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# The Liturgical Movement

## An Appraisal

By HENRY W. REIMANN

[ED. NOTE: The essence of this paper was delivered at a meeting devoted to liturgics at Luther Memorial Church, Richmond Heights, Mo., on Jan. 10, 1959.]

**T**HIS paper is an attempt to call attention to some of the observable blessings of the liturgical movement among Lutherans as well as to point to what are some of the observable dangers. There is no attempt to document these observations, and therefore the study will remain a quite personal appraisal and potpourri of convictions and suggestions.

But is there really such a phenomenon among us as a liturgical movement? For many reasons, some of which I will mention later, many Lutherans, including myself, are suspicious of "movements," "programs," "campaigns," within the church. But whatever name one uses, I think that it is evident that there is a growing liturgical consciousness and debate within The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. There is a growing concern for worship as an expression of faith and as a vital area of the church's life and work. There is an increasing number of pastors and congregations in Synod who are concerned not only with their own personal and congregational worship but with the liturgical practices of the church at large. At the same time there are also many who are indifferent to these liturgical concerns as well as some who fear Romanizing tendencies in this trend. This factor of liturgical zeal on the part of some, the indifference of many, and the antipathy of others certainly warrants the somewhat nebulous expression "the liturgical movement."

But all this is nothing new. There always has been a liturgical consciousness in the Church of the Augsburg Confession. There always have been Lutherans who have been particularly conscious of the link between faith, worship, and life. And yet it would seem that not until after Pietism had made a valid but one-sided protest against dead Orthodoxy did the need for liturgical movements arise to call the church back to a more traditional apprecia-



tion of worship and liturgy. Certainly Wilhelm Loehe in the 19th century as well as our own mild and for the most part unheeded Friedrich Lochner were among those who felt this need. In the 20th century the much-derided and now almost forgotten Society of St. James opened the way for many to become aware of the value of worship and worship forms even when they themselves would rather not become identified with this group. What we can call the present liturgical movement in our church is probably not simply the continuation of a very old liturgical consciousness in the Church of the Augsburg Confession. There are more recent factors which have undoubtedly helped to increase the tempo of liturgical consciousness: the worldwide interest in things liturgical, the ecumenical movement, the increasing co-operation and fellowship among world Lutherans, especially the *rapprochement* between American Lutherans and their attempts to derive a "Common Service" out of the many Lutheran formularies of the 16th and 17th centuries. But I am unable to see how "the liturgical movement" in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod can be so immediately related to any of these factors that we could say in *this* century, or in *this* decade, that "thus and thus" the liturgical movement was born.

More important than any speculations as to the origin is an assessment of this "movement." It cannot be denied that it has resulted in many blessings, but I am going to mention only five.

First of all, worship. It seems to me that worship is being elevated to the high position of importance that it should have in the faith, life, and work of the church. The liturgical movement insists that the church, if it is to be the church, must necessarily be the worshiping church. This means accordingly that worship, far from being in the realm of adiaphora, belongs, if not to the *esse*, at least to the *bene esse*, of the church. It means furthermore that all the aids to worship (the historic liturgies, the church year, vestments, symbols, architecture, ceremonies, and customs), however much these are in the realm of adiaphora, are to be highly valued and restored in an evangelical manner for the church's worship life.

All this I see as a great blessing. For this elevation of worship to a position of crucial necessity encourages people to do the will



of God. Worship in one sense can be regarded as an aspect of faith, and certainly it is one of the primary fruits with which God wants to be honored. This high regard for worship prevents our evangelical accent on faith from becoming a mere intellectual credence or merely an affair of the individual. To emphasize worship *is* to emphasize faith, the living faith that emerges from the trusting heart into the full-blown adoration of mind and spirit and lips in the midst of the congregation of the brethren of the Lord. An emphasis on worship magnifies faith and consequently also the Lord God, His Son, and Spirit, in whom faith trusts.

