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Lex Orandi, Lex credendi, and the Use of Variety in Worship

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LEX ORANDI, LEX CREDENDI AND THE USE OF VARIETY IN WORSHIP

A worship phenomenon

My associate was presiding and the vicar was preaching. With only two chairs in the chancel, I had no choice but to sit with my family for worship. *(While I considered it a special treat, word on the street is that the people sitting in front of me may not have looked at it the same way. My wife tells me that I sing a bit too loudly on occasion/all the time.)* Two rows in front of me sat a young family that I didn't immediately recognize. I started to run through the memory banks to see if I could picture them at Christmas for Kids or the Family Easter Egg Hunt or Soccer/Bible Camp. Nothing. The memory bank doesn't operate as quickly or efficiently as it once did, so I left it running in the background as we sang the opening hymn. Still nothing.

We generally print the entire service in the service folder, primarily for the sake of our visitors, but also for long-standing members who tire of the juggling sometimes required to worship. Not this Sunday. Figures! Here is a young family we want to reach and they are going to have to figure out what "The Common Service, page 15 in the front of the hymnal" means. I am two rows behind them. Close, but not close enough. I cannot, without climbing over a host of people, help them find their spot in the hymnal. Unfortunately, though we regularly encourage members to keep their eyes open for visitors and help them find hymns and orders of service, members don't always follow through on that counsel. That's exactly what happened. No help offered of any kind. The family stood at the presiding minister's direction, but didn't even have hymnals in their hands. It was a train wreck waiting to happen.

All of the congregation members had their hymnals open. Even I (one of the congregation's "worship experts") had a hymnal open, and not just as an example to visitors about where in the hymnal we are. I still have to turn to page 15 because I do not have it all memorized. We rotate through so many different services that I always have to be looking in a service folder or hymnal. Yet, in spite of the examples of everyone around them, this young family didn't bother to open their hymnals. They had found the opening hymn without great difficulty, but now couldn't figure out how to find The Common Service. Oh well! At least they had come. They would hear the announcement of forgiveness, the readings from God's Word, and a Christ-centered sermon. We could bring them up to speed regarding orders of service later.

After speaking the Lord's word of absolution, the presiding minister invited God's people, in the peace of forgiveness, to praise the Lord. The members of the congregation responded with the singing of the *Gloria*. As I looked up from my hymnal, I noticed that the young family two rows in front of me was singing, too. Even their children were. And all this without a hymnal open! *(Somebody call Letterman – we have a stupid human trick for him.)* Turns out this young family was a ringer. They knew the Common Service like nobody's business.

An opportunity for reflection

That got me thinking. (*I would like to believe that I was multi-tasking, but I don't know that I was as focused on worship as I was on this "phenomenon" I had just witnessed.*) The members of the congregation the Lord graciously called me to serve all needed the hymnal. I needed the hymnal. We didn't have the service memorized the way these visitors from a WELS church in Wisconsin did. The questions came rushing to me: Had I failed the people that the Lord had entrusted to my care? Had I introduced so much variety (*understood from a WELS perspective*) that I had robbed members of the congregation of thorough knowledge of one service? Had my "liturgical hopscotch," a term employed by one member to describe the congregation's worship life, actually undermined the goals I had in mind for worship? Can Tim Tebow actually be a starting quarterback in the NFL?¹ Had I shown disrespect to those who had gone before me, who were able to teach through the use of the orders in *The Lutheran Hymnal*? WWPTS?²

From there, I began to reflect on my experience in worship as a child. I will confess that I don't always remember accurately what happened in my youth. (*For example, I remember being a pretty good kid. Others assure me that statement has no basis in reality.*) Here's what I think I remember about worship: I didn't consult the hymnal except for hymns. There was no need to look in the hymnal for the order of service. By the time I could read, I already knew the service. I had learned it by listening, week after week, to the shepherd the Lord had given me and the people with whom he had surrounded me. As a three-year-old I was singing "Alleluia" and "Lord, have mercy." Each week it would solidify.

By the time I was a teen, I knew the service backwards and forwards, like nobody's business. Had someone dared to suggest that I turn to page 5 or 15 in the hymnal, I would have taken that as an invitation to "throw down." Without meaning to romanticize the past, I look back with great thanksgiving to the Lord for what he taught me through the Morning Service on page 5. The question came to mind: How many children in the congregation I serve would be able to participate in worship without following along in the service folder or hymnal? At best? Maybe a handful. Most likely? None. Even my own children, two of whom are teens, use the hymnal and the service folder. All of that reflection, during the service itself, and the day afterward, led me to this:

*Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.
Christ, have mercy on me, a bad pastor.
Lord, have mercy on me, a liturgical hopscotcher.*

What made it worse is that I should have known better! Precious little useful information sticks in the cranium, but trivia does. Think college locations and team nicknames, sports statistics, names of newspapers, and, of course, Latin phrases that can be dropped in conversation to demonstrate a person's classical education. "*Sola gratia. Sola scriptura. Sole fide. E pluribus unum.*" Filed under worship in the Latin phrase file located in the trivia cabinet of my brain are the words *lex orandi, lex credendi*. Crudely translated, "the law of praying is the law of believing." Every pastor ought to consider that phrase carefully as he plans worship, for the benefit both of the souls under his care and the people he aims to reach as an instrument in the Lord's hand.

