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Liturgical Renewal and McDonaldization

By Daniel Johnson

What is McDonaldization?

Imagine with me that it is the 1950s, and you are going on a road trip down Route 66. You get hungry, so you decide to stop for food. You pull off the side of the road and park in front of a classic American diner to get yourself a burger and fries.

Every diner is slightly different. This diner has several details which catch your attention. Perhaps the name of the joint is unique. Maybe it's a silly name, maybe it's the family's name, or maybe it's a regional name. Perhaps the logo looks unique—a unique color, artwork, font, texture, and so forth. Perhaps the artwork in the diner is unique. Maybe with black and white photos, or maybe there are posters of national parks, or maybe there are car models.

You sit down and wait to order, and comb through the menu. The menu is also slightly unique. Sure, every diner you have been to has burger and fries, but they all have their own variation on the theme. This one maybe has outer-space themed burgers. Maybe it has wild west themed burgers.

Your waitress comes and asks for your order. Every waitress (or waiter) at the diners you have been to has the same job: take your order, give the food to you, check on you, and close out your tab. But the way in which they do this job is always slightly different. This waitress maybe starts with a silly joke. Or maybe they have a certain line they recite to welcome you. Maybe they make recommendations. Maybe they don't. So on, and so on.

The point is, 70 years ago, each diner was slightly different, but they all had something in common: burger and fries. They all had the same essential theme, but each had their own variation on that theme. The variations were celebrated and expected. If the central theme was not there, then the diner would feel like a bad diner. If you went to a diner, and they didn't have burger and fries, but only sold salads, you would be outraged! If you went to a diner, and the walls were blank, it would feel wrong!

Fast forward with me 70 years later to today, and let's go on a road trip. You get in your fancy 21st century car and head down the road and get hungry. You want a burger and fries. Where do you stop? You go to McDonalds, or a to a chain very much like McDonalds.

You have been to hundreds of McDonalds. You have lost count. And they are all basically the same. Sure there are minor variations, every McDonalds has differing levels of quality, the bathrooms may or may not be cleaned, etc., but everything is basically the same. The architecture is the all the same. They all have that familiar logo, those iconic golden arches. They all have that drab tan-colored siding. They all have familiar artwork. The flooring is all the same. The furniture is all the same. There might only be three floor plans for every McDonalds in the whole country. The menu is the same everywhere. The same dollar menu. The same entrees. The same drinks. Sure, there is some slight variation, but it's all basically the same. Even the prices are all basically the same, depending on the municipality. The customer service is basically all the same too. The same perfunctory performance of the ordering process is pretty much expected at every joint, although with a major exception being made for especially friendly cashiers. We even have started to get rid of customer service and have started to use kiosks or our phones to order instead! I could go on!

The point is, McDonalds represents a trend in our society. 70 years ago, when you wanted a burger, you went into a mom and pop diner which had welcome and delightful variations on a theme: burger and fries. But nowadays, all of these variations have been radically flattened and done away with. Now they are replaced with rigid conformity. Yes, we still get burger and fries, but all of the unique characteristics which used to be there are unwelcome. Sure there are still some who cling to the good 'ol days, but for the most part, people don't want variation. If the burger isn't the same as the last one we had, we get upset. If the drink doesn't have the same quotient of syrup, we are dissatisfied. We want the same experience everywhere. We want the same architecture. We want something predictable and stable.

Now we come to my main point: This isn't just about food. This is an overall trend in society called McDonaldization. Like it or not, this is an actual sociological term, first used in 1983 by sociologist George Ritzer in the *Journal of American Culture*. Reflect with me for a moment. We expect McDonaldization in so many areas of life: healthcare, grocery stores, movie theaters, car dealers, government offices, and so on. We crave a stable, conformed, flattened, and de-personalized experience everywhere!

The question must be asked, is this always a bad thing? In some ways, no. For example, consistency is a good thing. I don't want to walk into a diner and have a menu full of salads! I don't want to walk into a diner

and encounter a staff that is confusing me with weird idioms and unusual customer service. Likewise, quality is a good thing. I don't want a moldy burger! I do not want lazy or under-qualified workers! McDonaldization has done some good, we must admit. There are clear standards which are often met.

