conviction that there would never be another hymn book. "We will have a looseleaf book," he said, "we will be able to add new hymns and throw away old ones from year to year." The musical and lyrical poverty of many of the "folk hymns" has of course hastened their early demise. Now many of the rock liturgies and folk hymns seem hopelessly dated and more out of tune with reality than the old hymns. The urgent desire to be relevant has rendered irrelevant what one might call the "hippy stage" of worship renewal. A residue of that movement remains, however, and must retain its legitimate place in our mosaic. What we should have been taught from that period is that change can no more be institutionalized than can a particular tradition. Openness and acceptance ought to be hallmarks of our attitude towards any attempt to incorporate legitimate aspects of our culture and

piety into our worship.

The Renewal of Liturgy

A further aspect of the context of our worship life today is the worldwide phenomenon of the renewal of worship. In Europe, in Asia, in Africa, as well as in North America, there has for the past two decades been an intensive activity of renewal. The Scandinavian countries have devised and approved new liturgies, hymnals, organ settings and produced new translations of the Bible. In Africa concerted efforts are made to incorporate tribal cultural forms and indigenous music into the worship setting. Among the vivid memories many of us have from the LWF Assembly in Dar Es Salaam are the drum accompaniments to the worship and the spontaneous ululation which were part of the singing of the large choirs.

In Asia there is now a *Christian Conference of Asia Hymnal* and there is a recently formed *Asian Institute for Liturgy and Music*.¹ The new code word for much of this worldwide activity is "contextualization", meaning that one is motivated from one's own culture in the process of the renewal of liturgy and hymns. In North America the most obvious fruit of the renewal of worship is our *Lutheran Book of Worship*. It is a book by no means universally loved and admired. Its innovation of liturgical style, the selection and resetting of hymns, its attempted inclusive language and its concerted effort to better integrate our theology into our worship has pleased many but infuriated others. But there is in this new book of worship an attempt faithfully to reflect the mosaic of our worship life and piety. It also makes a conscious effort to emphasize the central tradition of worship which transcends periods of history and cultural and linguistic barriers. There is, after all, a central core to worship universal in its scope which goes back to the early church and is reaffirmed in the Reformation. In that sense worship embodies and expresses our theology. It is the expression of the life of faith; it is where for many the concrete actualization of the Christian life and the life of the church takes place.

Contextualization is necessary or worship becomes an irrelevant exercise removed from life. Where contextualization goes too far the central core of worship is lost in a local form and it loses its universality.

HONOURING OUR TRADITIONS

A concern to discover our roots in the past is certainly a prominent feature of our generation. Many of us are first or second generation immigrants. For Lutherans this has in the past meant primarily German, Polish, Scandinavian, French and British traditions. It is important, indeed essential, that we remember and preserve the past. Without it we have no sense of history. Without it we fail to appreciate or even understand those influences which have made us what we are. While the languages

1. Japan in 1976 published a collection of 50 hymns which balances traditional and contemporary Japanese hymns with hymns from other cultures.

and the culture may be disappearing, we should try to avoid the melting pot syndrome and preserve the mosaic. This should not be simply a nostalgic attempt to “re-live” the past. Rather our concern should be to preserve and strengthen in our worship those elements of piety and theology which may help to correct some of the aberrant aspects of our current culture and life-style. The tendency in the “melting pot” model is to reduce everything to the lowest common denominator. The “mosaic” model attempts to put into meaningful relationship something of everything which creates the whole picture. It wants to honour, respect, cherish, preserve and enliven the best of all of our traditions. This has both cultural and linguistic implications. I am very sympathetic to the argument of the Quebecois that the disappearance of the language means the disappearance of the culture. In North America we are linguistic imperialists. We forget our old languages and refuse to learn any new ones, requiring instead that everyone learn our English language. This is the “melting pot” model and it impoverishes us. Some people say, “I can’t learn another language. I’ve tried and I simply can’t.” At the same time we expect old and uneducated Italian, Portugese, African, South American, Vietnamese, to learn our language. I have even suggested to some of our bilingual pastors, “Don’t be so anxious to get out of your bilingual parishes, you have something important to contribute to our worship, our church and our society.”

Our Canadian mosaic is exceptionally rich and diverse. Any Canadian airport looks like a small U.N. and it sounds like one. Our Lutheran mosaic is also very rich and getting more so. We can honor these traditions and let them freshen and renew the quality of our worship and our life together. The following are some of the ways in which our various traditions have enriched and continue to renew us. While they are in no sense exhaustive, they are meant to offer a glimpse of some special parts of the mosaic.