Origin and meaning of the phrase

¹ Even when I get distracted in worship I get distracted from my distraction!

² *What would Professor Tiefel say?*

I imagine you have big plans for June 25. Not only is it the day on which the Augsburg Confession was presented to Emperor Charles V, it also happens to be the day appointed for St. Prosper of Aquitaine.³ It is Prosper (c. 390-465), called by some “the best disciple of Augustine”⁴ for his work in defending Augustine’s teaching on grace, who gets credit for introducing the phrase *lex orandi, lex credendi*. Or is it actually “*lex orandi est lex credendi et agendi*” as Dr. Timothy Maschke suggests in his worship text?⁵ Will the real phrase please stand up?

Most agree that the phrase that has come down to us is a shortened form of a sentence found in one of Prosper’s writings on the authority of bishops: “Let us consider the sacraments of priestly prayers, which having been handed down by the apostles are celebrated uniformly throughout the whole world and in every catholic Church so that the law of praying might establish the law of believing.”⁶ What we know as *lex orandi, lex credendi* really began as “*legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi*.” (The law/pattern of praying founds/establishes the law/pattern of believing.) Prosper acknowledged what had happened in the church in the first four centuries – the teaching of the church had been handed down from generation to generation by the prayers (worship) used throughout the world.⁷ The conclusion is obvious. If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it. What had worked well in uniformly transmitting the teaching of the church ought to be continued. Dr. Arthur Just summarizes it in this way: “This maxim maintains that since the time of the apostles, liturgy has been the primary way the Church has handed down the faith to future generations. The liturgy and hymnody of a congregation shape the faith of the people more than anything else.”⁸

Dr. Maschke, in the opening chapter of *Gathered Guests*, suggests that Prosper’s phrase can be interpreted and applied in three ways.⁹ The first, and most obvious, and likely Prosper’s intent, is this: Worship life establishes doctrine. For example, Arius set his erroneous views to music and led many to believe that there was a time when Jesus was not God. Maschke argues that this interpretation is particularly common among Roman Catholics. He cites the example of the doctrinal statement in the 1950’s that established the bodily assumption of Mary as an official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. It arose from the worship life of Roman Catholics, who had been praying to Mary for centuries. In that case, worship life established doctrine. False doctrine, actually.

The second way to apply Prosper’s statement looks at it from the opposite perspective: Doctrine establishes worship life. For example, those who believe that human beings have the ability to come to Christ and choose him as their Savior arrange their worship in keeping with that idea. Think “fire and brimstone preaching” and anxious benches, rousing hymns and altar calls.

The third way to apply Prosper’s statement “acknowledges the validity of the two previous views yet shows that each is deficient in its neglect of the opposite. . . . Theology and worship are significantly

³ At least according to Catholic Online; the online version of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* suggests July 7.

⁴ Catholic Online (www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=884).

⁵ *Gathered Guests*, p. 26.

⁶ Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lex_orandi_lex_credendi) offers that translation of these words from Patrologia Latina 51:209-210 . . . *obsecrationum quoque sacerdotalium sacramenta respiciamus, quae ab apostolis tradita, in toto mundo atque in omni catholica Ecclesia uniformiter celebrantur, ut legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi*.

⁷ Some have suggested that “the prayers” mentioned in Acts 2:42 are actually a reference to liturgy.

⁸ *Heaven on Earth*, p. 27.

⁹ Pages 10-13.

interrelated.”¹⁰ That was Dr. Luther’s approach. He put the teaching of Scripture to music in his hymns because he understood that what people sang, they believed. Luther’s enemies were convinced that Luther’s followers were singing their way straight into hell with those hymns.¹¹ When the Reformer grasped the teaching of Scripture regarding the Sacrament of Holy Communion, he changed portions of the liturgy to reflect it. He got rid of the abuses of the Mass because they conflicted with what God said in his Word.

Evaluating the different ways of applying the principle to worship in our congregations

Be careful in opening the Latin phrase file. Invariably, other phrases beg for attention. Like this one: “*Repetitio est mater studiorum.*” Though Greek students have been trying to find shortcuts for years, there remains but one way to learn vocabularies: repetition. Committing passages of Scripture to memory comes through repetition. If it is true that what is prayed is believed and that repetition is critical to cementing truths in one’s mind, shouldn’t the form of worship be nearly the same week in and week out? Variety, while no doubt appreciated by some, would seem to work at cross purposes with the noble goal of worship: We want to establish the important truths of the Christian faith in the hearts and minds of worshippers, strengthening those who know the truth and teaching those who do not.

