

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Symposium 2024

Lutheran Worship Turns 500

*Reaction to Pastor John Bortulin's Essay
"Rededication: Embracing our Lutheran Identity in Our Current Context"*

There's no reason to beat around the bush, so I'm just going to say it up front. This was a disappointing essay. It didn't solve anything. The essay neither mandated traditional worship nor championed contemporary worship. In fact, the essayist suggested we "ditch" those labels entirely (22). Our presenter never got around to important details he could easily have addressed, like telling us what instruments to use in worship, what the pastor should wear as he presides and preaches, or how often the Sacrament of the Altar ought to be offered. The essay was disappointing for any who wanted a list of Lutheran worship rules to follow or that they could demand others follow. Sadly, that includes me, according to my old self, who is a "laws and rules" addict. The old Adam thinks, "Just give us the synod worship rules and then make sure everyone follows them. Or at least make sure other people obey the rules and give me some freedom to determine which rules fit in my context."

While the old Adam was disappointed with your work, Pastor Bortulin, the old Adam is not the real me and he doesn't cast the final vote. I thought you prepared an excellent essay for your brothers, and I am extremely thankful. You willingly took up what you recognized, even before you were asked, as an unenviable task (1). Or at least you took up the task after the committee begged you to do so, assuring you that they wanted you to address the matter pastorally (3) and evangelically. Throughout the essay you steadfastly steered clear of doing the easy thing of providing rules. Instead, you did the far more difficult and far more helpful pastoral thing of identifying principles every Lutheran would want to apply to the worship life of a congregation.

May I share a story that Pastor Bortulin's essay brought to mind? Each class I took in the coursework portion of my PhD program culminated in a two-week stay on the Concordia Seminary campus in St. Louis, in January and in June. In my first two years in the program, I made a point of going to chapel each day. I was eager to observe the worship life on the Concordia campus, to see how it compared to worship on this campus. One summer I noticed that a man with whom I shared a few classes, an LCMS pastor in Iowa whose company I particularly enjoyed, didn't attend. When I asked him about it, he seemed pleased to have the opportunity to express his thoughts on worship on the St. Louis campus. The exact details of his response escape me, but I recall him, a graduate of Ft. Wayne, expressing concern about a lack of reverence in worship.

His comment surprised me, because it didn't match what I had observed. The presiding minister and the preacher conducted themselves with dignity. They vested for worship, even with chasuble when the service included the celebration of Holy Communion. They lifted holy hands in prayer. The services were liturgical, and the music felt appropriate for the space and the context, though I will confess that, like Pastor Bortulin, "I'm no musician" (31). The worship seemed "reverent" to me. He followed up with a question: Does the preacher preach from the pulpit? Yes, I said, though on one of the days a man preached from the center aisle, but the content of his sermon was solid. That one practice legitimized, in his mind, avoiding worship in the seminary chapel.

When one of the men with whom we were taking a class was up to lead chapel, I told my friend from Iowa that he should go. (*Yes, that's right, if you're keeping score at home: A WELS guy invited an LCMS guy to attend an LCMS service.*) He did. We sat together, for a while at least. The service began with a gathering rite. It may not have been the best gathering rite I had ever heard, but it was neither heretical nor horrible. The words were fine. The music was fine. But my friend turned to me and said,

"This is exactly what I was talking about. I'm not going to stay. It's just going to make me angry." So he walked out. The LCMS pastor has left the building. The WELS guy stayed. I was shocked.

For my friend from Iowa, lack of reverence demonstrates a lack of love 1) for the truth of God's Word, 2) for the people to whom the Word was to be proclaimed, and 3) for their brothers and sisters in the synod. At a bare minimum, he seemed convinced that worship worthy of the name Lutheran needs to take seriously the responsibility of training people to come before God in reverence, humbly seeking forgiveness from him in absolution and the Supper, and humbly listening to him speak in his Word. That happens, he believes, in the use of the Divine Service. Any other worship in the formal setting of God's house does not give God the glory he deserves and does not give God's people the blessings he wants them to have.

I remember experiencing an existential moment as I reflected on what had just happened. "Can I legitimately claim to be an orthodox Lutheran pastor? A Lutheran pastor walked out of a service conducted by a pastor with whom he's in fellowship because of a gathering rite that wasn't 'reverent,' and I, though not in fellowship, stayed behind, not really bothered at all." A day before, I would have called the worship in the congregation I previously served reverent, but I wasn't so sure anymore. We vested for worship, but I didn't wear a clerical collar. Someone might suggest that I dress more like a banker than a Lutheran pastor. We used the Western rite and followed the lectionary, but we also used gathering rites, some of which hadn't been sanctioned by inclusion in the *Supplement*. We used the organ to lead congregational singing, but we used other instruments, too. Even drums. We offered the sacrament regularly, but not every Sunday. The question hit: "Had I for all these years deceived myself into thinking I was an orthodox Lutheran pastor?"

That experience made me stop and consider what I did in worship and why. My friend from Iowa had obviously *ruminated* on matters that hadn't even crossed my mind. Clear and compelling principles guided him as he planned reverential, Christ-centered, Lutheran worship in his congregation. While I'd like to think that everything we did in worship had been thought through carefully, that wouldn't be completely true. More often than I might like to admit, I was confident that what we did in worship was good, right, and Lutheran because ... well, that's what we were doing, and we would only do what was good, right, and Lutheran. (*Any other circular reasoners out there?*) The truth was that some of the worship practices in the congregation had been established before I ever arrived. I don't know that I could explain how they fit with Lutheran worship principles, but I had no interest in rocking the boat unnecessarily, so they stayed. Several practices I had considered thoroughly and could articulate cogently. Others, though, had been copied from other ministries, without much thought beyond, "They're doing it, and no one has questioned them about it, so we should do it here."

