

1. Retaining the Mass¹

It is a privilege and an honor for this parish pastor to be here with you to discuss our “Theology of Worship,” a most important topic for our consideration. I must confess that when Pastor Vogel gave me the topic, “A Theology of Worship that is Missional and Vocational,” I first had to figure out exactly what the term “missional” means. So I did what we all do to find information. I Googled “missional” and found it to be a somewhat elusive term, although rather popular among the amorphous “emerging” and/or “emergent” movements of North American Christianity. I was still confused so I called an evangelical friend. He told me “missional” generally refers to the need for Christians to live as missionaries, being formed as disciples and reaching out to the culture with the unchanging message of the Gospel. A “missional” ministry is often contrasted with an “attractional” ministry, which focuses more on internal matters such as programming to draw people. Since this is my presentation, however, I will take the prerogative to understand the term to refer to Christ’s mission of redemption accomplished by His incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension and delivered through His Body, the Church, in the preaching of His Gospel and the administration of His Sacraments. In other words, “missional” must be understood in relation to Christ. The term “vocational” is easier for Lutherans. Vocation refers to God’s gift of calling on people through their placement in various stations of life. God gifts people with a vocation as a context for their good works, or active righteousness. While not the focus of my talk, I would argue that Christians live as missionaries, or are “missional,” through their God-given vocation.

When asked to make this presentation, I was immediately reminded of Kurt Vonnegut’s brief stint with *Sports Illustrated*. Early in his writing career, Kurt Vonnegut was strapped for cash and so took a position as a writer for the magazine, even though he later admitted he “didn’t care or know squat about sports.” In the first week of his employment, they asked him to write a caption

¹ I use the term “Mass” because it is the language of the Book of Concord. However the term is synonymous with “Divine Service,” “Gottesdienst,” or “Divine Liturgy.” Through my presentation I will use them interchangeably.

for a picture of a racehorse that had jumped the fence at the local track. He fed a page into his typewriter, stared at it for several hours, and finally typed, “The horse jumped over the [expletive deleted] fence.” Vonnegut then left his desk, never to return. What else could he say? It was so obvious. The horse jumped over the fence.

As I reflected on moving toward a missional and vocational theology of worship, “*Ite, Missa est*”² was the clear, obvious caption that came immediately to my mind. I believe this concluding statement from the Latin Rite encompasses the entirety of Christ’s mission and our vocation. It is in the Mass, or Divine Service, where the Holy Spirit is at work creating and sustaining faith through Christ’s gifts, where He forgives sins and strengthens sinners for life in this fallen world. It is in the Mass where the living, risen, and ascended Christ is bodily present to accomplish His mission of salvation and inform our vocation through the means of grace He established. Thus, our Lutheran Confessions are clear that we do not abolish the Mass, but “the Mass is retained among us and is celebrated with the greatest reverence.”³ The Mass is retained and celebrated because there Christ is sacramentally present. What else is there for a theology of worship that is both missional and vocational? *Ite, Missa est.*

2. The Sacramental Presence of Christ in the Mass

Of course, a great number of you will disagree with me. I have under no delusion that what seems obvious to me is also obvious to you. Let us be honest. We would not be gathered here for this theological convocation in the year of our Lord 2010 if there were not deep divisions in the worship life of the LCMS. And I would argue that much of the disharmony has resulted because many of our congregations have effectively abolished the Mass by their use of rites, ceremonies, and worship

² “...and it should be pointed out the ‘Ite, missa est’ does not mean ‘Go, you are dismissed,’ but ‘Go, it is the mission: your apostolate has begun’...” from Martin Mosebach, *The Heresy of Formlessness*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 33.

³ “The Augsburg Confession (Latin Text), Article XXIV: The Mass,” in *The Book of Concord*. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 69. [Hereafter referred to as AC.]

forms that are inconsistent with our confession of the real presence of Christ.⁴ While we typically discuss matters of worship distinguishing between “traditional” and “contemporary,” I would propose that we consider employing the categories of “sacramental” and “non-sacramental.” The typical labels of “traditional” and “contemporary” threaten to reduce the entire discussion to one of personal preferences for musical styles, and promises to be entirely unfruitful. However if we begin to evaluate our worship according to “sacramental” and “non-sacramental” terms, then we may consider how our liturgical rites and ceremonies reflect our Lutheran confession that the living, risen, and ascended Christ is corporally and sacramentally present with His people. We must also be willing to admit when we have uncritically adopted worship forms that by their nature, confession, and practice deny the bodily presence of Christ.

Any theology of worship, then, that is missional and vocational must be thoroughly sacramental, because, as biblical, confessional Lutherans, we are thoroughly sacramental.⁵ Our Lord Jesus Christ, just before He ascended, gave the so-called Great Commission to His disciples. Having defeated sin, the grave, and the jaws of hell by His death and resurrection, Jesus Christ stated that all authority had been given to Him in heaven and on earth (*Matt. 28:18*). By His authority, then, Jesus sent His disciples to go and make disciples of all nations by baptizing them in the Triune name and teaching them to observe all He had commanded (*Matt. 28:19-20*). God’s promises were established in Holy Baptism, whereby sins are washed away, the Holy Spirit is given, and the human person is joined to Christ and the power of His death and resurrection. The Holy Trinity’s mission of salvation is realized in the saving waters of Holy Baptism. Moreover, Christ commanded on Holy

⁴ I understand “rite” to refer to the written text of the liturgy and “ceremony” to refer to the performance of the rite, which includes both the verbal and non verbal communication. The term “liturgy” is ascribed to the public worship of the Christian Church. See Paul H.D. Lang, *Ceremony and Celebration* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1965), 3-15 for further discussion.

⁵ We confess that Christ is really present in our midst through His Word and His Sacraments. “... in the Lord’s Supper the body and blood of Christ are truly and substantially present and are truly offered with those things that are seen, bread and wine. Moreover, we are talking about the presence of the living Christ, for we know that death no longer has dominion over him (Rom. 6:9).” Apology X.

Thursday, “Do this in remembrance of me” (*1 Cor. 11:24-25*). In His Holy Supper, Jesus promised to be present with His people through His Holy Body and Holy Blood in the bread and wine. Jesus also told His disciples that, “repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all nations” (*Luke 24:47*). Christ’s mission for His Church is realized in the waters of His Holy Baptism, the bread and wine of His Holy Communion, and the proclamation of His Holy Gospel. By His authority, Jesus Christ commanded and empowered the Church “to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments.”⁶ These gifts not only inform the mission of the Church, but also are the means by which the human person is strengthened and nourished in true faith to live in their vocation according to Christ’s command to “love one another” (*John 13:31-35*). Even more, Jesus left His disciples with this comforting promise, “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (*Matt. 28:20*). The risen, living, and ascended Christ is not distant and aloof in some Protestant heaven, but is really, truly, bodily, corporally present with His Church in the Sacramental Word and the Word of the Holy Sacraments. Christ is present and active for us in the Mass, gifting us with His righteousness through His means. In this way, Christ accomplishes His mission. Christ is also present and active in us in the Mass, actively teaching us and establishing our identity as His baptized children. In this way, Christ informs our vocation in this life. Thus, if we are going to move toward a theology of worship that is missional and vocational, then we must move to where Christ is at work, namely, the font, the pulpit, and the altar. In other words, Christ’s mission is realized, and His vocation for us is defined, in the Mass.

