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Do We Need a New Liturgy?

"Wanted: Some New Wine-skins" is the caption of an engaging article in the October, 1933, number of the *Lutheran Church Quarterly*, written by Albert W. Shumaker of Philadelphia. The article is so important that we cannot refrain from submitting its main statements to our readers, with a few comments of our own.

The author's thesis is that the people of America are "loudly demanding a more esthetic and more sophisticated form of worship." He holds that "we are living a new life in an entirely new world. Men need to have a new sense of God that will fit into that new life, yea, rather, that will fit them for that life. They want to know how to be at home with God in this new atmosphere. They want to know how to translate the spirit of Christ into the life which they must live; they are seeking a type of worship that will enable them to go forth from the sanctuary into a world of science, of machinery, of speed, of new social ideals, and of revolutionary political ideas and live according to the spirit of Jesus Christ. It is evident on all hands that that to which they have been accustomed is not supplying their needs." This sounds like the wail of a pessimist, but we are afraid that what Dr. Shumaker says of a quite general dissatisfaction with the present type of worship is but too true. Our own observation is that especially the educated classes in the United States find but little in the average Sunday morning service that attracts them and more and more stay away. That modern unbelief is chiefly responsible for the empty churches may be taken for granted. But not infrequently the complaint is voiced by people who profess to be believers that the church services are a cold, barren, uninteresting affair which it does one no good to attend. What is to be done?

Dr. Shumaker says that "for increasingly large numbers of people the answer is in the liturgical movement." He points to the really astounding progress which in America the cultivation of a liturgical element in the church services has made during the last years and the considerable extent to which the Lutheran Church, too, has been affected by this movement. What is its nature? "Usually the liturgical movement takes the form of a return to the historical liturgies, vestments, music, and forms of architecture." In other words, the liturgical winds, as a rule, blow the navigator back to the Middle Ages, if not directly, then via the Reformation. Such a return of course is not to be deprecated *per se*. The question must be, says our author, whether this retreat into the past is profitable and edifying. He holds it cannot be denied that there are advantages connected with it as well as dangers.

What are the advantages? He answers, The service gets to be beautiful and orderly, the sermon is taken from its high pedestal,

where it dominated the whole service, which as a result had become "too cold and logical and pedagogic"; "religious shows" like the antics of Billy Sunday are made impossible where this movement is given sway, and its liturgy supplies a certain mystic element, which "most ordinary people" crave. With respect to the elimination of unseemly, semitheatrical performances the question is justified, says Dr. Shumaker, whether the adoption of high liturgical ways does not introduce a "show" just as much as do the startling maneuvers of the revivalist mentioned, even though it is one of a different kind. Here we pause for a second to register our disapproval of the complacency with which Dr. Shumaker is willing to see the sermon dethroned. It is a point to which we shall have to return afterwards. For the first we shall let our author guide us as he exhibits the disadvantages and dangers entailed in the "liturgical movement."

"First let us point to the fact that the liturgical movement centers about the Sacrament of the Altar and tends to lift it to a position all out of proportion to its proper place in a well-balanced Christian life. . . . The new forms are really old forms, which got their meaning only as parts of the sacrifice of the Mass. Unless we give them new meanings, they can never become intrinsic parts of our own worship till the consecrated host is again upon the altar. Hence there is in the movement the great temptation of a return to Rome. . . . On the day that Jesus becomes isolated on the altar one of the great results of the Reformation will be lost. On that day Jesus will again become a stranger to the hearts of His people. Then we shall have to build an altar to the Virgin next to the high altar in order that men may have some way to approach their Lord. Then we shall have to change our ideas of the priesthood. And it hardly seems possible that we shall be able to be satisfied till we have resurrected the Roman doctrine of the Church." These words deserve a serious hearing. It seems natural that a worship which has as one of its foundation stones the doctrine of transubstantiation will take on a different form from one which has no such substructure. If we adopt what might be called the transubstantiation type of worship, the teaching of transubstantiation itself will be constantly knocking at the door asking for admittance. The reference of the author to the consecrated host upon the altar, we hold, is not meant to deny the Real Presence, but to describe the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist.