Yet it also can do some harm. Personality and particularity are good things, and we are losing this. Having variety can help to better connect with one another. Having particularity can help us to fit within our context in a more meaningful way. For example, if you go to a diner and the vibe really catches your attention, you are more likely to strike up a friendship with the workers and return. This is good for society, it brings us together in meaningful ways.

But, whether you like it or not, McDonaldization exists.

McDonaldization in the Church

Is McDonaldization found in the Church? The answer is complicated. In some ways, yes; but in other ways, no.

In some ways, the Missouri Synod has become more and more corporate as time has gone on. The most specific example of this is the success of the Lutheran Service Book. In the vast majority of cases, if you walk into any LCMS church, you will see the familiar burgundy hymnal, and hear the familiar tones of LSB services and hymns. Likewise, certain other publications like the Portals of Prayer and other devotional resources have become indelible marks of the LCMS in Lutheran Congregations.

While this could share some qualities with McDonaldization, I argue that the use of Synodical materials has not reached the extent of organizational conformity to which other organizations like McDonalds have now reached. When I walk into an LCMS congregation, there is still much variety found between congregations. Furthermore, I believe that the resources put out by CPH have truly been beneficial for the building up of healthy unity in the LCMS, rather than spurring on excessive conformity. There is still lots of diversity within the LCMS, and we have not succumbed to McDonaldization.

There are so many possible areas in society and in the Church that the topic of McDonaldization could be studied, and I would like to invite you to think about those things and reflect with a friend about it. But for this essay, there is one area in particular that I want to focus on, namely, the liturgical practices of the LCMS, since it is an area I am highly interested in.

Liturgical Variety in the LCMS

We can all attest that there exists a great variety within our congregations. Even between two churches only miles apart, the liturgical variety is astounding. Here are some of the obvious ways: Most congregations use the LSB, but some still use TLH. Some use LW. Some even use the LBW. Some don't use a hymnal at all, opting for CCM music with projectors. Some congregations are led by an organ. Some by a piano. Some by a guitar. Some by a praise band. Some pastors vest in the full array of a chasuble. Some only an alb and stole. Some don't vest at all, instead wearing just a collar. Some wear a suit. The choice of Bible translation even has some variety within the LCMS; most congregations use the ESV, but some still use the NIV. Some even use the NRSV, and some use the NKJV. I have even heard of one congregation using the NLT. The choice of lectionary has great variety too. Some use the historic one-year lectionary, but a majority use the three-year. Some congregations even worship in Spanish.

We can all attest to this variety of worship practices in the LCMS. This should not come as a surprise to anyone reading this essay. What I have written above is only a brief overview of this fact. Yet it is important to note, because this is the context in which Liturgical Renewal has taken root in the LCMS.

Liturgical Renewal in the LCMS

Within this sea of variety, there has emerged one particular strain which I will call the Liturgical Renewal or Revival movement. This is a movement which seeks to re-introduce the historical and traditional elements of the liturgy: chanting, traditions, lectionaries, vestments, and so forth. This is no small movement, it has enjoyed success in many congregations. You cannot escape this movement, many clergy, seminarians, and even laity are craving and seeking after Liturgical Renewal. I myself am a product of this movement, and have greatly benefited from it. It is my conviction that this movement is beneficial for the whole church, and I hope and pray that it truly be beneficial in a God-pleasing way to our Synod.

The liturgical revival movement has always been a part of the LCMS, stretching all the way back to the original Saxon immigrants from Germany. These immigrants were seeking refuge and escape from Pietistic Germany, which had suppressed the ancient liturgical forms of the Lutheran Church. When they came to the United States, liturgical renewal was already a top priority, and this was reflected in their publications.

There has also been a recent resurgence of liturgical renewal in the LCMS, which has varied roots. Some will point to the so-called "Oxford

Movement” from around the turn of the 20th century as its inception. Some point to the ecumenical efforts coming out of Vatican II. Some point to the home-grown roots in the LCMS that I mentioned above. No matter its origin, Liturgical Renewal has become a powerful movement and trend within the LCMS. Such magazines as *Gottesdienst* have become the public face of this movement within the LCMS, and have done much work to further it.

I pointed out earlier how much variety there is within the LCMS regarding worship practices. Many within the Liturgical movement gawk at this variety. Many of them see this variety as a problem. Their reasons for this are not unfounded, some of the variety in our Synod is bad variety, resulting in malpractice. However, variety is not in itself a bad thing. Even within the Liturgical Revival movement, there is still a great variety.