Should we discard what has worked for almost two thousand years for the sake of meeting the American mind where it is – obsessed with the new and exciting? Where will this ever end? Besides, each Sunday’s Proper provides plenty of variety in the service. There really is no reason to touch the Ordinary. Leave it alone and let the Spirit work through it to cement in the hearts of those who have gathered to worship the truths it proclaims. Just because a pastor has a computer and the technical skills to piece together new and innovative services doesn’t mean that he should. In *The Fire and the Staff*, Pastor Klemet Preus offers this encouragement:

If we are all the same, the services we attend should be pretty much the same. And if all the Christians in the world are the same, if the church is really ‘catholic,’ then the worship services throughout the world should be pretty close to the same. If the saints from age to age are the same, and they are, then the worship services from age to age reflect our oneness and sameness in Christ. . . . If we get the direction of the communication right in worship, then we will also understand that uniformity in worship is good.¹²

Some argue that the use of the same service each week leads almost invariably to mere formalism. Participants drift in and out of consciousness, able to speak the words and yet have their minds focused entirely on other matters. Like the people of Israel bringing the Lord the sacrifices he commanded without ever thinking about why he had commanded them, those who use the same form each week would soon find themselves going through the motions. That is not worship which pleases or glorifies God. However, the problem with the worship life of the people of Israel did not arise from a lack of variety. Their sinful hearts caused the problem. The same holds true today. Rote worship comes from

¹⁰ *Gathered Guests*, p. 12.

¹¹ Dr. Just, on page 251 of *Heaven on Earth*, quotes Frank Senn’s *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1997), p. 287: “While the original purpose of these songs was to make congregational participation practical in evangelical liturgies, they became such formidable means of disseminating doctrine that the Jesuits later said of Luther’s songs that they ‘destroyed more souls than his writings and speeches.’”

¹² Page 169. Pastor Preus contends that the primary, though not exclusive, direction of communication in worship is from God to us.

hearts that are cold to the Lord and his word of grace, not from a particular form being used repeatedly.¹³

Therefore, on the basis of *lex orandi, lex credendi* (and *repetitio est mater studiorum*), Christians who take seriously their God-given responsibility of passing on the truth of the Word should, as a general rule, use the same form of service each week.

One might describe that as slavish obedience to the principle (or, better, a caricature of the principle) of *lex orandi, lex credendi*. Insisting on the use of the same form each week as a demonstration of orthodoxy or proper care for souls is to miss the point. The phrase simply emphasizes that what a worshipper says and sings helps to form and solidify what is believed in the heart. The faithful worship planner will keep that in mind as he puts together services. Use of one form every single week might actually limit what is believed. After all, much more can be said and believed than the words of the Common Service. There is more than one way to confess sin. God's word of absolution comes to us in several ways in Scripture. More than one tune can carry the canticles that the church has used for centuries.

Insistence on the use of the same form each week also infringes on the freedom that the Lord has given his church. While he does direct his people to gather regularly for the sake of hearing his Word and receiving his Sacrament, nowhere in Scripture does he mandate a specific order of service or what must be included to get his stamp of approval. He has instead allowed his people to determine what they will do as they meet together for edification and encouragement.

Permit the statement of the obvious. Only those who gather for worship each week can be edified and encouraged. If people stay away from worship, it really does not matter if a congregation uses what it believes to be the perfect form. The reality is that some people do stay away from worship if it is always the same (*even if the Propers change!*). They want variety. They have grown accustomed to it in every other portion of life and do not agree that worship must always be almost exactly the same, whether in words or in sounds. For them, variety is the spice of life and makes worship far more vibrant and far more meaningful.

If variety will help get them in the pews each week, where the Lord can work on their hearts through his Word and Sacrament, then variety it will be. If variety will help them feel more comfortable in inviting unchurched neighbors and friends to join them for worship, then variety it will be. Demanding that people understand and appreciate one form as the way of worship hardly fits with the selfless example of the Apostle, who said, "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22, NIV). Every obstacle must be removed in order to carry out the ascended Savior's command to preach the gospel to all nations. Focusing on how to worship distracts from the real goal and mission of the church. God's people have more important things to concern

¹³ Paul Strodach writes on page xx of the introduction to *A Manual on Worship*, "When one considers all of the formal body of practice which the Church possesses and commends for use, one realizes not only the wealth of provision but the riches of past experience and the treasure of present opportunity. But one recognizes, too, certain possible dangers. Method may become uninteresting and lifeless; practice may become mere formality and rote. *But* these dangers appear only where the individual is barren of the fruits of personal communion and where the inspiration of the worshipping Church, that countless host of the ages, is not an added possession and joy to the individual worshiper." (*emphasis his*)

themselves with than following the tradition of the church or allowing a Latin phrase from the fifth century dictate practice in the twenty-first century.

One might call that a polite dismissal of the principle (or at least a caricature of the principle) of *lex orandi, lex credendi*. The principle absolutely, positively does not require the use of the same form in worship. It rather says, “Think carefully about what you do in worship. Remember that what people say and sing impacts what they believe. Yes, they can certainly believe more than the words and sounds of the Common Service. At the same time, the use of an entirely different service every week of every year, while perhaps providing much to be believed, might not have the solidifying effect that some repetition helps to provide.”

