#795 Liturgy and Gospel: A Snippet of Pastoral Counsel

Colleagues,

Pr. Ron Neustadt is our contributing writer this week. Recently retired, Ron has been working on a major Crossings project, details of which will be announced when the time is right, which isn't yet. As you'll see below, he's also reaping one of the rewards that come to faithful pastors who win the love and respect of the people they serve. Their wisdom is not forgotten. Now and then someone will tap it. Comes then a test of wisdom, the question being whether one can respond from retirement in a way that doesn't diminish some other pastor who's still bearing the burden of a call. You'll agree, I think, that Ron passes this test with an A+.

And as with style, so with content: again, an A+, where the matter being examined is not liturgics per se—here you'll find some sketchiness, as Ron himself points out in a note that accompanied his submission—but the theological principle by which any and every liturgical practice needs finally to be weighed. Look for it as you read, and allow Ron's wisdom to bless you too.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team.

The Question

Hi Pastor Ron,

It was great talking to you the other night; glad to hear all is

well with you and Deb, albeit busy. It is busy here today as I will be helping Phyllis set up for the church's Women's Retreat she has been working on. They have about 50 women signed up for it, which is more than twice last year. She will be relieved when it is over, but it should be very good.

Also, I meant to pose another question to you the other night. It has to do with the place of Confession and Absolution in the liturgy. At the beginning of the summer, Pr. moved it to just before communion. He said that it was an ancient church tradition and that the other church that we merged with (saved from closing) did it that way. I have a book on liturgy by Dennis Fakes, and in the section on confession, he talks about the history/tradition and mentions the Didache (which I then bought on my Kindle for $0.99) which mentions confession before communion. However, he says that it was to be done in the home, before going to the service. He goes on to discuss the Lutheran tradition and the placement at the beginning of the service, but no other rationale. The translation on my Kindle barely mentions confession and without the detail that Fakes provides. At any rate, I have been uncomfortable without confession at the beginning of the service. The current ELW, and all the previous ones we have, has it at the beginning for all the settings. I have always believed, and been told, that it is at the beginning to prepare our hearts and minds for worship, and to unburden us from the sins of the past week. In addition, Fakes talks about the assurance of our acceptance through the absolution. I think that for us to be prepared for worship in mind and spirit, the confession should be at the beginning; how else can we be prepared for the hearing of the scriptures and the preaching of the word, all of which comes before confession in our new order of worship. Am I all wet? I plan to bring it up at the next Traditional Worship and Music planning committee meeting, but I've been searching for some info and haven't found too much

other than what I've quoted.

If you have time, I would greatly appreciate any comment/guidance you could give me. Any additional references would also be helpful. Thanks in advance for any comments you may have.

Dick

The Response

Hi, Dick –

Thanks for bringing an old schoolmate to mind. Dennis Fakes was a classmate of mine at seminary—or at least we were on campus at the same time, if not in the same class. I didn't know he had written a book on liturgy.

Here's the little I know about the matter of the corporate confession of sins in Lutheran liturgical practice:

1. Luther's Formula Missae et Communionis (1523) did not include any corporate congregation confession of sins as part of the liturgy (mass). My understanding is that was because Luther and his contemporaries simply assumed that confession and absolution (which the Apology to the Augsburg Confession identifies as the "third Sacrament") was something that happened between an individual and his/her confessor. I.e., a person confessed his/her sins individually to the pastor and received individual absolution—and all of that happened at some other time than Sunday morning (or whenever the Lord's Supper was celebrated).
2. I think there are some references to Lutheran clergy (maybe even Luther himself), reciting what is called the Confiteor, a type of general confession, as part of the mass. In this case, the priest would be speaking

collectively, for all people, but this was not understood to be replacing individual confession and forgiveness; rather, ritualizing in the mass what would have already happened individually.

3. Over time, brief services of confession and forgiveness for groups of (rather than individual) parishioners would take place, often on Saturday evening.
4. I think it was the Swedes (a Lutheran pastor named Olavus, if I remember correctly) who developed a liturgy that included an order for corporate confession and forgiveness (similar to what we have now) that took place at the very beginning, as preparatory rite. The rationale was like the one you articulated.
5. I don't recall what the Didache had to say about a corporate confession and forgiveness taking place during the liturgy—if it said anything about that.
6. I think the placement of an order for confession and forgiveness has moved from time to time as folks have tried to figure out what made the most sense. I know that there are congregations that place it just before the "service of the Meal" rather than immediately before the "service of the Word." The rationale is that it makes more sense that we, having heard the Word proclaimed, are now freed to make our confession and then move directly into not just receiving the verbal announcement of forgiveness but also receiving it physically in the Meal. I can see merit in both placements.
7. It's worth noting that the whole issue comes up only because we've moved away from individual confession and forgiveness (in spite of the high regard the Augsburg Confession and the Apology hold for individual confession and absolution).

I'm glad to hear you're talking about things like the forgiveness of sins at your congregation. Sure beats taking up

time talking about insurance or paving the parking lot! I’d be interested to know how it all turns out. Whatever you decide in terms of placement in liturgy, anything that will get across the Good News of God’s offer in Christ Jesus to forgive us will be a blessing.

Peace and Joy,
Ron