Dr. Shumaker continues: "But even though we did not travel the whole way back to the sacrifice of the Mass, we must yet face the fact that there is something amiss in this tremendous emphasis upon the Sacrament of the Altar. Most people are ready to admit that there is need for improvement in our use of this our highest moment of communion with our Lord. But there is nothing in the Gospel to indicate that the whole Communion should become a mysterious rite

around which to center a gorgeously elaborate ceremonial which must be looked upon as the sum and substance of true worship. After all, even this Sacrament is only a part of worship, and it is just as wrong to exalt it above measure as it was for our fathers to unduly [f] exalt the preached Word. Sometimes it looks as though we are thus fleeing blindly to the refuge of the mystic rites of our faith because we have not the ability or the courage to face the actual needs of the Christian life in a world such as the one in which we live."

Another danger of the movement under consideration our author finds in the tendency of "putting cult in the place of life." It will be granted, holds Dr. Shumaker, that it is far easier to conduct an elaborate service with all details carefully prescribed than to bring a vital message to one's congregation. "Have we discovered that it is easier to be a priest than a prophet?" he asks. Besides, with the entrance of the priestly element the Church is likely to lose hold upon its faith. "Christianity can never survive as a cult religion, for it is a religion of spirit and life." In a word, cult stifles spiritual life. Neither has it any attraction for those outside. It is our author's judgment that "the way of a priestly cult lies close at hand in the very essence of our liturgical revival, and it is a way that leads to destruction."

In the third place, the spirit of traditionalism is to be reckoned with. "To all appearances, traditionalism has already left its mark upon our liturgical movement." It is true that Christianity must ever look backward, back to Christ. But the liturgical movement does not look back to Him, our Lord, but to ancient custom. "For most of the leaders of the liturgical movement it is the custom of the Middle Ages which is normative." "To many of us that is the symbol of a dying religion or else of a decadent generation." And are we not, by thus going back to the Middle Ages for our forms of worship, admitting that the Church no longer has "creative spirituality"? We pause again for a second to say that here there is an argument which should be given closer scrutiny, and we shall have a word to say about it by and by. But we agree with the author when he says that undue emphasis on ancient form is "traditionalism, dead traditionalism."

Again, when a certain form of the administration of the Lord's Supper is stressed, can it really be said that the form which is insisted on is the correct one? It is the form that was used in the Middle Ages; that is all. Would it, if form is to be emphasized, not be more proper to go back to the manner in which Jesus administered the Eucharist to His disciples? But worship must not be tied down to a certain set of forms; it must "grow and change with the changing needs of each new phase of human life." "To make the worship of the Christian Church a matter of ancient tradition is to admit that the Church has no message for the generation in which it lives." This sentence of Dr. Shumaker's sounds extreme; but it may at least

serve the purpose of making us very careful in our deliberations and conclusions pertaining to this subject.

Finally, Dr. Shumaker points to the large sums of money required where the liturgical movement enters and introduces its "vast pageantry with all its manifold ramifications." The result is that the Church has to be supported by the wealthy and becomes identified with their interests. "We must remember that to make the Church dependent upon a class, especially when that class holds the reins of a social order that already shows the marks of having outlived its usefulness, is to put the religion of Jesus Christ in very grave danger."

Dangers apart, will or can the liturgical movement furnish us a worship such as we should have? Dr. Shumaker thinks it may render help on the esthetic side, but he doubts that it can really provide an adequate worship. "If Protestants are turning to it eagerly now, it is only as a drowning man clutches at anything, even a straw. They will soon be disillusioned by the discovery that there is no salvation in a movement of this kind. In fact, history bids us beware of this palliative. It has always been the symbol of decadent religion." Our author reminds us that the Roman Church, which is often held to wield tremendous power over its members through its ritual, is to-day loudly lamenting its inability to keep its people in the fold, that the Greek Orthodox Church, "the prince of all ritualistic churches," has suffered tremendously, and that the Episcopalians in our country, who are known for their elaborate forms of worship, have never exerted a wide influence.