It seems to me that we have managed to minimize the incredible freedom we have in Christ. In its most basic form, Christian freedom has come to mean that we are free to do what we wish in areas where God has not specifically issued directives. Applied to worship, Christian freedom is the right to worship in a style that we prefer or that we feel may assist us in getting people into the pews. If that is all we understand Christian freedom to be, then we are to be pitied more than all people, for we have come to poverty.

The freedom that Christ won for us is so much more than that. Through Jesus’ willing death in place of sinners, we are free from the guilt and punishment of our sins. Raised with Christ in Baptism, we are free from the foolish idea with which we are born, that we must gain life with God by obedience to rules and laws, whether those are laws that God himself gives or rules that human beings concoct. We are free from the opinion that we must worship by the use of one form (or by the avoidance of forms) in order to get God to love us and secure the blessings he alone can give. We are free to use everything we have and everything we are for the glory of the Lord and for the benefit of all those whom the Lord has placed around us. That freedom gives us the privilege of being the servants of all, more concerned about showing love to others than in demanding the use of our rights. Because we are free (that is, because we are servants), we always ask, about every decision we make, “Does this show love to my brothers and sisters in Christ? Does this demonstrate love to those who do not know Christ? Is this wise?”

The wise servant’s application of the principle

The one who understands his freedom properly adopts neither extreme in regard to the principle of *lex orandi, lex credendi*. No slavish obedience (and no requiring it of others). No polite (or not-so-polite) dismissal. The wise servant walks the narrow Lutheran middle road between the two extremes.¹⁴ Dr. Luther encouraged that approach in his preface to the German Mass and Order of Service:

In the first place, I would kindly and for God’s sake request all those who see this order of service or desire to follow it: *Do not make it a rigid law to bind or entangle anyone’s conscience, but use it in Christian liberty* as long, when, where, and how you find it to be practical and useful. For this is being published not as though we meant to lord it over anyone else, or to legislate for him, but because of the widespread demand for German masses and services and the general dissatisfaction and offense that has been caused by the great variety of new masses, for everyone makes his own order of service. *Some have the best intentions, but others have no more than an itch to produce something novel so that they might shine before men as leading lights, rather than being ordinary teachers—as is always the case with Christian liberty: very few use it for the glory of God and the good of the neighbor; most use it for their own*

¹⁴ With thanks to Professor Deutschlander for his book and for the section that deals with “Worship Wars,” pages 203-211.

advantage and pleasure. But while the exercise of this freedom is up to everyone's conscience and must not be cramped or forbidden, nevertheless, we must make sure that freedom shall be and remain a servant of love and of our fellow-man.

Where the people are perplexed and offended by these differences in liturgical usage, however, we are certainly bound to forego our freedom and seek, if possible, to better rather than to offend them by what we do or leave undone. *Seeing then that this external order, while it cannot affect the conscience before God, may yet serve the neighbor, we should seek to be of one mind in Christian love, as St. Paul teaches [Rom. 15:5–6; I Cor. 1:10; Phil. 2:2]. As far as possible we should observe the same rites and ceremonies, just as all Christians have the same baptism and the same sacrament [of the altar] and no one has received a special one of his own from God.*¹⁵

The Formula of Concord commends that middle approach in Article X, on Church Practices:

We believe, teach, and confess that the community of God in every place and every time has, according to its circumstances, the good right, power, and authority to change and decrease or increase ceremonies that are truly adiaphora. They should do this thoughtfully and without giving offense, in an orderly and appropriate way, whenever it is considered most profitable, more beneficial, and best for good order, Christian discipline, and the Church's edification.¹⁶

So the churches will not condemn one another because of differences in ceremonies when, in Christian liberty, one has less or more of them. This applies as long as they are otherwise agreed with one another in the doctrine and all its articles, and also in the right use of the holy Sacraments. This fits the well-known saying, "Disagreement in fasting does not destroy agreement in the faith."¹⁷

The wise servant is neither an iconoclast nor a traditionalist; he is obsessed with neither innovation nor nostalgia. He carefully considers his worship practices in light of the heart of the *lex orandi, lex credendi* principle. He knows that what people sing and say in worship helps to form what they believe in their hearts and what they confess, in word and action, during the week. He understands that worship blesses participants by equipping them for their daily lives as the people of God outside of the sanctuary.¹⁸ With that in mind, he diligently compares the worship he arranges and leads with what the Lord desires people to know and believe.

The wise servant continually examines worship, asking questions like the following: "What am I teaching by the worship I arrange and lead? Am I helping to solidify God's people in the truths of Scripture? Am I modeling for them the life of a penitent? Has there been too much variety, so that those who gather for worship are more often confused than edified? Has there been too little variety, so that those who gather for worship are being stifled in their growth instead of encouraged? Has the variety that I have introduced been more for the sake of novelty than for the sake of edification? Have I used my freedom to draw attention to my abilities instead of being a servant and teacher who aims to bring glory to God? Where is the narrow middle road between the two extremes?"

¹⁵ *Luther's Works, Volume 53*, pp. 61-62, *emphasis mine*.

¹⁶ Solid Declaration, paragraph 9, in *Concordia, The Lutheran Confessions: A Reader's Edition of the Book of Concord*, pp. 627-628.