Then there are the sacraments. The liturgical movement has certainly brought about the blessing of a higher regard for the Sacraments, especially the Lord's Supper, but also, although perhaps to a less marked degree, for Holy Baptism and what the Apology calls the Sacrament of Absolution. In fact, one might say that the entire area of the means of grace has been accented by the liturgical movement. To be sure, also the rites in which the sacraments were historically clothed have received painstaking and reverent concern. All this is a great blessing. For the sacraments are the very vehicles of God's pardoning grace. These are the ways by which the Spirit brings the benefits of Christ to us.

Over against Anabaptist denials or Calvinistic spiritualizing or Lutheran minimizing, the liturgical movement can be thanked for elevating the sacraments. The very fact that at least monthly Communion is now the rule in our churches and weekly Communion is becoming more frequent; that private absolution is again being revered for the comfort of individual consciences; that dignity, solemnity, and beauty are being accorded the precious meal of the body and blood of the Lord are all great gains. Formerly it seemed that the sacraments had degenerated into a dispensable *Anbaengsel* to the Word. Now they have been elevated to the position where Lutheran confessional and dogmatic theology always placed them, viz., rites which have God's own command and to which are added the divine promise of remission of sins *propter Christum*.

With the higher regard for the sacraments has gone also a higher regard for the holy ministry. Congregations have been helped to regard their pastors not as their hirelings and "firelings" but as



servants of Christ rightly called by the church to the highest office, not of serving tables but of serving the Lord and His church with the Word and the sacraments. An excessive congregationalism, a false emphasis of the priesthood of all believers, has rightly been checked by the liturgical movement.

It is still proper, as Melanchthon would say (Ap. XIII), to adorn the ministry against the fanaticism of Anabaptists, and here the liturgical movement has served Christ's church well. For example, ordination in parts of the Missouri Synod was fast becoming a quite empty ceremony. The older formularies of our church were those of Wilhelm Loehe. Bells were rung at appropriate places in this dignified service. The revision of our Agenda in 1927 incorporated the English District's borrowing from 19th-century American formularies and made of ordination a quite drab and "congregationalistic" service. It seems to me that liturgical trends among us are responsible for a few significant changes that have begun to be made in our ordination formulary. This is one encouraging sign of respect and regard for the holy ministry and for the sacred order in which the church sets aside the candidate *rite vocatus*.

Another blessing lies in increased loyalty to our Lutheran Confessions. To be sure, there were relatively nonliturgical eras of the Missouri Synod that were very confessional-minded. However, increasingly it has seemed that there is a real nexus between the liturgical movement throughout the world and the greater confessional consciousness in world Christendom. At any rate, currently many of those in our church who are interested in, or participating in, the liturgical movement are avid and able students of the confessions. I don't know whether it was the liturgical concern that gave rise to the confessional concerns, or whether it was vice versa. Sometimes I think the confessional concern lay partly in the realization that our confessions were a valiant and usually quite irrefutable support for liturgical and sacramental revivals. A by-product of this study of the confessions was to center attention on the heart of doctrine and the real reasons for the antipapal polemic.

Now, however one views the connection between liturgical concerns and confessional loyalty, the fact remains that if the liturgical movement is giving support to our confessions, this is a wonderful thing. In the Missouri Synod, certainly not in its early history but



more recently, there has been a tendency to pay only lip service to the confessions and thus to rob the confessions of their true normative character as summary reproductions of the doctrine of Holy Scripture. Once more the church can be grateful to the liturgical movement, in this instance, for helping to shatter any uneasy alliance with a nonconfessional Fundamentalism.

There are also the blessings resulting from the liturgical movement's interest in ecumenicity. In our church those involved in this movement have usually been people who yearned for the true unity of the body of Christ. They have strenuously resisted the implication that the Church of the Augsburg Confession, with its liturgical continuity, its confessional catholicity, was in any sense a sect. The Lutheran Church stands in continuity with the Catholic Christian Church, even though not in communion with the Church of Trent or the Reformed bodies. Moreover, the men of our Synod in the liturgical movement usually have also been rather conscious of devotional, exegetical, catechetical, and even doctrinal areas of agreement between the liturgical churches. Their studies in the liturgy have perforce led to more contacts with Romanists, the Greeks, and the Anglicans. And all this is to the good. Surely our Lord wants His church to be one outwardly as it is one inwardly in His sight.