But Dr. Shumaker finds the chief obstacle in the way of success for the liturgical movement in the circumstance that "no difficulty of life, secular or religious, can be solved by a return to the past." "Our problem," says he, "is one peculiar to the twentieth century. There can be no solution for it in any age that is past." The liturgical movement "exhibits that strange illusion that persuades men to believe that God spoke in understandable language long ago, but that there is no present way in which He can make Himself intelligible to the souls of men." We hope the author is not denying that the Church, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, received its authoritative revelation of divine truth through these men. If he wishes to condemn the notion that there has been only one age in the Christian Church which was sufficiently guided by the Spirit to invent adequate forms of worship, we agree with him.

The difficulty involved in the endeavors to aid the cause of the Church by reintroducing the liturgy of the Middle Ages becomes especially evident when we consider, as Dr. Shumaker puts it, that "the ordinary man of to-day can never be made to understand or appreciate the life, either secular or religious, of medieval times. The forms that had vital meaning for those times can have little meaning

for our times, for our own is an entirely different world." "There are, no doubt, a few souls who can lose themselves in rapturous bliss amid all these ancient symbols, but for mankind in general they are a closed book."

Dr. Shumaker concludes: "We need a vital worship, and we need it desperately; but it must be something that is intelligible to us. We need something that speaks a language that we understand, both with our hearts and our minds. We can get it only as the Church supplies us with a new form of worship to fit the needs of a new age. . . . Men's souls are dying for want of nourishment in worship. They are crying to us for bread. To point them backward to a medieval worship is to offer them a stone. Surely we cannot be so cruel! Most of us pastors have not the talents to provide a new liturgy that can meet the needs of our parishioners or of the outside world which would come to the church if it had any hope of finding spiritual satisfaction there. But we are willing to follow those who have the ability to lead us forward. We need some one who in the spirit of the prophets will lead us on a new crusade, the spiritual crusade of the twentieth century."

The author thinks, as the closing words show, that the introduction and energetic sponsoring of a fully adequate liturgy by some great man of God would be like the beginning of a holy war for the Lord in which we all should join. Surely he is there letting his enthusiasm usurp the reins and gallop off with him. Think of the past! The founding of the Christian Church did not consist in the promulgation of a new ritual, nor was the Reformation a liturgical movement. And so to-day, in these stirring times, when mighty changes are going on all over the world and the social structure of our own nation apparently is radically altered, what we need is not a new liturgy. But while voicing this dissent, we heartily approve of many of the statements made by Dr. Shumaker.

In making a few comments, we shall first advert to Dr. Shumaker's statement, briefly alluded to above, that the return to the customs developed by the Middle Ages "means either that the development of the spirit of Christ stopped in the Middle Ages or that the men of our day are incapable of any creative spirituality and hence must borrow the accomplishments of their more virile forefathers." Does the author wish to sponsor the vicious modern error of development in doctrine, or does he merely desire to point to the Church's ability through the Spirit of God to cope with the difficulties of any particular age, to meet all foes, and draw up confessions as the need arises, shaping its proclamation of the faith once delivered to the saints to the special exigencies of the times? In the latter sense we endorse his words; in the former they are to us a serious departure from the principle of *sola Scriptura*.