¹⁷ *ibid*, paragraph 31, p. 631.

¹⁸ *Christian Worship: Manual*, on page 6, says it this way: "Worship repeats for Christians the truths about Christ that are essential for Christian faith, and it sets a pattern and pace for the Christian life." Dr. Just, on page 26 of *Heaven on Earth*, writes, "Likewise, in our worship, we repeat the same elements each Sunday to learn the posture of forgiveness in daily life."

Some practical applications – A case study sampling

The primary goal of this paper is to encourage worship planners and leaders to examine their worship practices, keeping in mind the heart of the principle of *lex orandi, lex credendi*. The author understands, however, that a philosophical paper might disappoint. Every good American wants practical counsel and advice; he wants to be told exactly what to do (and yet, at the same time, bristles at being told what to do).

For the sake of helping to stimulate reflection, I will offer a case study sampling. I will share some of the evaluating I have done of worship in the congregations the Lord has given me the honor of serving. I asked, particularly after the worship phenomenon mentioned earlier, “What ought I be teaching in worship and by my worship practices? What am I teaching? Am I providing a pattern for the Christian life?”

Confession of sins

I ought to teach those who come to worship that they are sinners in desperate need of a Savior. Though Rome might suggest, and many imagine, that only outward violations of God’s commands are considered sins, the truth of the matter is that we can sin against God even in our thoughts. Though the Evangelicals around us might opine, and many more believe, that we are basically good until we come under the influence of evil people around us, the truth is that we are thoroughly corrupt from the moment of conception. It is not just that we do some bad things that make us sinful, it is our very nature as ones born of sinful parents. Sinful people would like to think that, so long as they live more uprightly than most they will catch a break from God, but the truth is that sin deserves punishment, both the removal of blessing and the addition of suffering, now and forever. Just as ignorance of the law of the land does not excuse breaking it, so ignorance of God’s law does not excuse breaking it. For that reason King David prayed, “Who can discern his errors? Forgive my hidden faults” (Psalm 19:12, NIV84). A true confession not only expresses remorse for sins committed, but a desire to turn from sin. Yet even a confession of sins should indicate that there is good reason to turn to the Lord in confession: With the Lord is forgiveness.

I am not aware of a single confession of sins that adequately (and beautifully/memorably) conveys each of those thoughts. That, in my mind, necessitates the use of more than one confession of sins. The ones included in *Christian Worship* and *Christian Worship Supplement* together capture much of what is listed above, save perhaps the hidden faults and the renunciation of sin. By the use of different words, they teach worshippers that there is more than one way to confess sins. Yet there is enough commonality to provide for the baptized a template for confession as they turn to the Lord each day.

Here is what I found in my review of worship in the congregations I have served. For a time, while serving in an exploratory mission, there was a new confession of sins every week. I figured that was an excellent place to introduce variety, perhaps in response to saying the same words every week as a child. I realize now that I would have been wiser to use five or six instead of twenty-five or twenty-six.¹⁹

¹⁹ This should have been apparent to me in teaching confirmation, when I asked the students what should be included in a confession of sins and directed them to think about what we did in worship. They got, “I am by nature sinful,” but not much beyond that. I of course assumed it was because they were not paying attention. The reality was that they didn’t have enough repetition to put it together.

Since that time, whether from a new-found wisdom or sheer busy-ness, I have been much more reasonable with that variety. The confessions we use come primarily from various hymnals or other worship sources. In writing my own, I also found that I focused too much on finding new and creative ways to confess actual sin, but defaulted to “I am by nature sinful” for the confession of original sin. In a culture that understands actual sin (*sort of*) but has not a clue about original sin, could I not spend more time on exploring the depth of the sinfulness with which we are born? I also fear that I have, by highlighting actual sins against particular commandments, actually encouraged people to say, “Lord, I thank you that I am not like other people.” That is the last thing I want to happen!

The word of absolution

I ought to teach those who come to worship that Jesus has lived in perfect obedience to God’s law on behalf of all people and suffered the punishment that all people deserved on Calvary’s cross. I ought to teach that Jesus’ resurrection proved that he had died for the sins of the world. I want all who come to worship to know that they are part of the world that God loved and that those who believe in Jesus have the forgiveness that he earned by his sacrifice. I ought to teach God’s people that not only has the Lord taken away their sins and the punishment their sin deserved, but that they stand before God righteous in his sight and heirs of everlasting life. I ought to teach that the absolution is not merely a reminder or an assurance, but actually one of the ways by which God has chosen to channel his love and forgiveness into their lives.