Finally, there is the blessing arising from the fact that there have been Lutherans who have been willing to "go out on a limb" to recover and achieve these blessings. We can be grateful that increasingly these are not solitary voices crying in the wilderness but groups of pastors, teachers, congregations, who have communicated to one another their liturgical, sacramental, ministerial, confessional, and ecumenical concerns. The church can fail, and often has failed, to listen to the witness of its liturgical prophets, but it is more difficult to continue some of the old misunderstandings and prejudices when there are many loyal faithful Lutherans, leaders and scholars, parish pastors and pious laymen who call for liturgical revival.

But this paper is not intended merely to pat the liturgical movement on the back. Rather there are also a great number of people indifferent to this movement and a smaller group that castigates this movement as demonstrating Romanizing tendencies.



Are there some valid criticisms of the liturgical movement? I think there are. But I would rather term them dangers. And I believe we can sort these dangers out to parallel the blessings.

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|----------------------|-----------------|
| 1. Worship           | Formalism       |
| 2. Sacraments        | Sacramentalism  |
| 3. Ministry          | Hierarchicalism |
| 4. Confessions       | Confessionalism |
| 5. Unity             | Unionism        |
| 6. Challenging Group | Factionalism    |

The blessing in the accent on worship can be quite dangerous if the link between worship and faith is not maintained, if worship would overshadow the righteousness of faith in the thinking and doing of the church, if worship would ever in any sense come to be thought of as a work of man necessary to salvation, if the forms of worship would be insisted upon legalistically, if the human clothing of those forms, historic though they may be, and orthodox, would be regarded as necessary *iure divino*. It seems to me that the liturgical movement is particularly open to this danger of legalistic formalism. That is to say, worship for worship's sake and not for faith's sake, and the forms of worship for the forms' sake and not for the sake of worship, which is for God's sake, and for the sake of His people, who are to worship Him in spirit and in truth. Worship as an aspect of faith truly is absolutely necessary, but *liturgical* worship is not. Therefore desirable as the use of the best forms of worship may be, there is no point in getting overly excited about the adiaphora of liturgical details to the point that either people begin to regard them as the *esse* of the church, or even worse, regard them as in some sense meritorious for salvation, or that the weak consciences of those who regard any liturgical innovations as Romanizing stumble (cf. 1 Cor. 8:11-13), or that the harmony of the church is disturbed by liturgical controversies. We are called to build the church, and that is the rightful purpose of the liturgical movement, not to tear it down.

People often need to be educated slowly before they can realize the necessity of worship and the value of good worship, and liturgical innovations made in haste and running roughshod over bruised and tender consciences ought to be anathema to us Lu-



therans. That would be a tyrannical legalistic formalism. Worship is an expression of faith, but the content and substance of faith is the Gospel. The liturgical movement is in danger if it ever forgets this. That would be Romanizing, and the danger, I think, is present.

The essence of Romanizing is not the foolishness sometimes found among half-baked liturgical know-it-alls, who make everything in Rome valuable simply because customs are so old there. Our confessions are quite aware that customs *do* become antiquated, and if these are not necessary to salvation, we surely do not *have* to reintroduce them. The essence of Romanizing is not this rather unholy fear of being called a Protestant, nor the practice of resurrecting all the terms that have particularly bad tones in Protestant ears and of trying to be as Marian as possible. This to me is real Romanizing: to put such emphasis on worship and worship forms so as to appear to believe and to give others the impression that the ceremonial of worship is *in re divino* and necessary to salvation.

There is also the danger of sacramentalism. This means not only to go over the brink from a rightful high view of the sacraments into a form of an *ex opere operato* doctrine (which is just another variety of minimizing faith, where the fact of grace is made more of than the necessity of faith), but also to elevate the sacraments over the Word. Now, certainly, as we have said, to elevate the sacraments is a blessing, but there can be such a thing as elevating them too highly, as though the Word in preaching, in reading, in my Baptism, is somehow not quite so important as the Holy Eucharist. It is the *Gospel* in the sacraments, and faith in that Gospel, that is utterly crucial.