The Germans—a Theology of Grace

In the movie, “Those Wonderful Men in Their Flying Machines”, a considerable joke was made out of the German passion for order, thoroughness and doing things by the book. This, together with a penchant for involved if persuasive argumentation have often been noted as typically German. However, the most evident feature which characterizes the German contribution to the Lutheran mosaic is the theology of grace—preserved by faithful interpretation in sermons, hymns, teaching and liturgy. The traditional German concern for “pure teaching” reflects much more than a desire to do things right. It is the fundamental concern that the grace notes of the Gospel be heard through *all* our work and worship. This is reflected even in a great reverence and respect for the house of worship as a place of beauty for which the best is given. I have never failed to be impressed by the typical German congregation’s care for its place of worship, and the reverence of the people in worship together with their respect for the pastor who is the servant of the Gospel. Luther’s exaltation of the Word as that which proclaims our salvation has been preserved in the great chorales, the strong doctrinal emphasis and the sober worship of the German heritage. Preaching occupied a place of special importance in this tradition, a strong doctrinal preaching aimed at teaching the people for the harsh realities of life. Those preachers were great rhetoricians, capable of striking awe, inspiring response and building up

the faith for the life God called us to live. There was implicit here a theology of the cross but also a warm and devotional piety intended not only to direct but to comfort and strengthen the believer in day to day life. The slow paced hymn singing and liturgy of the German tradition carry beneath it a profound religious passion embodying both an acceptance of what is difficult and a hope and trust in the mercy of God.

The Norwegians—An Authentic Christian Life

Many people of Norwegian background have spent a good deal of energy in recent years convincing others that they are not pietists. Pietism has for so long been such a whipping boy for seminarians' sermons that one would think it a pernicious disease for which a cure is certainly desirable but likely not possible. But there is something in pietism that needs to be preserved.

Among the Norwegians two main liturgical and worship traditions were present. One was the formal and correct liturgy of the old Norwegian Synod; the other was the antiformalism or the so-called free service of the Haugean pietistic background. In actual practice both used the same service but with various additions and deletions, *both* reflecting the music and worship patterns of the Norwegian Church.

Embedded in and common to both the pietists and the formalists however was a deep concern for the personal religious life. The Lord's Supper was a time for penitence and reflection on the state of one's soul. Confession and absolution were always a part of that. There was an abhorrence of going unworthily to the Lord's Table. It is true that the two traditions were often at loggerheads. The pietists thought the formalists pompous, self-righteous and spiritually dead in their orthodoxy. The formalists thought the pietists legalistic, over-emotional and theologically unsound. But binding both traditions was the liturgy of Thomas Kingo, the hymnody of Landstad and the piety of Pontoppidan's explanation of the Small Catechism. Two paintings in particular capture the religious mood of that tradition: Tiedemand's, *The Haugeaners*, and *Bondebegravelse*. Both honour the essence of the Norwegian tradition; "warmth and an authentic religious experience in which one's life and work have a kind of integrity".²

The Swedes—Reverence, Order and Beauty

As in the other Scandinavian countries Sweden too had been influenced by a religious revival in the 19th century. This revival under the influence of Rosenius brought the pietistic emphasis into the relative formalism of the Swedish tradition. In immigrating to North America both emphases were combined to a unique degree. This was in no small part due to Lars Esbjorn's bringing of the Swedish manual of liturgy to the new land. It became the basis for the worship of Swedish Lutherans in North America. Swedish pastors coming to North America were imbued with the tradition of a uniform order reflecting the Swedish respect for order and tradition.

A combination of reverence, respect for order and beauty seem to characterize the Swedish tradition. The liturgy was "higher" and the pastors more formally vested

2. Gracia Grindal, "Two Tendencies in Interaction," *Una Sancta*, p. 16, in *Lutheran Forum* (Reformation, 1981).

than in some of the other traditions. This was however an evidence of the Swedish desire that what was done be in consonance with the Scriptures and the Church's confessional writings. Perhaps more than others the Swedes also stressed the observance of the festivals of the church year, a practice foreign to the Reformed environment of the new land.