Retaining the Mass with its deep ritual and ceremonial forms that confess the sacramental presence of Christ provides a real opportunity for mission. As a former evangelical, the objective Word of the Gospel and Sacraments in the Mass are a true comfort when compared with the subjective, effervescent, non-sacramental worship forms born out of the Second Great Awakening, with their manipulated, contrived attempts to create a spiritual atmosphere through music forms,

⁶ AC XXVII: 12-13.

charismatic leaders, pop-culture productions, and programming to felt needs. American evangelical rites and ceremonies baldly deny that Christ is present and at work among His people through the means of Grace He established. Now admittedly, the sacramental language, life, rituals, ceremonies, and liturgies of the Lutheran Church are incomprehensible to the denizens of this insane post-Christian world. This unfamiliarity, however, provides an authentic opportunity to evangelize the lost wayfarer of this fallen world and to recover the bored consumer of Christendom through powerful, meaningful signs that reveal the presence of Christ in the mysterious, biblical, evangelical, confessional, catholic, and apocalyptic world of the Mass, also known as the Divine Service or Divine Liturgy.

3. Responding to the Real Presence

I realize, of course, that everyone in this room shares the confession that Jesus Christ is truly present with His people through His means of grace. We all subscribe to the Book of Concord and the biblical theology it confesses. I would suggest, however, that perhaps what we say or confess to be true about the presence of Christ is not always reflected in our worship forms. It is almost as if we spit out “Word and Sacrament” merely to guarantee our orthodoxy. So while we all talk like Lutherans, our walk, when it comes to worship, does not necessarily reflect our confession that Christ is present in our midst. Every freshman in college is taught in that required speech class that nonverbal communication is stronger than verbal. So, for example, we may confess that the blood of Christ is present, but the use of plastic, disposable cups works against this confession. If the blood of the living, ascended Christ is really in our midst, then would we really receive it from a cup made of a cheap material not worthy of a decent glass of wine? Or if the charisma and personality of the pastor or servant leader is the focus of liturgy as expressed in dress, placement, speech and conduct, then it is nearly impossible to redirect the attention and faith of the people to the means of grace. We should remember that we confess that the ascended Christ, the one who possesses all authority, is among His people in the Mass, and we must therefore behave accordingly. If we fail to act in ways

appropriate to our sacramental confession, then the Body of Christ will never come to understand the comfort of the enduring presence of Christ with His people through His objective gifts.⁷

In the Scriptures, the holy presence of God filled people with fear, reverence, and awe. When Moses came to the burning bush, God commanded Moses, “Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (*Exod. 3:5*). The author of Hebrews recounted how God’s presence of Mt. Sinai filled the people and Moses with fear, and then encouraged the Christians to “offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire” (*Heb. 12:18-24, 28-29*). In the year King Uzziah died, the prophet Isaiah saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, surrounded by the heavenly host, which led Isaiah to confess, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts” (*Isaiah 6:1-6*). The presence of the Holy God is overwhelming for a sinful man. And when St. John was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day, the glorious presence of the living, ascended Christ sent him to the ground like a dead man (*Rev. 1:9-20*). Throughout the Holy Scriptures, God’s presence evokes fear, awe, and reverence. Moreover, the holy things of God, the sacred space, appointments, vestments, and rituals of the Tabernacle and Temple demanded the same. If we believe God Himself is present, then our worship must reflect this biblical reality.

In the Divine Service, we believe, teach and confess that heaven and earth come together in the mystery of faith. The Most Holy Trinity meets His people in the Mass. His people are drawn

⁷ The work of Michael Polanyi is critical for this discussion, although the limits of this presentation do not allow for it. Polanyi’s exploration of “Tacit” or “Intuitive” knowledge as opposed to purely “Cognitive” knowledge exposes the weakness of modern assumptions of how people know or understand. Polanyi’s argument is that people learn or possess knowledge “tacitly” or “intuitively,” not always being able to articulate all the particulars in how they came to know. He uses the example of facial recognition. We are able to recognize or to know someone without being able to detail all the particulars, and yet we still know the whole. With respect to liturgical rite and ceremony, I would contend that the sacramental Christian comes to understand or know the bodily presence of the living Christ through participation and observation in the liturgy, without being able to fully articulate how they came to this confession. Conversely, the non-sacramental Christian comes to understand Christ as being present spiritually through their particular liturgical forms. See Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1966) and Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1968) for further discussion.

into His story in the biblical narrative of the liturgy. When the Church Militant gathers around God's gifts, it joins the Church Triumphant. There is a heavenly invasion on earth. At the Holy Altar, Christians on earth come together with "angels and archangels and all the company of heaven" (*liturgical text*) in the presence of the Risen Christ. While this is a profound mystery, it is the belief of all sacramental Christians. If we believe heaven and earth come together in our worship and we gather before the Most Holy God and all the hosts of heaven, then our worship must reflect this biblical reality. Our worship should teach us to behave like St. John in the Apocalypse for we also gather in the Spirit on the Lord's day before the same Christ.

Lutherans make the radical confession that the real presence of Christ in the Mass brings us into an other worldly, biblical reality. The Word of God is more than a text for Lutherans, but Christ speaking in our midst. The Sacraments are more than obscure doctrinal statements for Lutherans, but Christ working in our midst. The Divine Service is more than a cultural expression or aesthetic preference for certain forms, but a human encounter with the Holy Trinity. As such, our verbal rites and our nonverbal ceremony must reflect this heavenly mystery. Our theology of worship cannot be reduced to intellectual concepts and cliched theological mantras, but must possess physical, material liturgical forms adequate to such a confession. Only a radical Cartesian dualist, that sad modern man suffering from a San Andreas rift in their person between the material and immaterial, can speak about the idea of the real presence of Christ without behaving appropriately. Only a disembodied ghost, a spiritually impoverished trousered ape could be so misguided as to think they believe God Himself is present and yet act without reverence, fear, and awe. Our Lutheran confession demands deep sacramental liturgical forms, other worldly rites and ceremonies. Such forms must bear the weight of our beliefs that Christ is speaking, Christ is present, Christ is at work, and Christ is revealed in words, water, bread and wine.

4. The Problem of Non-Sacramental Ritual in the LCMS

I must assume there is agreement in the LCMS about the real, corporal, bodily presence of the living Christ in the Divine Service. The Book of Concord is clear on this confession throughout. Yet our confessions are also clear that it is not necessary for there to be agreement on external ceremonies among the churches.⁸ There is a certain amount of diversity in rite, ceremony, and liturgical form to be expected in difference locales. This should be acceptable as no one form of liturgy or worship possesses a Divine mandate. The authors of the Epitome write, “We unanimously believe, teach and confess that ceremonies or ecclesiastical practices that are neither commanded nor forbidden in God’s Word, but have been established only for good order and decorum, are in and of themselves neither worship ordained by God nor a part of such worship.”⁹ Such diversity, however, does not mean external ceremonies are all created equal. While no form communicates grace *ex opere operato*, there is the potential for certain forms to deny the sacramental presence of Christ.¹⁰

It is impossible to separate the verbal and nonverbal in liturgical forms. It is possible for ceremonial conduct, the nonverbal, to mitigate or deny what is confessed in the rite, the verbal or written. As such, our “Ceremonies should serve the purpose of teaching the people what they need to know about Christ.”¹¹ The people need to know the living, risen, and ascended Christ is in their midst through the means He established. The ceremonies need to reflect this belief. When ceremonies become irreverent and informal, they work against our confession and the people are left without the proper understanding of the Gospel. As already discussed, the Holy Scriptures teach us how to behave ceremonially in the presence of Christ. So our ceremonies should teach us to act

⁸ FC Ep. X:7. See also Ap VII:30-32; FC SD:9.