The danger of sacramentalism lies in elevating the sacrament in the minds and hearts of the people, increasing the frequency of the celebrations, surrounding them with beautiful and ancient ceremonial, but failing to say with Luther in teaching and preaching the Word in the sacrament: "For you" is the chief thing." I'm not sure that the liturgical movement can be blamed for the fact that despite our increased celebrations there has actually been a decrease in the opportunities for preparation in faith to receive the sacrament. Perhaps it is good that the old custom of Communion registration is dying, at least in the formalistic, perfunctory, legalistic way it was practiced in recent years. But at least this old remnant of the



private absolution gave our people the opportunity for some preparation. The same is true of the old confessional service.

But some might rejoine that the liturgical movement has surely sponsored a revival of private confession among us. Surely where that fine old ecclesiastical custom is being re-emphasized, it is to a large degree due to the liturgical movement. True, but has private confession been valued, as our confessions value it, *propter absolutionem*? Have we been wary of the traps of using this legalistically, judicially? Wherever the central concern is not the absolution, i. e., the Gospel, and that means faith, private confession can be a rather insidious form of sacramentalism.

Then there is hierarchicalism. Whenever one exalts the ministry, which we have insisted is a blessing, one risks the danger of hierarchicalism, of crossing over the brink into the pitfall of valuing the ministry for the ministry's sake, ordination for the sake of ordination, and not for the sake of Word and Sacraments, i. e., the Gospel and faith. There is danger of demoting the priests of God, all baptized believing Christians, who *have* a priestly office from God. There is still the necessity for extolling the apostolate of the laity, and it would be ironical to find Romanists talking about some form of the universal priesthood while we spend our efforts rejecting what some regard as Walther's overemphasis. It seems to me that unless many in the liturgical movement try to become veritable Walthers or Luthers in describing the holiness and sanctity of the calling, marriage, the family, and especially the role of the mutual conversation of the brethren as a form of the Gospel, we are always open to the charge of hierarchicalism. Especially is this true when some put such excessive emphasis on canonical church order or on the life in religious community. Now, to be sure, our confessions praise both under the rubric of evangelical discipline. But whereas the ministry of the Word and the good works of the calling exist *iure divino*, canonical government through bishops and life in community are not mandates of God. The celibate life, even if devoted to the best worship and the best service, is not a higher calling than preaching, teaching, and baptizing children. Nor should we magnify the ministry of Word and sacraments, which is rightly the highest office of the world, in a proud and arrogant spirit. This is *God's* will, His work,



ordained so that we who are called by the church stoop to serve even as Christ did as the Father's minister of love.

Then there is confessionalism, understood in the opprobrious sense. The confessions can be turned by the liturgical movement into the Lutheran paper pope, a legalistic club against the "Protestant" Lutherans, instead of being our precious Gospel summary where everything, even what is peripherally said about ceremonies, revolves around the Gospel hub. As far as I am concerned, a false confessionalism is just as bad as a false biblicism; and it would be terribly ironic if some in the liturgical movement who rightly deplore the inroads of a false biblicism among us would set up in its stead an equally false confessionalism. In both the venom of legalism is at work: to prize the Bible for the Bible's sake and not for the Gospel's sake, to prize the confessions for the confessions' sake and not for the Gospel's sake.

To be sure, the confessions are authority for Lutherans because of their doctrinal conformity to the Word of God. To be sure, they are ancient testimonies to the life of worship in the patristic and Reformation ages, and they can be used rightly to refute false charges of Romanizing against the liturgical movement. But this is surely only a peripheral use of the confessions. We ought to be studying them and using them, just as the inspired Scriptures to which they point, for the sake of the Gospel, for the sake of faith.

There also is the danger of indifferentist unionism in the ecumenical concerns and consciousness arising in the liturgical movement. Liturgical uniformity is not necessarily agreement in the faith. Some measure of agreement in Word and Sacrament cannot blind us to the sores of doctrinal disunity. The presence of the Gospel, particularly in the liturgies and practices of the older churches, cannot obscure the fact that there are emphases on merit in the Roman and Eastern churches that still bury Christ and His benefits, the righteousness of faith, and that there are liturgical customs and rites there that are either false to the Scriptures or are rather unprofitable.

