

Approaching a Majestic God

We often hear that we need to change and revitalize worship in order to attract prospects and keep people in the church. Since some feel that the best way to do this is to make Lutheran worship less liturgical and more like the worship of Baptists and other Evangelicals, it is interesting to hear what some Evangelicals are saying about revitalizing worship.

Professor Donald Hustad, music professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, offered the following observations and suggestions:

The Evangelical Church has too often discarded everything that comes from the past and jumped from one worship fad to another... Liturgical churches have done a better job of preserving worship traditions, while Evangelicals have rarely understood the essence of worship and so have been cheated of their heritage. Some Evangelicals have grown tired of trite worship and are leaving the churches of their childhood for liturgical churches with a richer celebration of the majesty of God.

Hustad has hit upon a key point with his recognition that the essence of worship is a celebration of the majesty of God. It is true that God's standard for judging worship is whether it is conducted "in spirit and in truth," and that such worship can be expressed in many forms and styles.

But it is also true that an important standard for judging forms of worship is not "how much do I get out of it?" but "does my worship express my awe and humility in the presence of a holy God?" Unlike preaching and teaching, which are addressed to the congregation, prayer and worship are addressed to the holy God. Their content and form should reflect that fact.

The spirit of liturgical worship runs counter to the entertainment-hungry mentality of our society. Much contemporary worship emphasizes being moved or entertained by platform-led performances. Contemporary worshipers may at times be confused with an audience filing into a talk show to be dazzled by the bubbly personality of the emcee. The character of good liturgy on the other hand, is that it de-emphasizes individuals and unites worshipers in corporate praise of a majestic God. It directs less attention to human feeling and to individual desires and more attention to the majesty and goodness of God. Liturgical worship recognizes that although God is our truest friend, he is not our "buddy." He is a holy God, who is to be feared.

Good worship forms, therefore, preserve a balance between contrasting pairs: God's nearness and God's farness, law and gospel, the Means of Grace and prayer, listening and confessing, receiving and thanking. Another such contrast is the need to enter worship with a welcome and with a warning (read Psalm 95 for an example). In many contemporary efforts to "make worship more meaningful," the warning and reverence component of worship is slighted.

This need to balance welcome and warning as we approach the holy God was well illustrated by Gordon Lathrop in a recent issue of "Parish Practice Notebook", produced by Lutheran Seminary at Philadelphia. He evaluates two entry customs that seem to represent the opposite ends of the liturgical spectrum, namely, greeting visitors with a hearty welcome and entering the sanctuary with a liturgical procession.

Lathrop acknowledges the value of greeters, whether designated or spontaneous, who convey a feeling of hospitality to visitors. Such greetings, however, should serve to usher the arriving worshipers into the place of worship, a reverent setting where the main item of business is not more self-revealing chatter, but a shared adoration of the holy God. In this setting small talk is less useful than words that direct attention away from the

greeter toward God. Too much folksy welcome can seem phony and confuse the central purpose of our meeting, which is not human hospitality, but fellowship with God.

This focus on meeting God may be expressed by a custom seldom practiced among us, the liturgical procession. Correctly understood and practiced, the liturgical procession does not focus attention on those individuals who participate in it, but on the Means of Grace. Indeed, if the congregation stands during the procession, the individuals in the procession are barely visible.

What is visible is the cross and the gospel book held above the crowd. As these visible symbols pass through the assembled worshipers they pull the eyes and attention of the worshipers along with them to the sanctuary from which the Means of Grace will be delivered to us and where the officiants will lead us in worship of God. Such a procession may serve as a living introit which lifts our eyes from the assembled worshipers to the majestic Lord.

There are, of course, many ways to balance welcome and warning which lie somewhere along the spectrum between casual greetings and formal processions. Good liturgy is not tied to the forms of the past or to unchanging wording. Nevertheless, often we will produce better results by revitalizing time-tested forms than by latching on to the latest fads. Is a choreographed exchange of "Good mornings" really an improvement over the exchange that has marked the entry into worship for centuries: "The Lord be with you." "And also with you." Which greeting better conveys the reason we have come together? Which better conveys the hopes and goals we share this hour?

The point of all this is not that we should be tied to one set of forms or one level of formality, but that we should not be carried away with a "grass-is-greener-on-the-other-side-of-the-fence" mentality which sees a less liturgical style of worship as a panacea in holding interest and attracting people. The road to lively worship that keeps a healthy balance of welcome and warning, of offering and receiving, is not constant innovation, but careful preparation and loving presentation.

Whatever style and form of worship we follow, worship leaders need to invest their best efforts to make the worship services vibrant. Boring, ill-prepared liturgy has never been in style. Any form of worship that is lifelessly delivered is going to leave worshipers cold, whether it is high church liturgy or spontaneous prayer. Liturgy that is well prepared and is delivered with life and enthusiasm will never be out of style. Worship that honors the majesty of God and speaks to people's spiritual needs will never fail to draw people nearer to God and nearer to each other.

No style of worship is more God-centered than liturgy at its best. Worship leaders and worshipers alike should strive to present a majestic God with the best they have to offer.

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