Here are a few examples. One congregation uses the semi-gothic chasuble with the distinctive round cut all the way to the floor, and another congregation uses the Roman-style chasuble which has distinctive cut-outs for the arms. One pastor wears the maniple around his arm, while another doesn't. One congregation uses the scent of frankincense and myrrh for their incense, while another might not use incense at all. One congregation might dutifully chant the Gradual with an LSB psalm tone, while another might opt for a choral setting. One congregation might sing the hymns in parts, another might not. One congregation reads the Gospel from the lectern, and another might read it from the chancel, and another might read it as part of a procession. One congregation has a large organ, while another might have a small organ. One congregation might consistently use setting three of the Divine Service, whereas another might use setting one. One congregation might use the hymn of the day in the propers, whereas another might not. One congregation might use the three year lectionary, and another might use the one year. One congregation might veil the crucifix on Palm Sunday, but another might do so on the 5th Sunday of Lent. The differences go on and on. The point is, that even within the liturgical revival movement, there is great variety. It is not a monolithic movement.

The Temptation to McDonaldization

As beneficial as I believe Liturgical Renewal is to the LCMS, we must be wary of the temptations of McDonaldization. In many ways, this movement has recently become a reaction to the great amount of variety in the LCMS. Many participate in this movement precisely because it offers a greater unity of practice. This is not an inherently bad thing! The LCMS was even founded on this principle, and certainly there are many benefits that come with liturgical unity. The danger arises when we try to go beyond liturgical unity and insist on the extreme conformity of McDonaldization.

Here are some concrete examples for how McDonaldization is seen in the Liturgical Revival movement in the LCMS:

Many advocate for the pastor to hold his hands in the late medieval position of the palms flat together, fingers forward, and thumbs crossed. This practice is a wonderful confession of faith, and a beautiful, God-pleasing way to conduct oneself within the liturgy. The problem comes when people insist on this as the only “right way” to hold your hands. Yet, many have done this. Within a dignified liturgical context, there are a variety of ways to hold your hands, such as folding them, or even holding a book. Yet you can see here the tendency to conform and flatten the variation of hand-posture between congregations to a point that is tightly controlled.

Likewise, Divine Service, Setting Three is frequently hailed as a historic liturgy. Indeed, it is historic and beautiful. It retains the classic language of the Common Service, which not only is aesthetically dignified, but also is historically and theologically dignified. Since it was the main setting of the Mass that was available to the LCMS for several decades, many have it memorized through and through. These are all wonderful, God-pleasing things. The problem comes when people insist on it as the only “right way” to worship. Many have tried to do this, and have insisted that one can only rightly do the Mass with this setting. On the contrary, there are a variety of God-pleasing settings of the Mass available. In fact, Setting Three did not exist until relatively recently in history. Not only are the other settings in the hymnal capable of uplifting a reverent liturgy, but there are many even more ancient settings of the Mass which are equally as beautiful. For instance, Matthew Carver has published a book of chants taken from the ancient Gregorian tones of the late Medieval period. With the insistence of only using Setting Three among all congregations, we see the clear marks of McDonaldization.

Another example is the lectionary. Those invested in liturgical revival often advocate for the One Year Lectionary in the LSB. This lectionary is a fantastic, historic, and rich lectionary. Although it has been updated several times throughout history, the essential shape has its traces all the way back to the Church Fathers. The benefits of this lectionary are manifold. The pastor preparing for his sermon can benefit from the wealth of sermons all the way from the Church Fathers to Luther and Gerhard. The annual repetition of texts can also be very helpful as a teaching tool, as it is commonly said, “Repetition is the mother of learning.” The problem comes when people insist that this is the only right lectionary to use. The Three Year Lectionary is also a wonderful, dignified, theological, and thoughtful lectionary. It has many benefits that should not be ignored. By insisting on the One Year as the only right lectionary to use this leads to McDonaldization.

There are several other possible examples, but for the sake of brevity, the few I have supplied should suffice. The point remains, that there is the potential danger of McDonaldization within the liturgical renewal movement of the LCMS. There is the temptation to want every congregation to look exactly the same. There is the temptation to see any variation as bad, even when the variation is happening within the context of a dignified liturgical tradition.

