

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Symposium 2024
Lutheran Worship Turns 500

Reaction to Pastor Tyler Peil's Essay
“Reaction: Worship Developments after the Reformation that
Call for Careful Appraisal”

Historian Carter Lindberg wrote:

Historical distance, by providing a focus beyond what we take for granted, can be a surprising component of contemporary comprehension. The analogy of living in a foreign city illustrates this. If you live in a foreign city for a year, you will not learn a great deal about that city. However, when you return home you will be surprised by your increasing comprehension of some of the most profound and individual characteristics of your homeland. You did not previously “see” those characteristics because you were too close to them; you knew them too well. Likewise, a visit to the past provides distance and a vantage point from which to comprehend the present.¹

Our essayist has taken us on a journey through history to help us better understand, perhaps be surprised by, and (hopefully) increase our appreciation for our worship home as twenty-first century confessional Lutheran Christians. This walk through history has led us to mull over the questions posed in the introduction of this essay: “Did Protestant worship start singing the new song in a different key? Or is it a different song altogether? Is it hard to tell sometimes?” (1)

We begin in the right place with the theology and practice of Lutheran worship and the emphasis that the two are linked. Our essayist provided a quick review of Bible history to demonstrate that God has always desired to come near his creatures with his blessings but that he has always “mediated his presence, locating himself in times and places” (2). The blessings God won when he became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary he now distributes freely and abundantly when he comes near us in Word and sacraments. Lutherans have historically understood that the “home” where we find the gospel in Word and sacraments at the front and center, where Jesus comes with all his gifts, has been the Liturgy. As our essayist eloquently wrote, “A location for meeting with the Lord because it is a house built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, a house built for proclaiming Christ with a bath for washing and a table for supper with Jesus” (4).

Luther’s “conservative” worship reforms demonstrate this understanding. While he introduced some transformative features in his worship reforms—congregational hymn singing, reception of the Lord’s Supper in both kinds, scriptural, Christ-centered preaching—he didn’t throw the baby out with the bathwater. His Latin service of 1523 changed almost nothing from the pre-sermon liturgy of the Roman mass. Luther endeavored to be neither “papistic nor Karlstadtian, but free and Christian.”² He removed what obscured the gospel or was plainly unscriptural. He kept what served the proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the

¹ Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations, Third Edition* (Wiley Blackwell, 2021), 1-2.

² *Luther Works* 40:130, “Against the Heavenly Prophets.”

sacraments. His decisions demonstrated that he wasn't intent on starting a schismatic church. As our essayist noted in a few places, decisions about worship also bring into play matters of church and ministry.

- **A question to ponder: What are the church and ministry implications from following a “congregationalist” approach to worship? What might happen if congregations opt to set aside the historic liturgy, lectionary, vestments, and the hymnal authorized by the synod?**

As Pastor Peil noted, the advent of Pietism brought a shift in the focus of Lutheran worship (6). Preaching, hymnody, and worship forms became more about eliciting an emotional experience, as well as encouraging a prescribed level of sanctified living as evidence of that experience. The sacraments were marginalized. Pietism also introduced a certain level of doctrinal indifference. Pietistic influences made their way to America, first during the early colonial days and then in later waves of immigration. Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, while he brought a semblance of liturgical structure to the Lutheran church in America, was still an alum of Halle. The founders of the Wisconsin Synod were trained in pietistic mission houses. An appreciation for the Lutheran liturgy was not in their background, and it showed in the early architecture and hymnals of the Wisconsin Synod.

- **A question to ponder: Does a spirit of Pietism remain in WELS? If so, could it be that our pietistic roots have made us more open to the parallel spirit of American Evangelicalism? If so, how so? If not, why not?**

Our essayist highlighted the different “spirit” between Lutherans and Reformed that emerged at the Marburg Colloquy. This hinge in history has proven to be more than just a minor doctrinal difference. Matters of Christology, how God is present to humans, the way the Spirit works, and the nature of the sacraments are at stake. These are not minor issues of doctrinal nuance. The sainted Professor Deutschlander was often heard to say that “to err in the sacraments is to err fundamentally.” And, as our essayist aptly demonstrated, these differences are evident in Reformed orders of service as they were developed by Zwingli, Calvin, Knox, and others. Pastor Peil's descriptions of different orders of service from the different traditions are useful for our “careful appraisal” of worship today.

- **A question to ponder: How does one's doctrine of the Lord's Supper—especially what it is and does—influence one's worship practices?**

To a certain extent, the Reformed approach to the sacraments and Pietism's emphasis on emotional experience combine in Methodism, get supercharged in the Second Great Awakening, are streamlined by Moody, Graham, and other twentieth-century revivalists, and go mainstream with popular televangelists and the mega-church, non-denominational movement. This is the dominant Protestant church culture of America today. It flows from a Reformed-Arminian theology that emphasizes human performance and seeks measurable results. Thanks to Charles Finney, the means to achieving the decision and emotions desired—and the actions that give evidence to that decision—have been “scientifically” discovered and refined. Our essayist again did excellent work walking us through the history and giving evidence, for example, from

architectural³ and musical choices. His footnote on page 23 noted how Evangelicalism is especially appealing to the American mindset. This has really been the case since the days of the Second Great Awakening. Samuel Simon Schmucker wanted to accommodate American Lutheranism to this American trend. Thankfully, the churches of the Synodical Conference did not.⁴

I came across an article on the Christianity Today website last week by Dr. Brad East that is relevant to this discussion. Toward the end of his article about the importance of the church gathering for worship, he observed:

At the congregational level—and admittedly this is anecdotal—what I see is churches anxious about their falling status, nervous about losing Gen Z, and eager to give the people what (church leaders think) they want. The religious landscape has become a marketplace, and churches compete with one another by offering an ever-flashier product. More technology, louder worship, fewer rituals, catchier slogans, and a whole lot of therapeutic jargon. Something to be entertained by. Something to keep the boredom at bay. Perhaps even something to go viral on socials.

The lesson we should have learned long ago is that the more the church is indistinguishable from the world, the less the world has any reason to take an interest in it. The church cannot do better therapy than counselors, better concerts than rock bands, or better TED talks than best-selling authors. In a competition to entertain, the church will always lose to brunch and the NFL.⁵

Dr. East's observation about the mega-church movement has something to say to us when we are eager to position ourselves as more relevant or in touch with the people of our time.

- **A question to ponder: What role does Lutheran identity play in planting new home missions? How might new missions communicate a Lutheran, means of grace theology in the sanctuaries they construct and the worship decisions they make?**

Pastor Peil, thank you for taking us on this journey through history. You have demonstrated the contrasts between confessional Lutheranism and American Evangelicalism. You have shown that Lutheran is different and how—in the best ways possible. You have helped us appreciate our Lutheran “house,” as you so aptly concluded: “Home for me and house for the Lord’s gifts and presence. A place crammed with heaven to take our shoes off for a while” (26).

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³ Although I’m not sure a sloped floor and cushioned pews in a sanctuary are necessarily signs that a church is setting itself up as a place where the preacher is front and center (for example, St. Paul’s in Saginaw has a sloped floor and cushioned pews; however, it is an excellent example of how Lutheran architecture highlights the means of grace and communicates the gospel through art).

⁴ Nor did Schmucker’s son, Beale Melancthon Schmucker.

⁵ Brad East, “Worship Together or Bowl Alone,” 9/11/2024; <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2024/09/worship-together-or-bowl-alone/>.