⁹ FC Ep. X:3

¹⁰ It is entirely unhelpful to the discussion to assert “traditionalists” somehow hold that certain traditions or ceremonies communicate forgiveness of sins. In fact, I would argue that those who promote evangelical worship methods and techniques promising numerical growth are far closer to the *ex opere operato* position in that those particular forms are deemed more effective in reaching people with the Gospel.

¹¹ AC XXIV:3

like Moses, Isaiah, and St. John. Our sacramental confession means “useless, foolish spectacles, which are not beneficial for good order, Christian discipline, or evangelical decorum in the church, are not true adiaphora or indifferent things.”¹² They are not adiaphora or indifferent because they are opposed to the Word of God. The Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord states, “We should not regard as free and indifferent, but rather as things forbidden by God that are to be avoided, the kind of things presented under the name and appearance of external, indifferent things that are nevertheless fundamentally opposed to God’s Word...”¹³ The issue then becomes one of determining when a ceremonial form is incompatible with our faith. Here the disciplines of ritual studies, sociology, and anthropology become helpful for our discussion.

Paul Bradshaw and John Melloh have argued, “The starting point for ritual studies is, as far as possible, the empirical observation and recording of the totality of an act of worship, since what is printed in liturgical texts and what is happening in the actual event are quite different things.”¹⁴ In other words, it is essential to witness what takes place in a liturgy to comment on the faith of the community. The conduct of the liturgical actor and congregation should reflect their faith. As such, any attempt then to describe the general state of the liturgy in the LCMS will be inherently flawed and riddled with inconsistencies. The limitations are obvious. There will always be an exception. It is simply impossible to accurately account for the breadth of worship in our congregations through empirical observation. Still, anecdotal evidence argues convincingly that the printed liturgies are not always used and seldom practiced as given in the approved hymnals. Obedience to the rubrics is hardly widespread. Moreover, the infiltration of Church Growth Movement (CGM) worship and

¹² SD X:7

¹³ SD X:5

¹⁴ Paul Bradshaw and John Melloh, editors. *Foundations in Ritual Studies: A Reader for Students of Christian Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), iv.

principles in the LCMS is assumed for this discussion.¹⁵ Worship in the CGM is almost by definition spontaneous and constantly changing, which makes it nearly impossible to formally study. Still, the principles behind the CGM are somewhat constant and able to be considered by theological confession and ritual studies. I would argue that in the liturgies of both the LSB and the CGM, there are shared assumptions that work against the doctrinal confession of the LCMS. These are the product of enlightenment rationalism and subjectivism that undergirded both the Liturgical Renewal Movement and Church Growth Movements of the Twentieth-Century. While these movements may appear to be radically different, they are driven by many of the same principles and concerns.

4.1 The Liturgical Renewal Movement

In the twentieth-century, there was a widespread reform of Christian worship that crossed confessional boundaries. The renewal of liturgy resulted in the Anglican Church adopting revisions of the Book of Common Prayer; the Roman Catholic Church through its work at Vatican II instituting a new order of Mass; and the Lutherans disagreeing on the nature and extent of renewal in the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship. There is no doubt that the Liturgical Renewal Movement of the twentieth-century brought significant changes to Christian worship practices. Liturgical texts were retranslated and rewritten. Ritual practices were modified, added, or abandoned. Cultural preferences were accommodated by many liturgies. While many saw this movement as the savior of the church, others viewed these alterations, additions, or deletions to the liturgy of the church with suspicion and trepidation. Regardless of perspective, the impact of the Liturgical Renewal movement cannot be denied.

¹⁵ This assumption is not without warrant. The materials published in support of Ablaze! (tm) reflect the assumptions of the Church Growth Movement (CGM). Worship at circuit, district, and synod level also betray the influences of the CGM. Moreover, some of the largest and most influential LCMS congregations employ these methods almost exclusively. Examples include Salem Tomball, Gloria Dei, Crosspoint Katy, and King of Kings Omaha to name a few. Also, nearly every attempt to plant new congregations in the LCMS utilizes CGM techniques. Jefferson Hills in Missouri and Water's Edge in Frisco, TX are two prominent examples. Finally, an unknown number of LCMS parishes offer different styles of worship, including traditional, blended, and contemporary. This is a common CGM technique, which seeks to meet the preferences of the consumer.

John Fenwick and Bryan Spinks, in their study of this movement in its various forms, identified several of its characteristics, which will guide this discussion.¹⁶ First, there was a desire to create an authentic community. The reformers of the liturgy wanted parishioners to interact with each other more, rather than merely attend what they perceived to be a sterile, individualistic ritual. An emphasis for the liturgy was placed on familial bonds in the Body of Christ. For example, the *Pax Domini* became an opportunity to shake hands in a welcoming transaction with other parishioners.¹⁷

Another characteristic of the movement was increased participation. There was a push for more lay involvement and a decentralization of authority. Moreover, the worship needed to be intelligible and understandable for the people so that they could more actively participate. Criteria for the judgment of good liturgy included transparency and intelligibility. The people should be able to see and understand what is taking place before them. The role of the officiant is to assist the people toward the end. No longer was the pastor merely to provide priestly intercession, but was also to manufacture a feeling of community through the facilitation of lay participation in the liturgical event. This often increased the participation of the liturgical agent as well as the laity. The renewal movement generally considered liturgical rites to be most beneficial if they were easily accessible to the congregation.

In the twentieth-century, a renewed interest in the theology and practice of the patristic era had a profound influence on the Liturgical Renewal Movement. Betraying modern assumptions, theologians, biblical scholars, historians, and liturgists of the era sought purity of Christian faith and expression in the study of early church. The general theory promoted by Bauer and Harnack was that true Christianity was obscured by Hellenism and other cultural influences. The task of the

¹⁶ John Fenwick and Bryan Spinks, *Worship in Transition: The Liturgical Renewal Movement in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 5-11.

¹⁷ See Thomas Day, *Why Catholics Can't Sing: The Culture of Catholicism and the Triumph of Bad Taste* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 6 for a humorous account of the introduction of the "Handshake of Peace" to the Mass.

scholar was to peel back the encrusted, unbiblical traditions to find the central core of faith. Scholars became infatuated with the *Sitz im Leben* of the original writers and communities of the New Testament. They longed to find the original teachings of Jesus and practices of His followers. They judged later traditions to be inconsistent with true Christianity. These positivistic assumptions were misguided, to say the least.¹⁸ Nevertheless, many proponents of liturgical renewal believed that the worship of the church could be fixed by returning to the source of Christian worship. They assumed that the original liturgy would be marked by simplicity and contain a specific Jewish character. In their quest, many scholars oversimplified the complexity of early Christian worship in their attempt to fit everything into a common liturgical font.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the principle of simplicity drove many liturgical changes and the claim for ancient precedent allowed liturgists to both remove and include certain rituals. This characteristic of the movement also unwittingly communicated to congregations that their received liturgy was essentially flawed and needed to be corrected through the insights of modern scholarship. Once these necessary changes had been instituted, then they would again worship in spirit and truth, just like the ancient Christians.