Embodied in the Swedish tradition was "veneration for the church building, respect for an educated and ordained clergy, a sense of order and beauty in worship, that expressed itself in age-old chorales and Bach music, in liturgical confession, proclamation, prayer and praise".³ The piety of the people was closely allied with the language and the daily devotional readings from Swedish writers. As the language disappeared so did some of the traditional piety. However, the devotional spirit of the older generation carried over and with it came a new reaching out to fellow Lutherans. That fulsome co-operative spirit remains strong in North American Lutheranism today.

The Danes—Worship, Song and Daily Life

The liturgical tradition of the Danes is often seen as the simplest or least formal of all. Under the influence of pietism and rationalism the Danish liturgy lost such elements as the confession of sin, Kyrie, Gloria, Alleluia, etc. in the 18th century. In the 19th century when a kind of romantic liturgical revival took place, many of the missing parts were simply replaced by hymns and prayers. As a consequence a typical Danish service in North America contains as many as 5 hymns (8 for communion) and they became the principal form of the congregation's participation in the service. (Many Danes deplore the lack of their hymns in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*.) Two persons contributed especially to this development. Soren Kierkegaard's celebrated and devastating attacks on formal Christianity combined with an unusual wealth of hymnody to produce this less formal emphasis in the service. Further, in addition to being a prolific writer of hymns, the influence of N.F.S. Grundtvig looms very large. He emphasized strongly the union of religion and culture; the uniting of the Christian life with the community. This emphasis on the living out of the faith in the community was a distinctive Danish contribution. Worship and every-day life were seen to be harmonious. The worshipping community is important, so that worship itself, especially sacramental worship, is a basic expression of the faith.

Summary Comments

To cover all the traditions in Lutheranism is too large a task to cover here. This is in no way intended to minimize the contributions of Anglo-Saxon, Icelandic, Hungarian, Latvian, Estonian, Lithuanian, Latin American or any other tradition. All of the latter are numerically smaller patterns of our mosaic, though no less important for that reason. Each has a contribution to make which is to be honoured and, we hope, not lost. But there is a commonality in these traditions as well, a commonality well expressed by Egil Grislis. "The celebration of the Holy Eucharist is still an event of distinctive import for all Latvian Lutherans. Church services, with minor-key hymns and devout silence, moments of quiet reverence and ceaseless efforts for the

3. Conrad Bergendoff, "Singing the Lord's Song in a New Land," *Una Sancta*, p. 18, *ibid*.

preservation of the priestly context of the faith are clear indications of the Latvian respect for their tradition. Similarly, Latvian love of nature, of solitude and of intense privacy in communion with God are all dimensions of the Christian faith that have continued. The same is true of the attempt to speak the truth boldly and to obey the prophetic call to value justice. Of course, none of these individual elements is completely new. They can be recognized as rooted in a traditional Lutheran religious lifestyle.⁴ It would be foolish to expect to retain all that we might love from our particular traditions. It is a good thing that some things have passed; infrequency of communion, excessive sombreness of celebration, exclusively male clergy, dirge-like singing of hymns and liturgy, the inevitable association of confession and absolution with the Eucharist. However, the piety, the warmth, the concern for sound doctrine, the love of the Gospel, the unity of language, culture and piety are all to be treasured and insofar as possible preserved. There is a richness there which must not in the service of commonality be reduced to the level of universal understanding. Rather these traditions can lift, inspire, renew and challenge us afresh.

PRESERVING THE FUNDAMENTALS

The Nature of Lutheran Worship

Common to all our traditions are certain fundamentals which form the basis over which the cultural mosaic is laid. These fundamentals rise out of the universal Christian tradition and the unique Lutheran genius. The Lutheran liturgy is intended to be both a verbal and visible proclamation of the Word of God. It is also intended to be an expression of the response of God's people to that Word. In this sense the liturgy is the corporate action of the Christian community—it is literally the “work of the people” (*leitourgia*) in response to the “work of God” which is accomplished through *Spoken Word* and *Sacramental Word*. There is thus in our understanding of Lutheran worship a balance between the action of God and the action of the people. *We act in response to God's action.*

In many Protestant churches a quite different opinion seems to be the case. There the service is both constructed and conducted as an action on the part of the people calling for a response on God's part. It is as though we can persuade God to bless us because of our imagination, energy or creativity in the service. In such a context worship becomes neither God's action nor our response. Rather it is human action directed towards us with the hope that God is watching and will be pleased. The key seems to be spectacle and entertainment—with a lot of pizzaz and ingenious sensationalism. The service is seen basically as competition with secular entertainment for people's interest and loyalty. Accordingly churches are increasingly constructed like theatres with sloping floors and stage-like chancels. The clever use of drapes and lighting enhances the theatrical atmosphere. Our prominent television evangelists are the best examples of how far this has gone—for they literally compete for dollars with their T.V. spectaculars passing as religious services.