Although I have pointed out this possible danger, we should be diligent not to over generalize this movement. The majority of those participating in the movement do not represent the caricature that I presented above. I myself have greatly benefited from the Liturgical Renewal movement, and I pray that this movement be nothing but a blessing for the church. The point is that we must be wary of this temptation in order to avoid it. Nor do I wish to cast the first stone—I myself realize that I have this temptation too!

There is such a thing as good variety, even within Liturgical Renewal movement. In fact, it cannot exist without it; the Liturgical movement is itself a product of variation. Just like how competition can spur on innovation and excellence in areas like sports or business, so variety in Liturgical Renewal can lead to even better forms of Liturgical Renewal. This is precisely how it began—through variety. Take for example the use of chanting. This was abandoned by many congregations, and led to a state of affairs where chanting was completely foreign and unknown to most. Then the Liturgical Renewal movement came along and reintroduced the practice of chanting. Now, from a macroscopic historical perspective, this is not a striking variation. But from the microscopic contextual perspective, this was an incredible innovation! This innovation led to good variety: the introduction of something beneficial, which ended up being adopted by many other congregations.

McDonaldization destroys variety—all variety, both bad variety and good variety. The danger of McDonaldization in Liturgical Renewal is not only that it flattens variety to a point of suffocation, but also that it eliminates the possibility of beneficial improvement to our liturgies. I am not advocating for the wild and inappropriate liturgical innovations of the 20th century. Rather, I am warning that McDonaldization could eliminate the possibility of reintroducing other historical, traditional, faithful, and beautiful forms of the liturgy into our church.

Another potential problem with McDonaldization is that it can ignore the needs of a particular context. The needs of the congregation should, to a certain extent, impact the decisions made in the Liturgy. For instance, if you are in the 16th century and you have a congregation of illit-

erate peasants, it would be very unwise to put a latin psalter in front of them and expect them to chant it! Or likewise, a particular congregation may have developed a bias against particular liturgical forms. Even if this bias is unfounded and wrong, it would be incredibly unwise to force these forms upon the congregation. These and other needs must be considered when deciding what will be used in the Liturgy. McDonaldization is completely oblivious to context. Instead, we must take the posture of serving those to whom we are sent.

A Way Forward

So, what is the way forward? What do I propose?

Let's return to the analogy of the diner. Remember my description, that every diner was slightly different. Each diner had its own variation on the theme of burger and fries. One diner might have different artwork from the next, for example. Yet, even though they had variation, there was a central point of unity that was held in common between every single diner: burger and fries. If you went in to a diner, and they didn't have a burger and fries, you would be offended! In other words, there was unity and variation. There was a theme, but also variation on that theme.

Applying this analogy to the liturgy, we come to my proposed solution: Identify the central unifying element that constitutes a proper liturgy (the 'burger and fries'), and even while insisting on the preservation of this unifying element, we must allow for variation.

So, what is the 'burger and fries' of liturgy, according to this analogy?

Word and Sacrament.

Yes, it is that simple! Word and Sacrament. This ought to be the central unifying element to which we cling untiringly.

If we take the means of grace seriously, and truly believe that when we encounter the Word and Sacraments in the liturgy we are encountering God Himself, this will change everything we do. All of a sudden, we will be behaving differently. Perhaps our body language will be more reverent and dignified. Perhaps we will design the architecture of our churches in a more historic and Sacrament-centered way. Perhaps the music will be different too, in order to adorn the Liturgy with greater beauty and bring the Word into people's hearts. Perhaps we will use things like the lectionary to inculcate the Word in an orderly and consistent manner.

Prioritizing Word and Sacrament leads to a liturgy which is more

reverent. If these are mere human activities, then why should I behave differently around them? But if Word and Sacrament are divine activities, God Himself coming to us, then I should behave differently: as if I am in the presence of God. This doesn't mean that we act like stoics. It doesn't mean that everyone needs to feel sad during the liturgy. It does not mean that all emotion other than a blank face is wrong. It just means that what we do, even if it is rejoicing, we do with the focus set on God and His activity, and in response to His activity. Keeping the focus on Word and Sacrament does this.