Rediscovery of the importance of the Bible and the Eucharist were other key characteristics to the movement. The Roman Catholic Church focused more of their attention on the Liturgy of the Word and the public proclamation of Holy Scripture. The revised lectionary project was a fruit of this renewed emphasis. Many Protestant communities began to celebrate Holy Communion on a more regular basis. In the LCMS, congregations that used to partake of the Eucharist on a quarterly basis might switch to weekly or bimonthly celebrations. It is now widely accepted, even among non-sacramental confessions, that weekly celebration of Holy Communion is the ideal for Christians, mirroring the early community of Acts (2:41-47).

¹⁸ See Robert Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005) and Larry Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Press, 2005) for accessible refutations of the Harnackian thesis.

¹⁹ See Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) for a detailed presentation of the academic quest for the early liturgy and its difficulties.

The Liturgical Renewal Movement also emphasized use of the vernacular. The Roman Catholic Church went from a universal Latin Mass to a new order of Mass in the local vernacular. In the span of some forty years, the Latin Mass went from complete ascendancy to total obscurity, or a historical curiosity at best. The liturgical vernacular of English speaking confessions also changed a great deal. Most abandoned the Jacobean language of the seventeenth century in favor of more contemporary English translations. This emphasis on the vernacular appeared to give more access to the people and made the worship of the church more intelligible.

The rediscovery of other Christian traditions was another characteristic of the movement. Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox studied the same liturgical sources and explored many of the same liturgical rituals, creating an appreciation for the other traditions while also allowing for an opportunity to be corrected by them. Some tendencies, emphases and movements in the various orders of Christian worship were generally quite similar, which allowed an opportunity for discussion. The recognizable differences allowed for the same.

Finally, there was an emphasis on proclamation and social involvement. No longer content to remain an obscurant cult marked by irrelevant ritual performance, the proponents of liturgical renewal argued for an increased participation in social activism. The liturgy was meant not only to be an instrument of transformation for the person, but also an instrument for increased awareness of the issues. This emphasis was intended to make the church more relevant to the needs of a rapidly changing society

These characteristics of the Liturgical Renewal Movement offered by Fenwick and Spinks, suggest the determining principles for authentic worship include community, accessibility, simplicity, intelligibility, transparency, understanding, relevancy, and awareness.²⁰ While the Liturgical

²⁰ These principles for the Liturgical Renewal Movement are generally supported by the work of Aidan Nichols, *Looking at the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996); Kieran Flanagan, *Sociology and Liturgy: Re-presentations of the Holy* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991); and David Martin, *Two Critiques of Spontaneity* (Hertfordshire: The Broadwater Press Limited, 1973).

Movement is quite diverse in its origins, practices, and manifestations, these principles bind its adherents together. Unfortunately, such principles betray their origin in Enlightenment subjectivist philosophy that locates meaning and significance in the individual rather than an objective, transcendent reality.²¹ Even the desire for community, a reaction against modern individualism, reflects subjectivist ideals in the attempt to define this ephemeral community as ‘authentic,’ ‘real,’ ‘loving,’ ‘warm,’ ‘caring,’ and other such descriptors that are given meaning by the perceptions of the subject. In its various forms, the Liturgical Renewal Movement has displayed a tendency toward focusing on the immanent, relevant, and social needs of the modern person, sometimes at the expense of received theological truths and liturgical practices.

It should not be surprising that these changes took place in a philosophical age that resulted in the loss of transcendent truth, the dismissal of all meta-narratives, and an infatuation with the psychological and sociological nature of the individual. The church now exists in a pluralistic world where “there is no officially approved pattern of belief or conduct.”²² Subjectivism and pluralism contributed to deep alterations in social institutions such as the family, education, and the church.²³ Worship practices in Christendom were likewise effected. The Liturgical Movement promoted the need for change, believing that the church itself might be renewed by their efforts to “create worship that is ‘authentic’ and that enables a full-orbed exposure to the transforming power of Christ in the Spirit” so the people of God would serve His Kingdom more faithfully.²⁴ The degree to which this movement was successful is a matter of intense debate and consideration. Typically, those who welcomed the changes as beneficial for the church also believe that its underlying

²¹ Obviously, the limitations of this paper will not allow for a full discussion or defense of the relationship between Enlightenment thinking and the Liturgical Renewal Movement. Fenwick and Spinks make the connection as do Nichols, Flanagan, and Martin. This author will rely on their connection for this occasion.

²² Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1989), 1.

²³ See David Martin, *Two Critiques of Spontaneity* for a full discussion.

²⁴ John Fenwick and Bryan Spinks, *Worship in Transition*, 11.

principles and characteristics are valid. Conversely, those who consider the effects of the renewals to be deleterious to the life of the church claim that it is built on philosophical and sociological categories inimical to Christian faith and practice.

4.2 The Church Growth Movement

In the early 1950's, Dr. Donald McGavran, a professor and missionary, began to study why certain churches and missions were more successful than others.²⁵ Using social scientific studies, Dr. McGavran located certain characteristics shared by churches experiencing numerical increase and offered a long list of principles that would lead to growth in churches. These principles focused on aspects of corporate life, administration and leadership, facilities, finances, ministries, education, ecumenism, and evangelism.²⁶ While the Church Growth Movement (CGM) is usually identified with the work of Dr. McGavran and Fuller Seminary, it has a diverse number of schools, approaches, practices, and critics that make it difficult to arrive at a strict definition. Still, there are certain principles that identify churches and people as members of this movement.

First, the Homogenous Unit principle undergirds the movement. Social scientists recognized that people are “attracted to churches where they find others like themselves”²⁷ and so adherents of the movement designed worship experiences and communities to appeal to that particular segment of the market. Proponents of the movement provided techniques to reach and convert homogenous groups of people in a particular area. Social and behavioral studies informed this market-based approach to increasing the numerical size of the church. The use of these social sciences was deemed valid based on the underlying pragmatism that drove the movement as well as

²⁵ Donald McGavran's book, *The Bridges of God*, published in 1955 is often considered to be the start of the Church Growth Movement. Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*. 3rd Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) is one of the foundational works for the Church Growth Movement.

²⁶ See Chapter 16 in Elmer L. Towns; John N. Vaughan, and David J. Seifert, *The Complete Book of Church Growth* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1981) for a full exploration of these principles. This summary will largely rely on their discussion.

²⁷ D.G. Hart, *The Lost Soul of American Protestantism* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2002), 156.

the assumption that God desires such results for His church. In addition to providing the scientific structure for the principle of homogeneity, sociology offered direction in the area of systems, leadership, marketing and management. While sociology is not necessarily harmful to the life of the church, the schools of sociology informing the Church Growth Movement were nearly always subjective in their orientation, not considering objective or transcendent matters to merit consideration.²⁸ This certainly warrants caution as the chosen means for numerical success are not necessarily related to objective realities.

Church Growth followers typically argue that all barriers to the Gospel must be removed to achieve success, which usually includes eliminating traditions and rituals that are not familiar to people outside the culture of the church. David S. Luecke, a pastor in the LCMS, suggested that worship style may be the greatest barrier to the Gospel.²⁹ He suggested that classical music may be one such barrier to reaching out as it is not easily appreciated by people without a church background.³⁰ Moreover, he offered anecdotal support for the reduction of scripted ritual to increase attendance.³¹ In other words, eliminating scripted ritual and adopting familiar music would reduce unnecessary barriers so people might hear the message of the Gospel. Anything that might be understood as offensive or alien to the targeted group should be eliminated. Cultural concerns dictate the approach taken by the church.

