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Cultivating a New Perspective on Unity in Worship Practices

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Abstract: Confessions are crafted over time. Time itself can serve as a sieve through which poor theology is purified. Therefore our confessions of faith, crafted over time and carefully laid out in the *Book of Concord*, are the highest quality tools for mission available to us. As with most tools, however, utility is dependent on the user, not the object itself. How do we practically utilize confessions in such a way that we do not have to first convert someone to our *culture*¹ before they are converted to *Christ*? In recent years, the confessions of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) have more often been used as a hammer for proving a point than as a spoon for delivering the Gospel. What the LCMS desperately needs, possibly more than ever, is some discussion on the practical use of this tool, particularly in worship practices. The Early Church provides a helpful framework for how we might handle these discussions.

Now is the perfect time to have these conversations, as new LCMS churches are being planted across America, crafting their budding congregational cultures and practices from the ground up. Fortunately, these dialogues are beginning. In 2017, the synod published a guidebook, *Mission Field: USA—A Resource for Church Planting*. This publication was followed by an online training resource in early 2018. As our synod begins a renewed effort to plant congregations in the United States, we must ask ourselves some hard questions. How do we utilize the “sieve” of our



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confessions as we fulfill the Great Commission? How do we confess the Good News in all its richness and purity to the people who need to hear it most—those *outside* the flock? What does it look like to “develop an appreciation of a variety of responsible practices and customs which are in harmony with our common profession of faith”?²

I would like this article to serve as a useful resource for church planting teams as they consider, specifically, how to curate their worship practices as they confess in mission. I use that phrase “to curate worship” intentionally. Curation requires a working knowledge of the history of one’s subject matter as well as the audience to which that matter will be delivered. Too often, we find individuals who specialize in one *or* the other, to the detriment of both parties as well as to those in our congregations. Truth be told, among my fellow Lutherans I sometimes feel like the “weirdo” in the room. I’ve led worship with a guitar, and so I’ve been labeled as someone who loves contemporary worship. I’ve been known to add liturgy or chanting to youth retreats, and so I’ve been marked as someone who loves traditional worship. Which is true or is it possible to be both?³ I suppose I don’t know what I am. What I do know is that we need a middle ground. And pragmatically speaking, we have never needed a middle ground more desperately than right now, as the church planting movement in America is picking up speed.

My husband, Mark, and I *are* kind of weirdos. We’ve been known, on more than one occasion, to uncork a bottle of wine, sit on the front porch, and talk worship theology and its application in church planting. I note especially “more than one occasion” because, despite the theology degrees and bookshelves full of resources at our disposal, we have never once found the definitive answer to our questions about what historically-grounded, biblically-faithful worship looks like in a gymnasium full of new believers. I’ve intentionally transitioned to a more conversational tone, but that’s because I think this is exactly how this conversation needs to happen—sitting on the front porches of our homes, looking at the mission fields of our neighborhoods, as we consider the practical applications of our Lutheran confessions in worship. Specifically, what does this application look like for those called

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to plant churches, reaching our de-churched and unchurched neighbors? My Master’s thesis took me into the worship practices of the Early Church, specifically how the people balanced culture and history in their corporate worship practices. Since my husband and I are inclined toward church planting, we have wrestled extensively

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with how to apply the behaviors and practices of these earliest Christians to twenty-first century Christians.

In order to address this topic, a working definition of liturgy is in order. In its simplest form, liturgy is the pattern of responses utilized in corporate worship. While this word is almost overly-saturated with meaning today, Luther's perspective was comparatively uncomplicated. He suggested all that is required is that the church "come together to hear God's Word and to respond to him by calling upon him together, praying for every kind of need, and thanking him for the benefits received."⁴ In biblical times, *liturgy* simply meant "public service."⁵ Before AD 500, this word was used to describe the Christian's entire response to God, that is, the work of the people both inside and outside the church.⁶ Since that time, "the liturgy" has in some cases been made so specific as to denote only certain calls and responses in a particular hymnal.

This raises the question if there is any value to using liturgy at all. In an age in which a phone becomes obsolete in a matter of months, is there benefit to retaining anything old? I propose that there is something deep inside of us that resonates with tradition or, more specifically, with the *unchanging*. A friend recently shared with me that her children and grandchildren often remark that her house feels like home "because it never changes." Personally, I know that Thanksgiving just wouldn't be Thanksgiving without the standard spread; I've never desired tetrazzini on this turkey holiday. I believe every one of us has that *one* radio hit from our high school years that, in an instant, takes us back. There are scents that awaken memories we thought were far gone. When we respond to the greeting "The Lord be with you" with the familiar words "And also with you," we are participating in a greeting shared by our Old Testament brothers and sisters in the faith and even, if we grew up in the faith, our younger selves, our parents, or our grandparents. This deep resonance with familiar sights, sounds, and even smells is one benefit to utilizing familiar patterns in worship.