Here is what I found as I considered the words of absolution used in worship in the congregations I have been given to serve. I used much more variety in the confession of sins than I ever did in announcing the Lord’s grace and forgiveness. Since the word of forgiveness is the Lord’s more important word, it might rather have been the other way around. More time and energy could have been expended in bringing the many comforting words of Scripture to bear on God’s people, that they could hear the comforting message of life in different ways. The objective nature of God’s love for all sinners has more prominence in the words of absolution that I write now. However, because I have tended to use five or six different confessions, I have tended to stick with the corresponding five or six different absolutions. At the same time, I think it wise to limit the number of absolutions used in a year. One of the primary reasons for that? I don’t want to have to bury my face in the service folder or watch my associate struggle to speak words that I have written. Without making the power of the absolution dependent on the presiding minister’s memorization of it, the word of forgiveness comes across as more meaningful when it is spoken from the heart instead of read from a service folder. (*Although the reality is that most are following along in a service folder or a hymnal anyway!*)

Again, I have not found an absolution that captures everything I want to teach those who gather for worship. That’s where the sermon comes in. The sermon should fill in the gaps in the word of absolution, helping to expand the worshippers’ understanding of the love, mercy, and forgiveness of God. Yet there I have seen some failings. Much time and effort has been spent on revealing specific sins and the sinfulness that they reveal.²⁰ But I haven’t always expended the same kind of energy on the

²⁰ When I left British Columbia, my associate said something to this effect: “You have a great skill in preaching specific law. You never just said, ‘All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.’ You made sure each person knew that what God said applied to them.” He meant it as a compliment, I’m certain, but I often think about it in another way. Do I work as hard in helping people understand that what God says in the gospel doesn’t just apply to other people, but to them, no matter what they have done or how much they despise themselves for their sin?

specific preaching of the gospel. I have far too often spoken the gospel in a formulaic way, speaking of the active and passive obedience of Christ. I have tried to use text color to preach the gospel in different ways, but often end up giving it short shrift in order to keep the sermon within the prescribed time limit.

Or have I worked so hard on specific law that I have not much energy left for specific gospel and speaking peace upon the hearts of God's people?

Hymns

I ought to teach those who come to worship the best hymns of the Christian church. That requires some definition. The best hymns teach that the Triune God is the God of our salvation, who rescued sinners from eternal death and creates faith in the hearts of the elect. The best hymns are Christ-centered, focusing on God's work for man rather than man's work for God or man's feelings about God. The best hymns proclaim the central truths of Scripture and do so in a memorable, beautiful way that will stand the test of time.

I will grant that the previous paragraph is fairly subjective. I get to pick what I think are the best hymns and no one really gets to argue with me, because "best" is a matter of opinion. Knowing that, I have tried to put a check on my personal opinion. For me, it means trusting the wisdom of brothers who have spent far more time studying the hymnody of the Christian Church. That vetting of Christian hymns happened in the production of *Christian Worship* and also of *Christian Worship Supplement*. Brothers in faith to whom God has given the gift of wisdom selected hymns that they felt were worthy of use on the holy ground of corporate worship. Other hymns that I might like to sing, whether around the campfire or in the shower, did not rise to that level and therefore were not included. Those who participated in the selection process would grant that not all of the hymns are of equal beauty or value; they would agree, though, that all of the hymns could be used to the glory of God and the edification of his holy people.

For me this has meant, as a general rule, not using songs from *Let All the People Praise You* in corporate worship. Those songs have their place and can be used profitably in other settings. Corporate worship does not seem the best place to use them, because they have not risen to the level of the hymns printed in the hymnal. The challenge comes when brothers in ministry, in freedom, decide to make regular use of *LAPPY* in corporate worship and then their members transfer to the congregation in which I serve. My explanation, while sensible and pleasing to me, doesn't always resonate with them. I need to find a way to incorporate some of those songs in other areas of congregational life, whether as an opening for Sunday Bible study or at various meetings in the life of the congregation, and not just as a way to pacify people.

As I review my hymn selection, I would offer the following critique. I begin with an apology. I have been scarred by "Lift High the Cross." When the *Sampler* first appeared, I regularly walked into church hoping to see 715 on the hymn board. I loved that hymn and wanted to sing it often. I got my wish; we sang it a lot! You can guess what happened. I began to look at that hymn the way the children of Israel looked at manna. That has had a significant impact on my worship planning. I have avoided the repetition of hymns in order to spare the people of God my "Lift High the Cross" experience. At most we sing the same hymn three times during a year (*and only a precious few enjoy that privilege*). I have been especially careful with "In Christ Alone," though many probably come to worship hoping to see 752 on the hymn board. At one point, I thought this to be a strength of our worship – the variety of hymns that we used on an annual basis. I am not so convinced anymore. God's people have been exposed to many hymns, but they knew few by heart. Some members, of course, know many by heart, but that is only because they have their own hymnals at home. (That is a much lower percentage than one would hope!)

I remember a Seminary professor saying, about worship specifically, something along these lines: "People don't know what they like but they like what they know." He probably explained exactly what he meant by it, but I was too deep in thought about that proverb to catch the explanation. I took it to

mean, in regard to hymns, “You need to expose God’s people to more than the ten hymns that they list as their favorites. Teach them more hymns and they will like more hymns.” The Hymn of the Day selections certainly help in that regard, giving worshippers exposure to the strongest hymns at least once a year. But I have gone to the extreme, almost refusing, as a principle, to “give the people what they want.” They have been exposed to many, but cannot increase their list of favorites because they sing the hymns only once or twice a year. God’s people have tried, with comments like, “I loved the hymns we sang today,” to get some of those hymns repeated. Maybe (!) I should listen a little more carefully and make more use of the “favorites,” perhaps as the opening hymn, when they match the theme of the day.