Services of “contemporary worship” are commonly assumed by members of CGM to be more effective than so-called traditional modes of worship. Contemporary worship, according to

²⁸ This criticism could easily be leveled at a majority of sociological schools. John D. Witvliet says that nearly all social sciences operate with the assumption of an epistemological relativism (*Foundations in Ritual Studies*, 28). While this does dismiss their value, it certainly calls for an awareness of their limitations, especially for Christians committed to objective truth made known in the Word of God.

²⁹ While certainly not representative of the CGM in all of its various manifestations, David Luecke does reflect their shared principles, thus providing an excellent example for this discussion.

³⁰ David S. Luecke, *The Other Story of Lutherans at Worship: Reclaiming Our Heritage of Diversity* (Tempe, AZ: Fellowship Ministries, 1995), 2.

³¹ *Ibid*, 1.

Luecke, is typically visitor friendly; emphasized informality for the sake of good communication; usually features revitalized preaching; and tends to feature many different leaders who stand in front of the congregation.³² The creativity and novelty associated with these services are considered to be more appealing to a larger segment of society. In fact, the traditional liturgy is deemed to be clumsy and unintelligible to most people, which makes it a barrier that must be removed.³³ Thus, unfamiliar language should be eliminated or carefully defined. Popular and folk expressions are preferred for their cultural familiarity. Spontaneity, not habit, is considered to be the essential element for authentic worship.³⁴ Informality is to be preferred over rote repetition.³⁵ The worship should be transparent and intelligible to every participant. This will make the message accessible. Also, boredom will be eliminated as the person will be engaged in an immediate, usually emotional, experience. D.G. Hart observed that such services “use a variety of means that are designed to make an impression on would-be converts that elicits a dramatic, emotion, and, it is assumed, heartfelt response.”³⁶ The CGM focuses on a worship atmosphere that will likely engage people in a non-threatening, familiar manner. Traditional forms are nearly always rejected because of their perceived awkwardness, not to mention their inability to excite or engage emotions.

Pastoral leadership is another key aspect of the CGM. Following business principles, the pastor is a leader that must delegate, prioritize, and manage well, among other things. The charisma and character of the pastor is an essential ingredient to the numerical increase of a church. Dr. Peter Wagner even goes so far as to state that a growing church will necessarily have a dynamic leader who

³² Ibid, 9.

³³ Ibid, 10.

³⁴ See Lori Branch, *Rituals of Spontaneity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006) for a full discussion of this phenomenon.

³⁵ David S. Luecke, *The Other Story of Lutherans at Worship*, 13.

³⁶ Hart, *The Lost Soul of American Protestantism*, 157.

is being used by God to make it all happen.³⁷ The pastor is expected to function as a leader of the community, helping individuals to reach their potential through the exercise of their spiritual gifts, natural talents and abilities. To accomplish this end, the pastor must speak to relevant needs in the lives of the people.³⁸ The pastor must be an effective communicator to be successful in motivating, engaging, and building the community. His leading of worship and preaching should be informative and informal. He must appear to be an everyman to the people. Thus, his dress, demeanor, and speech should be casual so as not to be threatening. The pastor, like the worship of the community, must be accessible, informal, and inspiring.

Again the Church Growth Movement is a diverse collection of Christian confessions utilizing social scientific research to target certain groups of people with the message of the Gospel. Whether charismatic, evangelical, or denominational, CGM adherents follow a general set of principles to achieve their desired end. They focus on marketing to specific groups of people, which means tailoring worship to meet perceived needs. The worship is structured to prepare the audience for receptivity to the message. The worship then must be familiar and intelligible. It must be accessible in form and language. Further, it should provide an immediate, emotive response, avoiding boredom at all costs. Informality and spontaneity define the worship as being authentic and real.

The roots of the CGM can be easily traced to the methods and conclusions of modern subjectivist philosophy and social science. It is generally pragmatic rather than dogmatic. The CGM adopts methods that will be effective. Doctrinal truths are assumed, even though they are dismissed as being secondary to the more important task of reaching out to the modern person. The form is significant for growth, but does not affect the content of the faith. The churches of the CGM use means that will engage these people in an atmosphere of excitement and emotion to achieve the

³⁷ Dr. Peter Wagner quoted in *The Complete Book of Church Growth*, 117.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 15-17.

desired outcome. This outcome-based approach relies heavily on marketing and manipulation to be successful in numerical growth.

4.3 Shared Principles of Liturgical Renewal and Church Growth

The schools and sources of both the Liturgical Renewal and Church Growth movements would appear at first glance to have little in common. The Liturgical Movement is associated with traditional forms and expressions of worship. Its followers typically use vestments, paraments, lectionaries, scripted rituals, and mostly classical hymns and musical settings for the liturgy. The Church Growth Movement is associated with contemporary forms and expressions of worship. Its followers eschew vestments, paraments, scripted rituals and nearly all classical hymns and musical settings for the liturgy. Yet both of these schools operate from a group of shared assumptions. They desired to build community by creating an atmosphere of hospitality and accessibility. They believe worship should be rational and intelligible for the participants. Cognitive understanding is highly-valued by both of these movements. Moreover, the meaning of worship should be transparent to the people. It should be relevant to their personal needs as well as those of society. Creativity and spontaneity are considered to be marks for authenticity. Finally, simplicity is a hallmark virtue as both believe they reflect that apostolic nature of the church. The Liturgical Movement seeks the pure apostolic liturgy. The Church Growth Movement believes it reflects the intimacy of the house churches of Acts. In all of these principles, there is a subjective focus. The transcendent and objective are relegated to afterthoughts. The person is a consumer who has spiritual and social needs that are best met by studying the conclusions of scientific theory or uncritically assuming modern Enlightenment philosophy to be most appropriate for understanding the human person and religious expression.

4.4 Considerations for Discussing Liturgy and Ritual in LCMS

The current expressions of worship in the LCMS reflect the influences of both the Liturgical Movement and the Church Growth Movement. Of course this will not be problematic for

most members of the LCMS. They will appeal to the Word as being the sole source and norm for Lutheran faith and practice. They will argue that as long as the LCMS possesses the Word of God in truth and purity, then the ritual form of worship will not matter. Congregational polity, historical precedent of diversity, *adiaphora*, doctrinal unity, and evangelistic concerns will trump most ritual or ceremonial concerns in the liturgy. Such objections, of course, pretend that the Word comes to us in a vacuum rather than through means. This is not the doctrinal confession of the LCMS. Thus, it is imperative that the LCMS critically reflect on its ritual and ceremonial practices to move toward a theology of worship that is consonant with our doctrinal confession that Christ's mission and the vocations of the Baptized are realized in the Mass.

Unfortunately, much of the heritage of the LCMS now reflects a bias against, or at least an indifference toward, the ritual and ceremonial in the liturgy. Mark Searle made this observation: "In a sense, the whole Reformation was a protest against the way the word had been eclipsed by ritual in medieval Christianity, so that any concern with ritual was adjudged at best a distraction to religious seriousness, at worst a relapse into paganism."³⁹ While the followers of Luther were never iconoclasts, they still found themselves in reaction to a highly ritualized Roman Church. Luther himself was concerned with issues of intelligibility and accessibility in the Mass long before the rise of the modern. His reforms of the Mass included the introduction of the vernacular to allow the people to hear the Word. Unfortunately, current interpretation of Luther's reforms now provide the rationale for contemporary attempts at de-ritualization for the sake of accessibility. The difficulty here is the assumption that Luther thought rituals and ceremonies of the liturgy necessarily obscured the Gospel.⁴⁰ The introduction of the vernacular itself is not a pejorative statement against ritual. Yet this accepted understanding of Luther in conjunction with the aforementioned provides

³⁹ Mark Searle, *Foundations in Ritual Studies*, 9.