Furthermore, if we do not get Word and Sacrament at our local congregation, something is seriously wrong! If the Word is not taught faithfully, if there is error or negligence, then this is like getting a moldy bun on a burger. If the Sacrament is not given rightly, then this is like getting an undercooked patty of beef in our burger. We must insist on Word and Sacrament. Furthermore, it's impossible to do Word and Sacrament too well. We can always improve the burger and fries. This doesn't mean changing the Gospel, because it doesn't need change, but it means that we can always preach the Word and administer the Sacrament more faithfully.

So we should focus on the 'burger and fries'—Word and Sacrament, yet we should allow for variation. The Liturgy is not McDonalds. It is not a commodity that we can demand to be presented in the exact same way no matter where we go. Your local parish is not a branch of a mega-corporation which ought to look the same as every other branch. We must recognize that variation and local custom are beneficial.

Look at the example of the early Lutheran Church, during the period of orthodoxy, from about 1580-1750. Each individual territory had slight variations from one another. Every territory was doing the Mass. Every congregation was faithfully distributing Word and Sacrament to its members. Each congregation deeply cared for dignified and holy liturgies. Yet, one territory used the chasuble, while another only used the alb and stole. One parish might use German for the readings, whereas a school down the road would use Latin. One parish may use the German Mass from Luther, and another may use the Latin Mass from Luther. The exact lectionary would differ depending on the territory. While every congregation was serving 'burger and fries,' Word and Sacrament, there was variety between them due to local custom.

Another good example of this is found by watching the Gottesdienst videos. Throughout their videos which demonstrate the conduct of the Divine Service, the pastor repeatedly says that local custom will vary. In one of these videos, the pastor even shares one of these local customs during the demonstration. During the Kyrie, it is local custom at their congregation

for the chancel party to cross their arms across their chest. This is a rather unusual practice in the LCMS; I myself never heard of this practice before watching the video. At most other LCMS congregations engaging in Liturgical Renewal, the simple posture of hands together with the thumbs crossed is more common during the Kyrie. Yet, it is the local custom at this congregation, and is a longstanding tradition to cross the arms. Either option is dignified and uplifts the liturgy in a reverent way. Whether you cross your arms or not during the Kyrie, the central element of Word and Sacrament is present in either case.

This is the way forward: Insist on Word and Sacrament, but allow for variation and local custom in how this is carried out. We should avoid the temptations of McDonaldization at all costs. We must resist the allure to insist that every liturgy look exactly the same in every parish. A proper liturgy can be presented in a variety of ways, and there is not one perfect way to do it. We should not relentlessly search for one particular instantiation of the liturgy to which everything else must be measured. Instead, we should insist on what truly makes for unity in the Liturgy: Word and Sacrament, and allow for variation to accompany it.

One Body, Many Members

Liturgical Renewal is not a bad thing. Advocating for more reverent liturgies is in no way a bad thing. Even liturgical unity is in no way a bad thing. But liturgical McDonaldization is a bad thing. Insisting on only one perfect way to do the liturgy is a bad thing. Something which is good—unity, should not be perverted to become something bad—excessive control.

After all, this is what Paul talks about when he says that we are one body but many members. Each of us have something unique to bring to the body, yet we are all connected to the same body. Not all of us have the same gifts or interests, and this should be celebrated.

Applied to the liturgy, variety in liturgical expression is a good thing. There are many ways to glorify God in the way we craft our liturgies.

We also need variety. If every member of the body was a foot, we wouldn't be able to see. It would be suffocating to have to perform the liturgy in the same way everywhere. Every context demands some form of adaptation.

Yet we all need to be unified. If we have nothing holding us in common, this could lead to chaos or conflict. This is why Word and Sacrament must be the focus. We must stay on the center of the path and avoid these two ditches: (1) anything goes, or (2) excessive control. We must allow for local custom. This does not mean that we fling wide the doors and anything

goes! Rather it means we should cling to what matters most—the dignity of Word and Sacrament, and should not get hung up on granular details such as hand posture. A reverent liturgy can take a variety of shapes. This does not mean anything goes. Nor does this mean that we should stop discussing what makes for a more reverent liturgy or advocate for particular practices, but it does mean that we allow for each congregation to have its own unique liturgical life and custom.

My hope is that this paper drives us to have more intentional conversations about liturgy. I would like to invite you to talk to a friend about this essay, share with them the idea of McDonaldization, and reflect on this question: What is most essential for the liturgy? Why?