Our mania for entertainment in North America makes the proper understanding of

4. Egil Grisliis, “The Quest for a Prophetic Piety,” *Una Sancta*, p. 24, *ibid*.

the liturgy all the more important and difficult. Television induces passivity and encourages spectatorship rather than participation and expression. We need a recovery of the genuine worship of Word and Response. This does not mean liturgy is dull and drab and undramatic. Luther in the Smalcald Articles speaks of the many ways in which the Gospel can be proclaimed—he lists proclamation, sacrament, exercise of the keys and the mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren (a beautiful phrase). There is a richness and comprehensiveness in this view which can be of help to us.

It was out of a conviction of its centrality for the faith that Luther argued worship should be an expression of the faith life of the common person. Worship therefore should be in the vernacular; it should be understood as grace not law; the liturgy should be designed for “unlearned lay folk” and children⁵; preaching and teaching of God’s Word should be central as that which upbuilds the faith. He thus ridiculed the separation of clergy and the laity into two classes of people, as though worship was uniquely appropriate to the clergy. Rather, Luther consistently expressed the view that worship was of the essence of the life of faith, to be understood as an actualizing of the new life. Worship is therefore not an esoteric activity engaged in by a spiritual elite in isolation from the world; it is the expression of God’s work in the church and of the work of the faithful in the world in which they live. It is celebration of what God had done, of His continuing presence, and of the expectation of the new age. Worship thus properly involves the congregation, not just the pastor—all are equally part of the worship; choir, reader, offering takers—all are ministers. It is not an action performed for the church; it is the action of the church itself in the very expression of its life. The liturgy becomes the mode for the presence of the church, “. . . the actualization in this world of the ‘world to come’, in this aeon of the Kingdom”.⁶ Given such an understanding of the liturgy as an expression both of God’s proclamation through verbal and concrete word and of our response, every worship should be charged with high expectation.

The liturgical renewal movement is one of the best of churchly developments in the 20th century; it most effectively and universally of all expresses the theology of the church in language and forms appropriate to the 20th century. One may quibble about musical settings, selection of hymns, lectionary choices, etc. The fact remains that the liturgy is really the theology of the people. Through the forms of the confession of sin and faith; through the hearing of the Word; through the celebration of the Sacraments; through song and prayer; in adoration and supplication we express what we believe and what we hope.

Preaching, sacrament, community are the concrete forms of Christ’s continuing presence. He is not a spiritual wraith somewhere in the wild blue yonder at God’s right hand. He is right here in my pastor who stands in the pulpit; in the water, the bread and the wine; in my sisters and brothers who are beside me. The liturgy is not entertainment; it is not meaningless form and repetition; it is not ecclesiastical pageantry—it is the living actualization of the Gospel among us—in a dramatic and

5. *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 32, p. 63.

6. A. Schmemman, “Theology and Liturgical Tradition,” *Worship in Scripture and Tradition*, edited by Massey H. Shepherd (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 165-78.

variegated form appropriate to our lives and circumstances.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

In reviewing our cultural mosaic I have to some extent been looking backward to those immigrant ethnic and cultural traditions which have made us what we are. The best of those traditions must be preserved, loved and indeed enhanced. We surely do not want our lovely smorgasbord to become a cultural porridge. But there are other patterns yet waiting to be added to this mosaic. As one travels our country from sea to sea, one sees and experiences the beauty of the Maritimes, the lushness of central Canada, the sweep of the prairies and the grandeur of the Rockies. One also experiences the harshness of our climate but senses the vitality of our multiculturalism. Our basic tradition of openness and respect for others must continue to be reflected in the patterns of our worship and our life together as a Christian community. We have yet to be enriched by the Inuit, Indian and Metis traditions. The influence of French culture is as yet minimal. As we look toward establishment of a new Lutheran Church in Canada we need to begin to incorporate into our life and worship those uniquely Canadian characteristics which can enrich not only ourselves but the world wide community of Christians. This is the challenge which lies before us. In faithfulness to the Gospel and in respect for the multiform variety of the people of God in our land, let us take up the challenge with creativity and enthusiasm.