

Proclaiming and Receiving Christ in Liturgical Worship.¹

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What is good liturgy? A number of years ago, an article in *The Lutheran* called “Entertainment Evangelism”² spurred numerous letters to the editor – most of them disagreeing with author Walther Kallestad’s conclusions.³ What I found missing in the original article and the subsequent articles and letters, were criteria for good liturgy.

Is it good liturgy because it entertains and attracts thousands of people each Sunday or does good liturgy have to be boring? Is it good liturgy because it’s in the approved church hymnal? Is it good liturgy because it challenges one to think new thoughts; or does good liturgy comfort one with the familiar? Is it good liturgy because “that’s the way we’ve always done it” or because “that’s what everyone else is doing” or because “I like it” or because “it attracts big crowds”?

How should clergy and lay people determine if a liturgy is good or bad? Can “entertainment evangelism” ever be good liturgy? Can the LBW, WOV, or ELW ever be bad liturgy?

In the original publication of this paper I define liturgy as “the work of the people.” I knew that it came from a combination of Greek words: λαός (*laos*) = “people” and ἐργάζομαι (*ergazomai*) = “to work.” When I actually looked up the Greek words: λειτουργέω (*leitourgeō*) and λειτουργία (*leitourgia*), I discovered that they came from the secular realm. It was originally about serving in public office – doing work *on behalf* of the people.

Liturgists work *on behalf* of the people to help them express the unity that God has given us: singing together, listening together, communing together, etc. Liturgists work to help the people receive the faith God is giving; and they help them express the faith they have received.

Not everything people do together is Christian liturgy. A crowd at a sporting event singing the “Star Spangled Banner” or “Take Me Out to the Ball Game” is not participating in a Christian liturgy. Not all Christian liturgies are appropriate for Lutheran congregations. Not all Lutheran liturgies are appropriate for a specific congregation. But how does a worship committee decide what is good, right, and salutary for their congregation? How does a worshiper in the pew decide if it is a good or bad liturgy? What criteria should be used in critiquing liturgies? With more and more congregations experimenting with alternative worship settings, we need to look at appropriate ways of judging these liturgies.

One of the few things I remember from my seminary liturgical class was the following three-part criteria for good liturgy: liturgies should be judged theologically, historically, and pastorally.

1. THEOLOGICAL CRITERION

What does the liturgy indicate about God? Christian worship is primarily a movement of God coming to us. Secondly, it is our response to the God who has come to us. A good definition given in a confirmation course on worship is: “Worship is a unique way in which God comes to strengthen us through Word and sacrament. We respond by giving ourselves to God and others.”⁴

¹ This article was originally titled, “What’s Good Liturgy,” and published in *Taking the Lead: A Publication of the Rocky Mountain Continuing Education Center – ELCA*, Volume 2, Issue 1, Fall, 1992. It was centered on the liturgy in LBW. It’s been revised some with ELW in mind.

² May 23, 1990

³ In July 11, 1990 issue, two articles appeared countering Kallestad's viewpoint: "The Medium – Unfortunately – Is the Message" by Walter Bowman and "Evangelism – Not a Floor Show for the Bored" by Mark A. Olson.

⁴ *Affirm: Worship*, page 2

Worship is not primarily something we are doing for God. It is a place and time where God comes to us through the means of grace. We gather to hear God’s Word, which comes to us as Law and Gospel; and to receive the tangible Word in the sacraments. Liturgy has to be clear about this proper emphasis of worship.

One way of keeping this proper emphasis is to use the pattern for worship on pages 92-93 in ELW, which is: Gathering, Word, Meal, Sending.

I’m using a slightly different outline (although with the same elements) below. The “central elements” are in **purple**. Other elements in smaller, **dark red type**. There is a type of parallel structure to the liturgy with two foci: Word and Meal.