Other benefits to following a pattern (liturgy) in worship include memorization and participation. For the Early Church, structure in worship came about as a means of enabling more participation in worship. Newcomers could learn elements of worship that were repeated week to week—a very important feature before the advent of the printing press—and, since most of these elements were direct quotations from Scripture, not only were they able to participate, they were internalizing Scripture simultaneously.⁷ These repeated elements in the first few centuries included the recitation of the Psalms and the Lord's Prayer.⁸ Today we could ask, *What elements of our worship encourage participation? What elements help participants memorize passages of Scripture?* I believe we consider these opportunities too narrowly when we repeat only one passage, such as the *Nunc Dimittis*, without ever challenging ourselves and our congregations to learn more.

This is not to discount the *Lutheran Service Book* as a confessional teaching tool in the least. I wish simply to suggest that the Divine Service settings which it contains are not the *only* teaching tools at our disposal. For example, for several years in a row my congregation read portions of the Passion narrative aloud on Good Friday. Having done this several years, it suddenly dawned on me that I had memorized substantial portions of Matthew 26–27. As another example, when my San Antonio DCE cluster holds a four-day youth event, we write a call-and-response liturgy based on the theme Scripture passage(s) for the event. By the end of the long weekend, many students are able to repeat these passages back to their parents. Pattern creates “an understanding among the participants,” allowing worship to be a “corporate expression and not just the response of the individual.”⁹ If spontaneity, either on the part of the participants or the pastor/worship leader, is given free reign, only the most dominant voices would ever be heard in worship.

The patterns of worship established by the church throughout the ages are worth studying *because* they bear the brushstrokes of so many fellow believers. Each stroke adds a layer of color and texture to this beautifully elaborate painting of worship today. However, it is not in keeping with the example of the ages to act as though we twenty-first century Christians must carbon-copy that painting, failing to add our own mark, *nor* to completely toss out that painting and start completely from scratch. Like us, the earliest Christians wrestled with this tension between the old and new. They found value in retaining some elements of the old; this fact alone should make us consider whether there is some benefit in those elements for us today. It can be a beautiful thing that the church has retained “words which for the most part have become exclusively its own.”¹⁰ It is important to note “can be” because, on the one hand, practices shared with others are a mark of intimacy. On the other hand, practices left untranslated serve only as a barrier to new believers. New church starts (and old ones, for that matter) must consider whether they will translate their unique words and practices or treat them like a secret handshake that the visitor must earn the right to learn. If we make the choice to retain practices or words that belong solely to the church, we must also be diligent in translating them for newcomers, lest we mistake exclusivity for intimacy. Familiarity and innovation are not mutually exclusive. To return to the Thanksgiving analogy, I had no complaints when marriage introduced me to a whole host of new holiday side dishes. The turkey was still there, but it was surrounded by San Antonio culturally-appropriate jalapeno

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cranberry sauce. In worship, let's keep the meat and stop arguing about the side dishes.

One of the greatest detriments, I believe, to the current discussion on worship is that *style* is the foundation upon which unity is built. *Style*, by definition, is a manner of doing something. Much time is spent on discussing the *manner* instead of the *substance*, which is our confessions. The earliest Christians faced a similar potential for distraction. Two types of congregations developed in Early Church—the Jerusalem Type and the Gentile Type.¹¹ The doctrinal debates settled by the Jerusalem Council (AD 49) did not suddenly translate into practical similarities among all worshipping bodies, which retained culturally-specific, geographically influenced nuances throughout much of the first three centuries. In fact, many Gentile-type congregations were completely isolated from other believers and, therefore, lacked many of the forms adopted from Judaism.¹² Despite these differences in the manner, they were united in the message—Jesus Christ and Him crucified (1 Cor 2:2). It is actually in the marriage of these two types that our rhythm of worship today finds its source. From the Jerusalem Type, we find the roots for such elements as sacramental rites, prayers, sermons, prescribed readings, psalmody, hymns of praise, and festivals. From the Gentile Type, we received such practices as weekly gatherings, home devotional life, and (more humorously) the potluck. Consistency in liturgy and hymnody among the churches simply did not exist until much later. Yet, for the Early Church, variety of style did not mar unity of message. Nor did it for Luther. We find in the Augsburg Confession the following:

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For this is enough for the true unity of the Christian church that there the gospel is preached harmoniously according to a pure understanding and the sacraments are administered in conformity with the divine word. It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that uniform ceremonies, instituted by human beings, be observed everywhere. As Paul says in Ephesians 4[:4–5]: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism.”¹³

This point is emphasized again in the Apology with an additional note as to the useful retention of words or traditions that have been passed down through the ages:

[The church] consists rather of people scattered throughout the entire world who agree on the gospel and have the same Christ, the same Holy Spirit,

and the same sacraments, whether or not they have the same human traditions. . . . But just as the different lengths of day and night do not undermine the unity of the church, so we maintain that different rites instituted by human beings do not undermine the true unity of the church, although it pleases us when universal rites are kept for the sake of tranquility. . . . With a grateful spirit we cherish the useful and ancient ordinances, especially when they contain a discipline by which it is profitable to educate and teach common folk and the ignorant.¹⁴

So what are the essentials? Consider the elements which have stood the test of time through the last two millennia of Christians: prayers, songs, readings from Scripture, sermons, and the Lord's Supper. As Luther indicated, the ceremonies surrounding these elements is not the foundation upon which our unity is built.

This is a good place to include a note of caution. Satan uses tricks to infiltrate the truth. As early as the second century, one of the tricks he has used involves something as innocent as song. Gnostic teacher Bardesanes spread false doctrine through "charming hymns and melodies."¹⁵ This practice was then repeated by several other heretical teachers. In our desire for variety, good theology should never be sacrificed. I once had a conversation with an intelligent professor and theologian who asked me, "Is the church supposed to be a white tower upholding the pure doctrine of the church or a soup kitchen for sinners?" In my naive enthusiasm, I quickly answered the latter. "Wrong," he corrected, "It is a spurious alternative." What he meant is that soup is no good for the sinner if it has been poisoned. To carry this analogy into the statements made at the beginning of this article, our carefully-crafted and time-tested confessions are the way we check the soup for poison. In crafting our corporate worship, we must always remain diligent in checking each element against Scripture and our confessions.

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Some would argue that worship must look almost identical in every LCMS congregation in order for unity to be maintained. In the 1700s, German pastor Henry Melchior Muhlenberg founded the first Lutheran synod in America and voiced a desire to see "[o]ne church, one book"; this initiative sprung from a desire to create a shared culture among the churches, rather than to correct any divergent theology.¹⁶ However, in the larger history of the church, this is a relatively *new* idea. In the Early Church, it was not uncommon for the expression of liturgy to vary based on location and audience while the essential elements and their understanding remained the same. For example, two distinct descriptions of the Lord's Supper appeared early on: "The one, in the *Didache*, was intended primarily for Christians [while the] other, in one of the apologies of Justin Martyr, was designed to be read by non-Christians."¹⁷

The liturgies of the early Christians differed depending on their intended audience. They shared a common confession concerning the Lord’s Supper even if they used different words to describe it. I echo Muhlenberg’s desire for a shared culture among the congregations in our synod; however, I disagree with his method for attaining such unity. I believe we can have that shared culture if we focus on the essentials—our confessions—while respecting the necessity of some diversity in practice. Rather than focusing on the neighboring congregation’s wallpaper, let us focus on the foundation, because we will find that they are, in fact, built upon the same thing.

All this brings us to the question of how to cultivate a new perspective on worship, particularly, one that is useful for church planters and their teams and answers the question, “What are the essentials?” As we have seen in the example of the two “types” that emerged in the first century, the Early Church had “more than one liturgy, or form of worship . . . individual areas had their own liturgies, and the liturgy in any given area changed from one period to the next.”¹⁸ New church starts *will not* look like congregations that were established one hundred years ago. Gentile Christians who gathered for worship did so differently than their Jerusalem counterparts, who were steeped in Jewish culture. They remained unified because of their message. Can we not model this in our congregations today? Can we rally around our

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shared confession even as we share that confession with the mission field in which God has placed us, whether that be rural or urban, old or new, domestic or foreign? As I mentioned at the beginning of the article, my husband and I are personally wrestling with this. We have found the framework of the Early Church to be a useful tool, and I hope that you have found it similarly helpful. In our church plant plan, here is what the initial workings of this wrestling look like for us: We would love for the worship gatherings to resemble the uncomplicated beauty of a campfire praise service with minimal media, instruments, and lead vocals. The liturgical elements and songs (both old and new) could be printed in songbooks, allowing us the ability to worship in any space (including outdoors). We believe that the liturgy is living, and one of its best uses is to help us memorize God’s Word. Thus, we would seek to cultivate a renewed contextual use of liturgy that brings the richness of worship throughout the history of the church into contemporary context in order to be accessible to the new and renewed believer.