Orders of service

I ought to teach the group that gathers for worship that Word and Sacrament are at the heart of the Christian life. If worship is to set “the pattern and pace for the Christian life,”²¹ then attention needs to be on the gospel of Christ as it comes to us in Word and Sacrament. Worshippers need to be reminded of the blessings that they enjoy through Baptism and the gifts that the Lord offers and gives in the Sacrament of the Altar. They need to have demonstrated for them the way to consider and apply the Word of God to their lives as salt and light.

The orders of service in *Christian Worship* and *Christian Worship Supplement* focus on the gospel in Word and Sacrament and train God’s people to sit at Jesus’ feet as their first priority. I am particularly thankful for the Gathering Rite on Holy Baptism because it allows the people of God to focus on the blessings the Lord gives through the Sacrament, particularly as more and more opt for private baptisms and deprive the congregation of the opportunity to watch God’s grace in action. Well-crafted sermons at the center of each service help people grow in their ability to understand God’s Word and to study on their own with profit.

As I consider the orders of service that we use, whether provided in a hymnal or crafted on our own, I would say that we are in a fairly good pattern. We remind people of their baptisms, both by the use of the gathering rite and the invocation of the Common Service, as well as in preaching. The baptismal font is visible immediately upon entering the sanctuary. More could be done, whether by the purchase and use of a Paschal Candle or better teaching regarding the words of invocation, to teach God’s people to remember their baptisms each day. Holy Communion is offered two Sundays a month and is available to all on any Sunday they wish to receive it. The readings appointed for the day are introduced and tied together. My associate does an outstanding job of that. He actually takes the time to write out and rehearse what he is going to say!²²

The sermon plays a central role in teaching God’s people how to read their Bible on their own. By explaining the text in its context and then drawing applications for today, God’s people are taught to consider what a particular section of Scripture meant for the people who first heard it before immediately jumping to an application. By specific law and gospel preaching, God’s people are taught to think in terms of law and gospel as they read the Scriptures on their own. Only a fool would dare to say that he has reached the pinnacle of preaching; improvements can always be made. For me, it would be in providing fuller and richer application and appropriation, so that God’s people don’t just think about

²¹ *Christian Worship: Manual*, p. 6.

²² This is my confession that I have learned to trust (entirely too much!) my ability to introduce the readings clearly and concisely.

the meanings of words in a text, but meaning for life. I need to ask myself the question, “Am I teaching people, by this sermon, how to read and meditate on the Scriptures on their own? Am I teaching them the law-gospel dynamic of the Christian life?”

As I prepare orders of service, I ought to aim to teach those who gather for worship that they are not alone in their Christian hope. They are connected with brothers and sisters in Christian faith across the world and across time. They are not the first to live in a world hostile to Christianity, nor are they the first to struggle in holding to the truth in the face of error.

That would mean preparing worship in a way that someone from another WELS congregation could come to a service and not feel that he had entered into foreign territory. One would expect that the sermon could carry the day in that regard, but God’s people appreciate more in worship than just the message proclaimed from the pulpit. It would also mean utilizing services that would demonstrate, even to a Christian who has no understanding of the liturgy, that we preach Christ crucified. Making use of the services provided in *Christian Worship* and *Christian Worship Supplement* helps in that process.

In a year’s time, we use as many as fifteen different orders of service on Sunday mornings.²³ While those services have repeated from year to year, there are still many even in the congregation that are a little less than confident about the words and the tunes. Part of me has said, “It’s good for the members to be a little uncomfortable on occasion – it will help them understand what visitors feel like.” I have come to doubt the validity of that approach, because they just feel uncomfortable and don’t find any benefit in it whatsoever. Perhaps we should use one service three or four times in two months to help solidify, both for the comfort of members and to give visitors the sense that the services used can actually be learned.

I ought to teach those who come to worship the freedom that they have in Christ. As noted earlier, this is first and foremost a proclamation of freedom from the guilt and punishment of sin and freedom from the foolish opinion of the law with which all are born. It also means that, because God has not established one particular order of service for his people, we are free to use services that we are convinced will teach God’s truth and be a blessing to souls. In the exercise of that freedom God’s people need to see that freedom is always to be used in wisdom and love.

That means it probably is not a good practice to use the Common Service every Sunday. Or any service every Sunday, even if people clamor for the GIA setting of Morning Praise.²⁴ The last thing we want is for people to equate one service with orthodoxy and consider any change of service the equivalent of a change in doctrine. That means it would also be good to add some different instrumentation, lest people begin to think anything less than a pipe organ is worship that stinks in the nostrils of God. But it also means offering instruction before making major changes and considering the impact that it would have, not only on the members of the congregation but on sister congregations in the area.

I have not always offered the kind of instruction that I should. I have relied too much on their calling of me to serve as pastor instead of explaining what we are doing and why. Regular classes on worship

²³ That includes different gathering rites, which typically lead into one of the services from *Christian Worship* or *Christian Worship Supplement*.