THE LITURGY OF THE WORD OF GOD	THE LITURGY OF THE EUCHARISTIC MEAL
Gathering to Hear God’s Word	Preparing to Receive the Meal
Confession and Forgiveness or Thanksgiving for Baptism	
Entrance Hymn or Psalm	
Greeting	[Peace]
	Setting the Table
Kyrie and/or Canticle of Praise	Assembly Song
Prayer of the Day	Offering Prayer
Hearing God’s Word	Receiving the Meal
1st Reading	
Psalm (sung?)	Dialogue and Preface (sung?)
2nd Reading	
Gospel Acclamation (sung)	Holy, Holy, Holy (sung)
Gospel	Prayer at the Table
Sermon	Communion
	Communion Songs
	Table Blessing
Responding to God’s Word	Responding to the Meal
silence for reflection	
Hymn of the Day	Canticle or Hymn after Communion
Creed	
Prayers of Intercession	Prayer after Communion
Peace	Blessing
	Sending Song
	Dismissal

The major elements are “hearing the Word” and “receiving the Meal.” The other sections serve those elements. The Gathering can include a procession including a Bible Bearer. The Entrance Hymn and certainly the Prayer of the Day serve as summaries and introductions to the Word of God that the people are about to hear. After hearing God’s Word in scripture and sermon,

we respond with singing, confessing, praying, and renewing our fellowship with each other.

The second part begins like the first part. The peace also serves as a new greeting. (Perhaps originally for the baptized who remained for the Meal after the catechumens were dismissed.)

The offertory was originally a processional where the bread and wine were presented to the table (as the Bible could be presented during the Entrance Hymn). The preparation for the meal concludes with prayers, which summarize the importance of the meal. Our receiving of the meal is followed by our responses: singing, praying, and service out in the world.

I believe that this pattern with the emphasis on God coming to us in Word and Meal is the pattern that should always be followed. I get concerned when too much emphasis is placed on the Gathering or on our responses. (When time is an issue, I personally prefer keeping a Great Thanksgiving and omit the Kyrie and/or Cantic of Praise.)

2. HISTORICAL CRITERION

What does the liturgy symbolize about the Church? We are part of the Church catholic, which began in the first century and has existed throughout the years between then and now. We are part of the Lutheran community, which has existed for 500 years. Liturgy should reflect some connection with those believers of every time and every place; our tradition as Lutherans; and also the history of the local congregation.

It has been argued by some that every Lutheran congregation should use the same liturgy as a sign of our unity in the faith. A Lutheran should be able to go to any Lutheran Church in the country and know and easily participate in the worship of that congregation.

However, there is a problem in determining, "What is a traditional Lutheran worship?" Luther, himself, wrote two, quite different liturgies: One in Latin and one in German; one using traditional Latin canticles and one using German hymns. The *Common Service* of 1888 followed a slightly different outline than the *Service Book and Hymnal* (the "red" book of 1958), both of which are slightly different from the "green" book or *Lutheran Book of Worship* of 1978. Now we have *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (2006).

I once used the liturgy published by the Joint Synod of Ohio and Other States for a centennial worship service. It was quite different from any other Lutheran liturgy I had seen or used. One could conclude that the history of Lutheran liturgy is quite varied.

At the same time, I expect worship in a Lutheran congregation to be different than in a Methodist or Baptist Church.

However, there are historical and traditional aspects that need to be part of our liturgies. We read from the Bible, not other religious or non-religious books. We use bread and wine (or grape juice) for the sacrament; not beer and pretzels or coffee and donuts. We often wear historical vestments (although, since Luther considered them *adiaphora*, perhaps we should **not** use them more often). We follow the church year. Although I included the liturgical outline from ELW under theology, it could also be included here. It is an outline that has been developed throughout the 1950 years of church history. It is the outline that has been created by the ELCA for worship in its congregations. It is a good outline. Even though we may not sing any liturgical songs or hymns from a hymnal, the fact that we use the same outline means that we see ourselves as part of the great body of Lutherans.

Most importantly, Lutheran worship needs to make the proper distinction between Law and Gospel. If there is no Gospel, it is not Christian worship. If there is Law, it needs to be more than moralism or self-help guidance; but as a light that exposes our sins, a hammer that pounds us to our knees before Christ.

There were some at seminary who argued that it was not necessary to preach the Law because the people had already been beaten down by the Law out in the world. They come to be renewed, restored, accepted, loved by God and God's people.

Others argued that we needed to use the Law to verbalize what is beating them down so that we can better target the Gospel to that particular need. A quote in a course on evangelism that I've often used: "You don't throw a drowning person a sandwich. However good the sandwich may be, it just doesn't meet that person's need."⁵ Preaching Law can frame the particular need that the Gospel addresses – but it needs to be a need that actually exists among the people.