⁴⁰ It might also be argued that Luther may have been an excellent theologian and biblical scholar, but was less spectacular in his understanding of liturgy, rite, and ceremony. Whether this is true or not is beside the point. Any appeals to Luther on this topic do not carry much authority as he did not speak much to these particular matters. See LW, 53.

an easy, albeit misguided excuse for members of the LCMS to overlook or disregard liturgy and ritual as central concerns for the church.

Another challenge for this discussion is the common assumption that the Lutheran Reformation succeeded in restoring the Mass to a more ancient, primitive form, which was simpler, more faithful, and more intelligible. From this perspective, the accretions and superstitions of the medieval church were, in essence, removed so that the people could understand what was taking place in the liturgical rites of the church. Art Just goes so far as to write, “What we find is that Luther, through his application of the theological principle of justification by grace through faith, restored the historic liturgy to the simplicity and beauty it had before the decay it suffered during the medieval period.”⁴¹ This understanding of the perceived simplicity of the liturgy before the so-called “Dark Ages,” however, is nearly impossible to defend. Moreover, this common argument is faulty on a number of levels. First, it is not necessarily true that liturgy moves from simplicity to complexity. There are a number of examples of liturgy moving from complexity to simplicity. The efforts of the Liturgical Movement and Church Growth Movement bear witness to this fact. Second, the idea that simplicity in liturgy is more desirable than complexity is not necessarily true. Third, it is difficult to point out the singular, unified Medieval Mass marked by ugliness and decay. Examples surely exist, but there was more diversity in that period than is often allowed. Besides, the value judgment of “beauty” is simply not helpful to the discussion.

This acceptance or dismissal of liturgical form based on individual concerns for the aesthetic is problematic. The argument that all such forms are merely stylistic preferences relies more on subjectivist philosophy than Christian sacramental theology. Werner Elert’s statement that the ceremonial raises “the problem of external form.... The form of worship is formally conditioned by artistic taste”⁴² denies the possibility that the external form might have the capacity to communicate

⁴¹ Arthur Just, *Heaven on Earth: The Gifts of Christ in the Divine Service* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2008), 237

⁴² Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, 326.

deep and important truths or offer a glimpse of transcendent reality. This is an untenable position for a sacramental Christian. Waddell echoes a similar view when he writes, “Whether the form is classical-traditional or ‘contemporary,’ it is what is edifying to a people of specific place, time and circumstance. This is an important consideration which involves at the very least subjective personal opinion about style of music.”⁴³ Again, the form is reduced to a cultural preference, nothing more, but maybe less.

The LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations stated in a 1972 critique of the Charismatic Movement, “The emphasis of our Lutheran heritage on the external Word as the instrument of the Holy Spirit helps prevent a subjectivism that seeks divine comfort and strength through an interior experience rather than in the objective word of the Gospel.”⁴⁴ This statement appeals to the objective reality of God’s Word against the subjectivism of personal, individual experience. Yet the Charismatic Movement is closely related to the Church Growth Movement and not so distant from the subjectivism of the Liturgical Movement. It is essential to recognize that the objective external Word is always expressed through a liturgical form in rite and ceremony. The discussion must be directed to what is proper form for the objective external Word. The appeal to form as a purely subjective concern will inevitably devolve into an anti-materialism not congruent with the incarnation of Christ or the sacramental forms He instituted.

I would argue that the present worship life of the LCMS reflects the subjective and minimalist influences of both the Liturgical Renewal and Church Growth movements. It is Word-focused with little regard for liturgical form, ritual, or ceremony. Simplicity, intelligibility, accessibility, spontaneity, community, transparency, relevancy, creativity, and informality are the guiding principles for developing forms of worship. The forms for worship are regarded as mere matters of style and preference. As a result, clergy and congregations, all poorly educated in liturgical matters, are given

⁴³ Waddell, *The Struggle to Reclaim the Liturgy in the Lutheran Church*, 219-220.

⁴⁴ Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *The Charismatic Movement and Lutheran Theology* (St. Louis: Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, 1979), 29.

the responsibility for figuring out how to conduct the service or create their own based on cultural and personal concerns rather than sacramental and theological ones.

This current state of our liturgical practice betrays a dangerous naivete about appropriate liturgical form and its inseparable relationship with theological confession.⁴⁵ Sadly, the arguments for such diversity made from congregational freedom; historical precedent; *adiaphora*; or textual, doctrinal, confessional and missional constructs have become excuses for impoverished liturgical rituals, ceremonies, and practices that effectively deny the sacramental theology of Lutheran faith. Moreover, these arguments largely ignore the possibility that poor or inappropriate rituals, ceremonies, and practices obfuscate the theological confession of God's sacramental presence with His people. The prevailing trend in the LCMS might best be described as a de-ritualizing of the liturgy. All that matters is the Gospel preached and the sacraments administered, as if preaching and administering the sacraments occur in a vacuum, or some ethereal disembodied existence. I would argue that such de-ritualization threatens the confession that God Himself is present and at work through His ordained sacramental means, the source and substance of the mission and vocation of the Body of Christ.⁴⁶

The general dismissal of ritual and its importance for Christian worship reflects the adoption of uncritical assumptions not informed by anthropological and sociological literature, much less the theological confession of the LCMS. The inevitable consequences for this de-ritualization are

⁴⁵ James Alan Waddell argues that the adoption of a "liturgical hermeneutic" offers the possibility to move the current debate into more fruitful territory. He states, "With scripture and the Lutheran confessions as formal principle and the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone for Christ's sake as material principle, a triptych of referent, form and function might help move the church's conversation forward in an effort to make sense of all the diverse practices taking place in the church today in the name of both 'the historic liturgy' and 'contemporary worship.'" This modernist assumption that a method will solve the problem at hand does not address the issue at hand. Moreover, his focus on a proper application of pure Lutheran theology largely dismisses form as not essentially germane to the debate. See especially chapter 8 in *The Struggle to Reclaim the Liturgy in the Lutheran Church: Adiaphora in Historical, Theological, and Practical Perspective* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2005), 272.

⁴⁶ The Lutheran Confessions clearly state "the true body and blood of Christ are truly present under the form of bread and wine in the Lord's Supper." See Augsburg Confession X, 1. *The Book of Concord*. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 44.

impossible to determine at this point. To consider this trend to be benign, however, would be irresponsible. If the expression of faith through liturgical form is not consonant with doctrinal confession and theological belief, then the latter will eventually be deemed irrelevant, if not untrue. If doctrinal confession and theological belief do not inform ritual performance in the liturgy, then the latter will devolve into a theater of the absurd.

5. Recovering Sacramental Ritual Forms Adequate to Our Confession

A prolonged, informed, and honest discussion about the state of liturgy, rite, and ceremony in the LCMS is necessary if we are going to move toward a theology of worship that is missional and vocational. Our sacramental confession demands it. If we truly believe that Christ is in our midst, then our worship must reflect this confession of faith. Now if the presence of Christ is merely an idea or doctrinal commitment, then our worship will increasingly reflect the disembodied, non-sacramental, Gnostic and Docetic forms practiced and promoted by modern American Christendom. As Lutherans, however, we do not believe the Holy Spirit works through such pleasant, non-abrasive atmospheres of stimulating worship experiences. Rather, the Holy Spirit works through physical means established by Jesus Christ. Our Lord has established the proclamation of the Holy Gospel, the administration of Holy Baptism and the Holy Communion as the means by which faith is created, sustained and nourished.⁴⁷ Our rites and ceremonies must reflect our confession that God Himself is working through these gifts to accomplish His mission in the world and sustain His people in their vocations. This means our rites and ceremonies must be capable of bearing this heavy weight. Again, the disciplines of ritual studies, sociology of liturgy, and anthropology are able to inform our discussion.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ See AC V

⁴⁸ This discussion rests largely on the work of Aidan Nichols, *Looking at the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996); Kieran Flanagan, *Sociology and Liturgy: Re-presentations of the Holy* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991); and David Martin, *Two Critiques of Spontaneity* (Hertfordshire: The Broadwater Press Limited, 1973).