We have a few more remarks to add. When Dr. Shumaker holds that in former years Protestants made the sermon too prominent, we should like to see him become a little more specific. Is he thinking of the Puritan services, in which the sermons did take on an inordinate length, often lasting several hours? To do him no injustice, we quote his exact words. "Order [as insisted on by the proponents of the liturgical movement] leads to a third value by the fact that it requires the proper coordination of all the elements of worship. That value is the reducing of the sermon to a subordinate part in the service of worship. The sermon used to be the climax of the service. Everything else was a preparation for it. Hence worship was too cold and logical and pedagogic. The historic liturgies make the sermon simply a part, not the climax, of worship, and that is a very great service to the cause of vital worship." Frankly, we are mystified. "The sermon a part, not the climax." Surely something can be a part and at the same time the climax. Should the worship have no climax at all? The proclamation of God's Word has been the glory of Lutheran worship in the past, and that position of preeminence should not be taken from it. We are well aware that the Scriptures do not prescribe what per cent. of worship is to be given to prayer and song and instruction from the Word, respectively. We admit, too, that certain types of worship used in services which we attended, the minister feeling that he ought to address a little sermonet to the congregation prior to every hymn that was sung and prior to the Scripture-reading and a special preface before the reading of the sermon text, will cause every one to rebel. But after all justified criticism has been voiced, must not the Word remain supreme? Do we not primarily go to church to hear what God has to say to us? If there is to come to us increase of faith, growth in knowledge, strength in our struggles, firmness in temptations, a deeper insight into the ways of God, must it not all be mediated by the Word?

Yes, people are crying for bread. But let us not think that a mere improvement of liturgy will give them what their heart is yearning for. What is really needed is, according to our conviction, a message which, generally speaking, is more vital, helpful, searching, adapted to the needs of the present age, an age of universal education and tremendous scientific achievements, than that which is as a rule heard from the pulpits to-day. What others have found in listening to the *vox populi* we cannot say; but our own experience tends to show that, where church services are criticized, people, as a rule, do not wish to express dissatisfaction with the liturgy, but with the sermon. It is very true that in their doctrinal content our sermons must ever remain what they are—a presentation of the truths of God's Word, of the divine Law and the divine Gospel. Here there can be no change. But in the manner in which these truths are set forth and

illustrated and then applied to the problems and needs of the hearers there can be improvement, and we personally wish to sit among the humblest of the brethren in endeavoring to learn how greater efficiency in this sphere may be attained. Every wide-awake pastor will indeed not fail to keep an eye on his performances as a liturge to prevent the liturgical part of the service from becoming a lifeless, humdrum, or even painful affair; and he will watch especially his reading of the Scripture-lesson and the prayers and ask himself whether in this matter he acquits himself with becoming solemn emphasis, as one conscious of proclaiming an important message and of leading the congregation in prayer, or whether he creates the impression of merely hurrying through a prescribed task. But his chief concern will have to remain the proper preparation and delivery of the sermon. What Melancthon wrote in 1530 is true to-day: "*Tenantur auditoria utilibus et perspicuis concionibus*" (rendered by Justus Jonas: "*Es ist kein Ding, das die Leute mehr bei der Kirche behaelt denn die gute Predigt*"). (Apol. XXIV [XII], 50.)

We cannot conclude without making mention of another important article in the October, 1933, number of the *Lutheran Church Quarterly*, written by George R. Seltzer of Hartford, Connecticut, and entitled "Whither Worship?" in which an informing survey of the various movements in the liturgical field is given and the following wise counsel is offered: "Both types of service [the ultrainformal and the ultralitururgical] suggest to us the need for balanced and diffused progress, rather than great extremes in worship. When extremes such as those cited exist, it becomes increasingly difficult for our people to move from one parish to another; and we live in a time when residences are not as fixed as they once were. The best interests of the Church would be served if we could have a churchly, temperate practise and progress not limited to a comparatively few congregations, but spread throughout our churches. It would mean that some congregations would have to take long strides to overtake their sisters and that others would have to hold back from motives of Christian chivalry. It would not mean that absolute uniformity was either a goal or a possibility."

W. ARNDT.

Das „Semper Virgo“ und die „Brüder“ (Geschwister) Jesu.

Es ist niemals geraten, mehr beweisen zu wollen, als die Schrift selber auslegt, inkl. dessen, was man nach den besten Regeln der Auslegung und des menschlichen Denkens auf Grund der Schrift nachweisen kann. Aber diesem Grundsatz gegenüber ist es merkwürdig, daß sich selbst inmitten der lutherischen Kirche viele herkömmliche Ansichten und Behauptungen finden, die entweder überhaupt nicht auf der Schrift beruhen oder