Some questions that I use as part of my transition from biblical exegesis to interpretation and application.

Questions about the Law: How does this text understand my/our plight? What is the "bad news" it is addressing? What human failure or sin does it expose? What aspect of my/our lost condition does it speak to, e.g., bondage, sin, guilt, alienation, weakness, darkness, etc?

Questions about the Gospel: How is that plight resolved? What's the "good news" in this situation? What hope does it give in my/our lost condition. How does it heal and make whole, e.g., liberation, cleansing, forgiveness, reconciliation, power, enlightenment, etc.?

Questions about Jesus: How is Jesus involved in affecting the resolution? How is this solution unique to Christians? Where in my/our life/lives does Jesus meet me/us?

Questions about Us: What in our world functions in the same way? How has the biblical truth been re-enacted in my life or in the life of someone I know? What metaphors, images, stories does the text produce? What differences might it make in my life if I believe this?

3. PASTORAL CRITERION:

(a) What words and music speak clearly to this particular group of believers? and (b) what is this group of believers able to do?

I think that we would agree that Luther was theological astute in writing his liturgies. He followed much of the historical tradition that had been handed down to him; but if we tried worshiping with Luther's liturgies in German or Latin; it would not be good liturgy for the people who can't understand or participate in the actions of the worship.

Historically, wine in a chalice has been an element for Holy Communion, but we make slight changes for pastoral reasons: offering grape juice for those with an alcohol addiction, offering individual glasses or intinction for those who are offended by a common cup, or permitting communicants to receive only one of the elements. We make some liturgical decisions based on the needs of the people.

The pastoral aspect of liturgies keeps the participants in mind. While the theological criterion stresses **saying** the right things about God (orthodoxy); the pastoral criterion stresses ways the people might **hear** the right things (ortho-acoustics?). According to one study "in a normal two-person conversation, the verbal components carry less than 35% of the social meaning of the situation; more than 65% is carried on the nonverbal band."⁶ While we often say, "Actions speak louder than words" most of my seminary training was on saying the right words, rather than looking at *how* we might say them so that they are better heard by the people.⁷ We need to spend more time studying *how* we say and sing and do liturgy – what we are communicating non-verbally – rather than just what is said. What are the people hearing through our words, music and actions?

⁵ Edward F. Markquart, *Witnesses for Christ: Training for Intentional Witnessing*, student book, p. 69

⁶ Mark L. Knapp, *Nonverbal Communication in Human Interaction*, (1972)

⁷ I wrote a paper back in seminary about the non-verbal communication of the Word of God.

If we sing “Hark! A thrilling voice is sounding!” or “Joy to the world” to dull melodies or lifeless accompaniments, people will hear the mood of the music more than the joy contained in the words of the hymn.

Perhaps my earliest training about worship was as a child listening to my (non-clergy) parents and their church friends talk after worship services. The number one complaint was the length of the sermon. Second was the length of the whole service. If the primary thing they took from a sermon was, “It’s too long,” something isn’t quite right. I’m sure that wasn’t what the preacher wanted to give them.

In addition, worship is not a spectator event. The people need to be doing something. A criticism I have of entertainment evangelism or TV liturgies is that the people become observers rather than participants. It is **our** worship service. Which means that it isn’t just the pastor’s worship service. It isn’t just the congregation’s worship service. It isn’t the worship service of the liturgy composers. It is what the liturgists lead **us** to do together.

When I state that it is **our** worship, it is particularly important to me, (1) that we keep in mind our younger members – grade school children – in planning worship for this community of faith (is it possible to plan worship so that even they don’t get bored?) and (2) that we keep in mind visitors, especially those from non-Lutheran backgrounds – how fully can they participate, especially if they don’t read music?

What I found helpful about the entertainment evangelism article was that he was comparing the worship service to entertaining guests in our homes. What can we do to help them feel welcomed and appreciated?

As aspect of planning worship, preparing worship helpers, and even the look of the bulletin is to keep guests in mind. How do we do it to help them feel that they are part of this gathered community and encourage their participation?

A second aspect of the pastoral criterion is knowing what the particular group of believers can do. If none of the members play string instruments, it’s difficult to recruit a 40-piece orchestra. (A huge neighboring church had such an orchestra. My congregation did not.)