Sacramental ritual and ceremonial forms are almost diametrically opposed to the forms promoted by both the Liturgical Renewal Movement and the Church Growth Movement. The belief that the ineffable, incomprehensible Most Holy Trinity is present among His congregation undergirds all sacramental form and ceremony. The nearly indescribable and other worldly visions of Moses, Isaiah, and St. John inform sacramental worship forms. These deep forms are meant to suggest a heavenly encounter with God Himself. As such, the trivial modern concerns for the simple, the immediate, the intelligible, the explicit, the transparent, the novel, the creative, the informal, and the relevant make little sense when one considers the Lutheran belief about what takes place in the Divine Service. In fact, such concerns work against our sacramental confession.

Sacramental rites and ceremonies that most effectively communicate the presence of God to the human person are complex, rather than the simple. Only when the liturgy possesses complex signs of meaning, both verbal and non verbal, is a person able to understand the simple truth that something important is taking place in their midst, namely, the ascended Christ deigns to be with His people. Moreover, God's holy presence with His people is never direct and immediate, but rather is mediated through means. It is in the sacred words, water, bread, and wine that Christ comes to His people, and His presence is only immediate through such mediums. Mystery is also necessary for a sacramental confession. The confession that heaven descends to earth in the Mass needs a liturgy filled with mystery, so that this other worldly encounter might become intelligible to the participants. Opaque ceremonies help to make this belief transparent. Also, habitual rites and repetitive ceremonies allow the person to truly learn and pray the liturgy. Repetition is the key to learning what God is enacting among His people. Such habit and repetition provides the opportunity for a spontaneous formality. The presider chants, "The Lord be with you," and the congregation immediately responds, "And with Thy Spirit." Finally, the whole of a sacramental liturgy, its ritual and ceremonies, gives the person tacit and intuitive knowledge of God's sacred encounter with them. While the person may not be able to fully articulate the details of the liturgy, the whole of it

forms them in this confession of faith. When the liturgy, the entirety of the rites and ceremonies, is prayed and conducted with reverence, then its relevance becomes a reality for the people. Just as it was for Moses, Isaiah, and St. John, the Most Holy Trinity is present with and for the congregation.

While there has been diversity in liturgies throughout the history of Christianity, sacramental liturgies share these common traits to communicate the true, real presence of Christ. These liturgies are complex, mediated, mysterious, tacit, opaque, habitual, formal, and reverent. Their sacramental ritual forms are thus objective, meaning the Holy Spirit is at work through the means established by Christ. They are not dependent upon the person, but draw the faith of that person to the proper object, which is Christ Himself. The common rules and regularity of sacramental liturgies allow the person the freedom to pray and participate as they do not have to constantly figure out what is taking place. A sacramental liturgy recognizes the power of communicating through the non-rational, nonverbal, and sensory, which draws the worshiper into a new reality that engages their entire person with all of its senses. This then transforms the worshiper as their actions and faith are endowed with a holy, other worldly purpose. Furthermore, the iconic nature of sacramental forms opens the person up to heavenly, transcendent mysteries. For Christians who confess, teach, and believe in the mystery of the sacramental presence of the Most Holy Trinity, their rites and ceremonies will necessarily reflect their faith. So Lutherans do not abolish the Mass, but it is “celebrated among us with greater devotion and earnestness than among our opponents. The people are instructed more regularly and with the greatest diligence concerning the holy sacrament, to what purpose it was instituted, and how it is to be used, namely as a comfort to terrified consciences. In this way, the people are drawn to Communion and to the Mass.”⁴⁹

6. Reforming Liturgy in the LCMS for the sake of Mission and Vocation

My argument is that if the LCMS is to move toward “A Theology of Worship: Missional and Vocational,” then it must recover its sacramental confession that that living, risen, and ascended

⁴⁹ AC XXIV:1

Christ is the source of mission and vocation in His Church. Christ accomplishes His mission through His means of grace. Christ informs our vocation through His means of grace. The living Christ is the source of life for all believers, so we listen to His Word; we return to the waters of His Holy Baptism; and we feed on His Holy Body and Blood. Our liturgies must communicate textually, verbally, and non verbally that Christ is present and effecting His forgiveness, life, and salvation for sinners through these objective means. We must retain the Mass because it keeps Christ in our midst. And with Christ in our midst, we can be confident of His mission and our vocation. *Ite, Missa est.*

Yet if we consider the current programming in the LCMS, we would think that we need to be a certain type of church for the sake of mission and vocation. Our ecclesial confusion is reflected in the fads and novelties promulgated by one Church Growth guru or consultant after another. If the mission of the church is to be successful, then we need to..., and you can fill-in the blank here. We seek to transform our congregations by the power of organizational principles, systems theory, education programs and leadership training, as if we somehow possess the power to effect such transformation. Programs such as Ablaze!^(tm), Transforming Congregations Network, and Pastoral Leadership Institute are perceived as the means by which we will recover a sense of mission and vocation in our congregations. These programs and their adherents rely almost entirely on non-sacramental forms of worship and secular methods. At best they mitigate our sacramental theological confession, at worst they deny it altogether. While some of these may work in terms of financial and attendance numbers, we are not pragmatists and Christ has promised nothing through those means.

I would like to offer a novel proposal. Perhaps we are called to be faithful as the church if we are to be truly missional and vocational. Faithfulness, for the church, of course, means obedience to our Lord Jesus Christ. Here, Luther reminds us that a seven-year old knows what the church is: “holy believers and ‘the little sheep who hear the voice of their shepherd.’”⁵⁰ The voice of the

⁵⁰ SA, 12:2-3.

shepherd comes through His appointed means, the Holy Gospel and the Holy Sacraments. The church is called to be faithful to the dominical mandates to “preach repentance and forgiveness of sins...,” “Do this in remembrance of me...,” “If you forgive the sins...,” and “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations by baptizing....” This is the mission and vocation of the church. There is no other place where the living, risen, and ascended Christ is at work. We do not look for Christ to be present in any other place. He has promised to meet sinners in these means and so, for the sake of His mission and our vocation, we preach the Gospel and administer the Sacraments. We retain the Mass, which means our rites and ceremonies must be appropriate to our confession that Christ is truly, bodily, corporally present. They do not need to be identical, but they must be sacramental if we are to be faithful to our Lutheran identity. *Ite, Missa est.*

7. Asking the Right Question

I realize that this presentation will use the usual questions. The moment the Mass is mentioned, some will respond, “Which form of the Mass, or Divine Service?” Certainly, there has been widespread diversity in liturgical forms in the history of Christianity, both in the LCMS and the rest of Christendom.⁵¹ As such, this is a fair question to raise, although it does not get to the real issue. The real issue revolves around the nature of the rites and ceremonies of our liturgies. Sacramental forms are necessary for a sacramental confession. Non-sacramental forms deny our confession, which means that a majority of evangelical, charismatic, or reformed liturgies will be inappropriate because of their theological confession. We simply cannot make a disembodied “new measure” into a sacramental rite or ceremony. They operate out of radically different theological world views. So what is the answer to this question for the LCMS today? Use the LSB. It is not perfect, but it does possess sacramental forms of the Mass or Divine Service.