I could wish that I'd had my "Concordia experience" while I was serving as a parish pastor. I'd like to go back and more thoroughly evaluate what we were doing and why, and then do a better job of explaining it to the saints. What Pastor Bortulin wrote about Lutheran worship requiring thoughtfulness and carefulness struck me: "There's plenty that has been held onto for good, pastoral reasons, and there's plenty that has been changed, too, for good, pastoral reasons. Sadly, however, much has been held onto, and much abandoned, it seems, without much pastoral thought at all" (22). If the only reason for making a change is, "I think this will make worship more relatable for the people in the community we're trying to reach," that doesn't qualify as a careful or thoughtful approach. If the only reason for keeping things the same is, "I think this will demonstrate that this is an orthodox Lutheran church," that wouldn't reach the standard of carefulness and thoughtfulness.

While Pastor Bortulin only specifically addresses carefulness and thoughtfulness in one section (21–22), one could argue that the essay repeatedly calls on pastors to think about what they are doing and why as they lead God's people in worship. Isn't that the point of nearly every thesis? He encourages

us to think about both the first-time visitor and the long-time parishioner (24–25), about how worship not only informs but forms (26–27), and about preparing people for daily living while also lifting their eyes to the home of righteousness awaiting the faithful (29–30).

Thoughtfulness and carefulness, our essayist emphasizes, requires conversations with brothers (*and perhaps a line item in the budget for coffee*). None of us serve in isolation, disconnected from the congregations in the circuit or the synod, even if we might feel that way. What we do has an impact on others, and love for fellow believers shows itself in considering how a practice adopted in one place might affect others. That's not to say congregations must, to keep their synodical "license," worship in the same way. It's rather that they must—and I recognize the legalistic sound of that word—engage brothers in conversation if, for instance, they are going to move away from the use of the Western rite. By definition, a conversation is not a monologue. In other words, if I'm considering introducing something different from the practice of the brothers in the circuit, I shouldn't approach the conversation in a "let me explain to you so thoroughly what we are doing and why that you will be compelled to support our decision" way. Explaining is helpful, of course, but even more critical is genuinely soliciting constructive criticism from brothers. I appreciated our presenter's comment that "God's given me two ears to listen" (12). The prayer often attributed to Francis of Assisi comes to mind, "O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek ... to be understood, as to understand." Listening to brothers and adapting my plans based on their comments is a beautiful thing, far more beautiful than "sticking to my guns" because "I know my context" or because "I have the freedom to change worship practices so long as the gospel of Christ remains central."

Our presenter helps us understand Christian freedom properly. He describes true freedom as "serving for the neighbor's benefit" (10), not simply doing whatever God has not forbidden. Dr. Siegbert Becker's essay for the 1983 synod convention, "Christian Liberty," holds a place on my "read this regularly" list. Near the end of the essay, he writes, "The freedom of the Christian ... is never just the freedom to do or not to do something. It always consists in doing what we do to the glory of God and the welfare of our neighbor. The first is liberty. The second is Christian liberty."¹ Choosing not to introduce some change in worship because of concerns raised by brothers is not "a surrendering of our liberty, any more than Christ's non-use of his divine attributes deprived him of those attributes. Rather it is the **use** of our freedom to do what pleases the Lord."² Becker urges his readers not to be "rugged individualists" who go their own way and do their own thing. Instead, we can, to the glory of God and for the benefit of others, with the strength he provides, work hard to walk "in harmony with brothers whose opinions have as good a chance of being right as our own."³ We have a blessed debt, as members of a synod, to treasure the unity the Lord has given us and to "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Eph 4:3 NIV).

In the highly unlikely event that those who heard this essay find nothing to comment on or ask for clarification about, I would submit the following questions as possibilities:

- *Do you find the wider definition of "liturgical" helpful in the conversation about Lutheran worship? Why or why not? (10–12)*
- *What should speaking boldly against legalism in worship matters look like in our synod? What should speaking boldly against frivolity in worship matters look like? (13)*

1. Siegbert Becker, "Christian Liberty," (essay presented at the forty-seventh biennial convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, New Ulm, MN, 1–6 August 1983), 18.
<http://essays.wisluthsem.org:8080/handle/123456789/314>.

2. Becker, "Christian Liberty," 18, emphasis added.

3. Becker, "Christian Liberty," 19.

- *In a practical way, how does a pastor, in worship, give people the impression that we are doing something of consequence, leading them somewhere of great importance, and dealing with material of great significance? (18–19)*
- *Should a pastor help prepare members of his congregation for the different worship practices they might experience in other WELS congregations? If yes, how? If not, why not?*

Pastor Bortulin, thank you for the evangelical encouragement to approach worship matters thoughtfully, prayerfully, and carefully. We will all do well to heed your wise counsel to engage our brothers in conversation and to evaluate what we are doing in worship and why, to the glory of the God who loves sinners and for the benefit of those purchased with the precious blood of the Lamb of God.

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