²⁴ I fear the “Lift High the Cross” effect, especially when I hear people say of the GIA setting of Morning Praise, “You can use that service every week as far as I’m concerned.” When I responded with, “I am not so sure you would like it as much if we used it more often,” she said, “Whatever.” I know what you’re thinking. It was a teenager. Nope. A fifty-year-old woman.

would be helpful; we've only offered a couple of worship classes in ten years. Regular articles on aspects of worship in the e-newsletter could be useful; we have only done so a couple of times. Some worship leaders regularly include snippets of explanation in the service folder; we have done so only rarely. I need to take advantage of opportunities to teach.

The universal priesthood and the public ministry of the gospel

I ought to teach the people of God gathered for worship that they are priests, free to serve God with everything he has given them. They have the special power and right to forgive and not forgive sins. At the same time, I also ought to teach them that there is a public ministry of the gospel, not just for the sake of order, but because the Lord of the Church instituted that ministry out of love for the sheep.

God's people, in worship, ought to be given the opportunity to carry out their priestly function by encouraging, admonishing, and forgiving each other. They do so by the singing of psalms, hymns, and canticles. I am not certain that they recognize that in so doing they are carrying out their role as priests; they rather think of it almost entirely as worship of their Savior-God. Instruction, of course, would be a good way to help them see that they come to worship as priests, to serve their fellow believers even as they declare the praises of their Savior.

Might there be other ways to have God's people carry out the priesthood to which they were anointed in Baptism? *Christian Worship Occasional Services* includes an order for Corporate Confession and Absolution that includes an exhortation. God's people exhort one another to trust the Lord's forgiveness and let it reveal itself in their actions. They extend to each other the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ. In all the variety we have employed, I have not as yet used that order in worship. The Compline service in *Christian Worship Occasional Services* includes one confession option in which the presiding minister confesses his sins and the people of God, in their role as priests, speak the word of forgiveness. What God's people do in worship teaches them what to believe and do each day; it sets a helpful pattern for their lives.

While all of God's people are priests, not all are public ministers. The pendulum, according to those who are wiser than I, swings back and forth from an emphasis on the public ministry to an emphasis on the universal priesthood. Where that pendulum is now is a matter for debate. We want it right in the middle, acknowledging both. How do we teach that in worship? The words of absolution, in most of the services in *Christian Worship* and *Christian Worship Supplement* at least, include mention of the called servant of Christ. While the word of absolution in the Service of the Word is beautiful and comforting, it does not mention the public ministry. For the sake of variety, it is fine and good. However, were that to be the primary way of announcing forgiveness in the name of Christ and the congregation, I think we would lose something.

I say that in part because of my own experience in an exploratory mission. I had been so afraid of people misunderstanding, that I went away from, "As a called servant of Christ and by his authority, I forgive you all your sins." I proclaimed the gospel in the words of absolution; of that I am certain. I didn't help the people gathered understand that there was a public ministry of the gospel instituted by Christ.²⁵ Yes, I am like every other Christian present. Yes, I am a priest just as they are. But I am also a pastor. Not that

²⁵ One could argue that it was more important in an exploratory mission to teach about the public ministry, since they hadn't actually extended the Call.

I therefore have reason to boast, for a pastor is nothing more than a servant of the servants. I have a duty to teach them about the public ministry of the gospel.

This is one of the reasons that I vest for worship. Though some visitors may initially consider it ostentatious, it helps to teach people that there is a public ministry. They see that the man in front of them speaks not on his own, but as a representative of Christ and in the name of the congregation. They learn that this is not first their friend who speaks to them from the pulpit, but the shepherd of their souls. While I would be free to go without any vestments, and have done so on occasion, those are exceptions and not the rule. Part of me (*a large part of me, unfortunately*) wants every member of the congregation to think that I am cool, the best thing since sliced bread, so that they cheer my every move and cannot imagine how the congregation could survive without me. That is the part of me that I need to drown. Wearing an alb is one way I remind myself that I am merely one in a long line of gospel messengers. I am doing nothing more than proclaiming Christ and preparing the way for the man who will follow me with that same message.²⁶

In conclusion

What we do in worship has an impact on what people believe. So simple, yet so profound. That does not mean that the faithful worship leader must use the same order week in and week out, or that change and variety works at cross purposes with training God's people to know and confess the truth. The principle of *lex orandi, lex credendi* rather means that those who have the privilege of planning and leading worship ought to reflect regularly on what they are teaching by the choices that they make. Careful consideration of everything that is done in worship, with an eye on doing a better job of providing a pattern for the life of the Christian, can only bring great blessing to the people of God. Isn't that exactly what a shepherd wants for the flock he has been called to serve?

SDG

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Institute for Worship and Outreach
Meeting in Mequon, Wisconsin
May 21, 2012

²⁶ Two days after finishing this, one of the students in our school gave me a hand-crafted note that said, "Thank you for being the coolest pastor ever." Evidently I have failed; maybe I should wear an alb all the time. God be praised for the encouragement he provides for his shepherds through the people he allows them to serve!

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