⁵¹ Cf. Luther D. Reed, *The Lutheran Liturgy*, op. cit., 89 has an excellent discussion of the different practices among the Lutheran Church orders.

Some will ask, “What about *adiaphora* and Formula of Concord X?” This question rightly claims Christian freedom in matters that are neither commanded nor forbidden in Holy Scripture. Since there is not a biblically mandated order of worship for Christians, then no form of liturgy, rite or ceremony can be forced on a congregation or bind an individual conscience.⁵² Theoretically, this should allow congregations and their pastors to worship in whatever manner they deem appropriate. Again, this is a fair question to raise, although it also fails to address the issue at hand. The issue again comes back to the necessary distinction between sacramental and non-sacramental forms. *Adiaphora* and FC X both speak against forms that deny the Word of God, which is that Christ is present with us always to the very end of the age through His gifts.

Related to the above question is the appeal to our congregational form of government. Since our congregational polity establishes the local community as the final arbiter of practice, they are free to use whatever liturgical forms they choose. In most instances, then, questions of local preference, cultural context, and pastoral discretion are allowed to dictate worship forms. While our synodical constitution clearly states that member congregations are bound to “exclusive use of doctrinally pure agenda, hymnbooks, and catechisms in church and school,”⁵³ many opt to use resources from non-approved entities, creating their own liturgies, rites, and ceremonies. This is usually done by an appeal to *adiaphora*, Formula of Concord X, and congregational authority. Such radical autonomy and a refusal to submit to others for the sake of love works against the unity of the LCMS. If we are synod, then we should be bound by our constitution and by-laws.

Another common question is “Don’t we need to distinguish between form and content?” As pastors and congregations of the LCMS who unconditionally subscribe to the teachings of the Book of Concord, we theoretically share the same theological content in our confession of faith. Issues of liturgy or practice, however, are often reduced to mere forms through which the content

⁵² Cf. Formula of Concord, Article X. *The Book of Concord*. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), .

⁵³ *2007 Handbook: Constitution, Bylaws, and Articles of Incorporation*, The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, 13.

of this doctrine is expressed. The assumption here is that as long as there is agreement in doctrinal matters, there can be disagreement or diversity in the forms of public worship.⁵⁴ While this is a common issue in discussions of worship, it reflects a certain naivete. Theological content must inform liturgical forms, just as those forms will reflect theological confession. There is an inseparable relationship between form and content. This relationship begins to get to the real issue.

Underlying the above questions, or objections mentioned, members of the LCMS who adhere to principles of the Church Growth Movement (CGM) contend that historic liturgical practice prevents reaching out to people unfamiliar with the rituals or culture of the church. In other words, the liturgy is inhospitable. It is a barrier to Christ's mission. It keeps people from Jesus Christ and His Gospel. If the LCMS is to survive and flourish, then it must change to meet the diverse needs of people in the culture. Liturgical practice is one aspect of this necessary change. The current mission programming of the LCMS is driven by this perspective as evidenced by the published materials and leadership training offered to support its Ablaze!^(tm) movement. These prevailing assumptions, differences and distinctions have led to a widespread lack of uniformity in liturgical rite and practice in the LCMS. This is a reality.

I would argue that all of these questions and objections, however common, miss the point. The real issue at hand is this, "Is the living, risen, and ascended Jesus Christ truly, corporally, and bodily present among His people through His means for the sake of the mission and vocation of the Church?" If the answer is yes, then our theology of worship must reflect this belief. If the answer is yes, then our liturgies and their rites and ceremonies must reflect this belief. If the answer is yes, then our faith will be strengthened and nourished as we gather around our Lord in these objective means. If the answer is yes, then our mission and vocation will be guided and directed by Jesus Christ Himself, and no other.

⁵⁴ The issue, of course, is not the existence of differences in local practice. There has never been a singular liturgy for Christendom and there has always been variations in local practice. The real question is the permissible extent of difference. At what point does a practice deny the confessed doctrine?

8. Current Challenges in the LCMS

If we are to move toward a mission and vocational theology of worship, then we must consider some current challenges to the discussion. First, the current state of sacramental life of the LCMS leaves something to be desired. While we confess that Christ is present in the Holy Communion, many congregations have an irregular celebration of the sacrament and others are informal in their liturgical conduct. Both of these behaviors work against our confession of faith. Also, creative, novel ritual texts are rarely sacramental in their language. While many of our received forms of the Mass grew organically over decades and centuries, using careful language to communicate the mysteries of the faith, most rituals of spontaneity have a tendency to focus on feelings, emotions, and the affects of the heart, which are anything but sacramental and objective by nature. Moreover, the non verbal movements of relevant worship experiences draw attention away from the means of grace to the worship leader, pastor, or other liturgical agent. The desire for community through informality focuses the people on the manipulated atmosphere and emotions, which are baptized as a true spiritual experience, rather than the sacraments.

The formation and education of LCMS clergy in this discipline must also be addressed. The curriculum at its seminaries requires very little. At St. Louis, a single class on worship is included in the education of the future clergy. This class must cover the history of the liturgy, liturgical theology, and the conduct of the liturgy. It would be delusional to think this prepares a man for the task of leading a parish as the primary liturgical agent, not to mention creating their own liturgies that are faithful to a Lutheran sacramental theology. Of course this does not prevent our pastors from writing their own liturgies for the congregations out of their liturgical, ritual, and ceremonial ignorance and uncritical adoption of subjectivist ideals.

While these challenges may seem daunting, we must remain hopeful that we can recover a rich sacramental life in the LCMS. Statistical trends in our Post-Christian context suggest that people mired in the emptiness of this modern world long for something larger than themselves. The

Eastern Orthodox confessions, whose sacramental liturgies have remained largely untouched by the foolishness of the Liturgical Renewal or Church Growth Movements, have grown quite rapidly in North America. This suggests there is an opportunity for us to rediscover the deep sacramental rites and ceremonies of our own catholic and orthodox confession. My own experience as a parish pastor supports this reality. Anecdotal evidence leaves much to be desired, but the growth at Grace Evangelical Lutheran in Tulsa, OK has been constant and steady for over four years. The people drawn to the ministry because of the Mass, with its sacramental ritual and ceremonies. Retaining the Mass does require efforts in liturgical catechesis and mystagogy, but these efforts have been quite fruitful for our mission and vocation, even in the heart of the so-called Bible Belt.

Finally, our strongest hope for the renewal of our mission and vocation through worship is the scriptural tradition of the LCMS, which is reflected in the sacramental confession of the Book of Concord and the liturgies of the Lutheran Service Book. The Holy Scriptures point clearly to Christ working through His sacramental means for the sake of mission and vocation. The Holy Scriptures also teach us proper ways for conduct and worship before our Holy Trinity. The Book of Concord further emphasizes these realities as we retained the Mass for the sake of the life of the Church and the faith of the people. We are not radicals or enthusiasts, but possess the best of the Western Catholic Tradition. This heritage is contained in our most recent hymnal, The Lutheran Service Book. We already possess everything we need to renew the mission and vocation of our congregations. We only need to remain faithful to Christ and His gifts. *Ite, Missa est.*