And then, too, isn't there the danger of a false ecumenism arising out of the liturgical movement that looks always toward the "Catholic" churches but seldom toward our Protestant brethren? On some points it may be quite true, but in general it does not



seem to me that we Lutherans are really closer in doctrine to the Romanists and Greeks than to the Presbyterians or Methodists. True, a common regard for the sacraments joins liturgical churches in a front against the sacramentarians, but is the Lutheran and Roman antithesis really the same against the Southern Baptists? I think that some in the liturgical movement need to be alerted to the danger of thinking that the Church of Rome is more a part of the body of Christ than is the limitedly liturgical Church of Scotland.

Finally, it seems to me that one of the chief dangers lies in the area of "group challenge." We have mentioned some of the blessings here, but are there not also the grave dangers of factionalism, party spirit, even the very evil of sectarianism against which the liturgical movement certainly fights on other fronts? One might even sense the lurking evil of a false Pietism (ironical and paradoxical as that may seem) in some liturgical "conventicles."

To be sure, our Synod needs groups that will courageously champion unpopular views, but we do not need, nor should we ever support, factionalism in any form. That is why I have personally always been rather suspicious of "movements," "programs," "campaigns." It is so easy to let these stand in the way of building up the *whole* body. It is so easy for the group, any group, to work only for its own sake. It is so easy for the group to become narrowly defensive, to practically equate true Lutheranism with its own constituency, to criticize and judge merely because another pastor or congregation is not standing with us or agreeing with us. When I think of these things, I am not always sure that movements in the church, and also the liturgical movement which can raise up such a host of emotional reactions, are a good thing for the church.

Yet God certainly has used movements in the church, and God certainly is using the current liturgical revival among us, for His own blessed Gospel purposes. And we may use this movement, and may be involved in it, to promote the blessings indicated, but surely we ought not to be used by this movement and become so embroiled in it that we ignore some of the dangers. Each pastor in the Missouri Synod, together with his most nonliturgical brother, is dedicated to the same confessional vow, to the same Scriptures and their confessional summary, to the same great one holy catholic and apostolic church of our Lord Jesus Christ, to the same Triune



God, in whom we were baptized. What we need primarily is not any particular revival in our church or any particular movement, but a revival of the Gospel, of faith, and of love.

This means that those of us who are involved in this particular movement need the gift of the Holy Spirit, His gifts of frankness and charity. We need to be frank with all our brethren on the whys and wherefores of liturgical revival and to set forth what we regard as the blessings of this movement. We need the charity and patience to try to understand and value the brother who is in the same church, under the same Lord, but whose views on worship and forms of worship are different from ours. To achieve this, I believe, calls for discussions, conferences, retreats such as we have today, but such, as this retreat is, as are open to all, to the most painfully nonliturgical brethren imaginable. Then of course a movement might lose some of its cohesiveness, but we will surely be avoiding some of the dangers and opening ourselves to the Spirit's working to use these frank and charitable meetings for what is surely the purpose of the liturgical movement among us: to build up the whole church in faith and love.

Who can predict the future? It would seem that the liturgical movement will meet continued approval or indifference or resistance. We should be praying that our leaders may be men full of vision to realize all the blessings that liturgical revival could bring our Synod but who will at the same time be gifted by the Spirit to check the dangers wisely and evangelically.

But whatever happens in our Synod or in the whole church of Christ on earth, we surely never want to think that liturgical revival, or any other revival, is going to usher in the *ecclesia triumphans*. Our future is the cross before the day of glory. We work for liturgical revival toward this end: that the *ecclesia sub cruce* may have stronger backs to bear imprisonment, suffering, persecution, in an era when possibly there may be no chasubles or chants or communities but the aloneness of brain washings and a torturer's sadism.

But beyond is the consummation of worship, where, I think, we shall be surprised at the diversity of rites and attitudes toward rites in the land where there is no temple.

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