In the coming years, it will become harder and harder to find accomplished organists, but who says that liturgies have to be done with an organ? (Although I served one church where it was put in writing that the organ would be used every Sunday.) I have played parts of setting 1 of LBW on a piano in a bar. I have done setting 2 of LBW with folk/blue-grass instruments. I have done the chant setting (LBW 3/ELW 5) accompanied only by an oboe. There are a variety of ways that the ELW can be used, depending on the abilities of the people in the congregation.

Some of its musical settings in ELW are designed for piano or an ensemble group; others are designed more for an organ.

There were times when only five or six people showed up for our Saturday worship – our liturgy wasn’t much more than the liturgy from “Holy Communion in Special Circumstances” in the *Pastoral Care* book. This is what our church has determined are the basic and essential elements of the communion liturgy. That’s what those few people could do well.

That’s also my starting point for planning communion liturgies: beginning with the bare basics in the *Pastoral Care* book and add to them; rather than start with the full-blown liturgy in LBW/ELW and think about omitting the optional parts.

There’s a great wealth of alternative Lutheran liturgical settings in all types of musical settings.

John Ylvisaker has a number of different musical styles of liturgical settings in his *Borning Cry*, volumes 1, 2 and 3: Afrikan Spiritual Mass, American Spiritual Mass, Hymn Mass to name

three different styles. There is the “Chicago Folk Mass,” and the “Lutheran Jazz Mass,” and the “Detroit Mass,” and the “Cornell Setting,” and “Now the Feast and Celebration” to name some others from the Augsburg-Fortress catalogue. *Gather*⁸ is a Roman Catholic folk-hymnal with a number of liturgical settings, a psalter, and liturgical hymns which can easily be adapted for Lutheran use.

I served a congregation that includes a number of members who play folk instruments, so we were able to have a folk-style service every week. My last congregation had almost no members who played instruments. We couldn’t have 6-8-member ensemble leading the congregation’s song like I did in a previous congregation.

Preachers in writing their sermons often ask themselves, “What speaks to this group of people?” Especially when using illustration. It should also be asked in preparing the liturgy.

What can this group of people do? Although I know of musicians and congregations who can properly sing, “We All Believe in One True God.” That creedal hymn was not part of the tradition in any congregation I served. I also didn’t believe that they could do it well. “I Believe, I Do Believe” is a creedal hymn set to a South African tune which we could do. It was a song many of our young members “get into” in a way they never would in reciting the Nicene Creed. (We still use the historical creeds at times, but not every Sunday. They are not essential elements of the liturgy.)

In contrast to what was stated under the historical aspect, there has been the suggestion that every congregation should have its own loose-leaf worship book that can be easily changed every week or month. I usually changed liturgies with each season of the Church Year. No two congregations should be doing the liturgy exactly the same, because they are different groups of people with different needs and abilities. Yet, there should be something recognizable as Lutheran worship within Lutheran congregations.

All three groups of criteria are important. “Entertainment Evangelism” seems to emphasize only the pastoral aspect – what the people like.⁹ In some ways, the LBW overemphasizes the theological and historical criteria. ELW tries to be a bit more balanced.

It seems to me that these three criteria are much better for judging good liturgy than just “I like it” or “We’ve never done it that way before.” Using all three of these criteria, liturgy can be created that may be entertaining. It may be something most of the people like doing – and are able to do easily. At the same time convey the timeless truth of the Gospel and our membership in a Lutheran community of faith.

Concluding Illustration

At a workshop I led on worship, I put an illustration like the following on the board.

⁸ GIA Publications, Inc. Chicago (1988)

⁹ Community Church of Joy, where Walt Kallestad was pastor and from where “Entertain Evangelism” came, no longer exists. It is now Dream City Church – Glendale Campus; a huge multi-site megachurch of the Assemblies of God tradition.



Someone goes into a box called “worship.” Then leaves from that box. I asked, “What should happen to them in that box?” The answer I came up with was: cleansed. Dirt of our lives is exposed and removed. Cleansing is both an objective event as sins are confessed and absolution declared in the brief rite, in sermon, and in sacrament; and a subjective event as people feel clean and refreshed and renewed. Christ has encountered them in their minds and in their hearts.