Ultimately, my prayer for the LCMS is that we could unite around that which is confessed rather than the manner in which it is confessed. A successful example of what this unity in confession can look like is seen in my friend Rev. Ted Doering's church plant. The congregation recites the Apostles' Creed every single week as a teaching tool because many have never memorized it before. When Pastor Ted preaches, he does so in a conversational tone from the floor of the cafeteria where his church is currently worshiping. He has no robe nor pulpit, and at the end of the service, everything from the sound system to the baby changing station will be packed into a small trailer, but the content of his sermon is Law and Gospel in all its purity. The manner is unique to his flock, which is made up of more new believers than cradle-Lutherans, but the content is consistent with any other LCMS church.

I have often witnessed my brothers and sisters in the faith getting bogged down in the "preservation of tradition," failing to realize that *preservation* is an action we take to keep something from dying. *Cultivation*, on the other hand, is something we do to encourage the growth of that which is living. In our new church starts, let's cultivate a love for the living liturgy of the church, adding our fingerprints to this beautifully elaborate painting rather than starting from scratch. Let's utilize our confessions as a sieve through

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which we strain new ideas, refining those ideas down to the very best methods for conveying the pure Gospel to those who so desperately need to hear it. Let us utilize the Early Church, not just the (relatively young) Lutheran church, as a framework for learning to graft contemporary converts into our rich Christian tradition. And finally, let us cultivate a new perspective on unity in our corporate worship practices by focusing *first* on our common confession in Christ.

Endnotes

¹ When I speak of culture, I am referring *specifically* to the standard practices, characteristic features, and social practices that have become common to the LCMS tribe (apart from our theology). For example, most of us have an unspoken set of social expectations of those who would enter our doors as well as a set of assumed "standard practices" of other LCMS congregations.

² LCMS 2016 Handbook, Constitution Article 3.7, p. 11. <https://www.lcms.org/about/leadership/commission-on-constitutional-matters>.

³ As recent data from Barna indicates, I may be in good company among my fellow millennials. A 2015 report on "What Millennials Want When They Visit Church" included a surprising lack of emphasis on classifications of "traditional" or "contemporary" worship.

Rather, a greater emphasis was placed on the content of worship—“when [millennials] show up at church for a worship or learning opportunity, they do so hoping there is Someone present to worship or learn about.” <https://www.barna.com/research/what-millennials-want-when-they-visit-church/>

⁴ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works: Sermons I*, Vol. 51 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), 33.

⁵ James Leonard Brauer and Fred L. Precht, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1993), 59.

⁶ Edgar S. Brown, *Living the Liturgy: A Guide to Lutheran Worship* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961), 7.

⁷ Timothy Maschke, *Gathered Guests: A Guide to Worship in the Lutheran Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 85–86.

⁸ Luther D. Reed, *The Lutheran Liturgy: A Study of the Common Service of the Lutheran Church in America* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1947), 32.

⁹ Brown, *Living the Liturgy*, 7.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ As their names reveal, the Jerusalem and Gentile “types” comprised primarily Jewish or Gentile converts, respectively. Each type had its own unique characteristics. The Jerusalem type was influenced more heavily by the customs and practices of Judaism. The Gentile type finds its origin a little later—around AD 50—in Corinth and Asia Minor and developed its practices without these same influences.

¹² Reed, *The Lutheran Liturgy*, 25.

¹³ Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, “The Augsburg Confession—German Text,” *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles Arand, et al. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 42.

¹⁴ Kolb and Wengert, “The Apology of the Augsburg Confession,” *The Book of Concord*, 175, 180.

¹⁵ Ernest Edwin Ryden, *The Story of Christian Hymnody* (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Press, 1959), 11–12.

¹⁶ Reed, *The Lutheran Liturgy*, vii.

¹⁷ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Harper, 1953), 199.

¹⁸ Robert G. Clouse and Edward Engelbrecht, *The Church from Age to Age: A History from Galilee to Global Christianity* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 16.