

“THE WORLD IN THE CHURCH”

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I. Introduction - The Inevitable Conflict

The Bible draws the dichotomy between the spirit of this world and the Spirit of God with harsh realism. They are polar opposites which cannot co-exist with one another. So the aged apostle John warned the congregations of Asia Minor:

“Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world - the cravings of sinful man, the love of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does - comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.” (1 John 2:15-17)

The Apostle James was even more forthright in bluntly proclaiming the incompatibility of Christianity and the world: ***“You adulterous people, don’t you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.”*** (James 4:4)

Jesus reflected the same grim reality in His *“High Priestly Prayer”* as on the eve of His death the Savior prayed for His apostles and all those who would come to know the Father through their proclamation. Our Lord noted that faithfulness to God and to His Word would inevitably result in relentless enmity of the world:

“I have given them your Word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that You take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; Your Word is truth. As You have sent Me into the world, I have sent them into the world.” (John 17:14-18)

Thus, the challenge to the people of God throughout every generation in the long history of the Church, has been to remain *“in the world but not of the world”* - that is, to faithfully proclaim the Bible’s message of Law and Gospel for the salvation of sinners without allowing itself to be influenced or effected by the world in which it carries out its divine mission.

In this context, the topic which I have been assigned - *“The World in the Church”* - necessarily carries a negative connotation. Scripture has made it clear that it is impossible for the world and the Church to exist harmoniously. If they manage to do so at any given point in history, it is, no doubt, safe to assume that one of the two has abandoned and betrayed its essential nature. Either the Church has become worldly or the world has become churchly. Given the nature of the case, the former is infinitely more likely than the latter. Accordingly, the presence of the world in the Church cannot be benign but must always be malignant. The world within the Church is a deadly infection which must be isolated and eliminated. To the extent that the world has infiltrated the Church then the enemy is within the camp, and his presence must be recognized and dealt with lest he wreck havoc and destroy all that which is holy and true about the Church, leaving behind only an empty facade - nothing more than a beguiling pretense of the authentic Church. The sad record of history and of our own personal experience during the trying times in which we live ought to warn that all too often this has been the case.

II. The Nature of the Church in Scripture and the Confessions

The pursuit of our topic requires that we must at the outset clearly define the biblical nature of the Church. The Church, most simply stated, is the people of God, called out of the world to gather together around the Gospel in Word and Sacrament, the Means of Grace, through which God creates and sustains faith. The biblical witness that the Church is people, called out, gathered together, around Word and Sacrament is consistent and clear:

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer...And every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” (Acts 2:42,46-47)

“To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called

to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ - their Lord and ours: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Corinthians 1:2-3)

“And God placed all things under His feet, and appointed Him to be Head over everything for the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who dwells in everything in every way...Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit - just as you were called to one hope when you were called - one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all...It was He who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God, and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching, and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into Him who is the Head, that is, Christ, From Him, the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows, and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” (Ephesians 1:22-23; 4:11-16)

“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.” (Colossians 3:15-26)

“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, His body, and since we have great High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart with full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water, let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. And let us not give up meeting together; as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another - and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” (Hebrews 10:19-25)

The Lutheran Confessions asserted the biblical understanding of the doctrine of the Church with careful precision. In Part III, Article XII of the Smalcald Articles, Martin Luther declared:

“Thank God, today a seven year old child knows what the Church is, namely the holy believers and lambs who hear the voice of their Shepherd (John 10:11-16). For the children pray, ‘I believe in one holy Christian Church.’ This holiness does not come from albs, tonsures, long gowns and other ceremonies they made up without Holy Scripture, but from God’s Word and true faith.” (McCain, p. 309)

Phillip Melancthon expressed the same thought in the Augsburg Confession: *“The Church is the congregation of saints (Psalm 149:1) in which the Gospel is purely taught and the Sacraments are correctly administered.”* (McCain, p. 60) When the Roman theologians at Augsburg rejected this simple definition, Melancthon offered additional detail in the Apology, retaining a clear biblical focus upon the Means of Grace as the visible marks of the Church:

“But the Church is not only the fellowship of outward objects and rites, as other governments, but at its core, it is a fellowship of faith and of the Holy Spirit in hearts. Yet, this fellowship has outward marks so that it can be recognized. These marks are the pure doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments in accordance with the Gospel of Christ. This Church alone is called Christ’s body, which Christ renews, sanctifies, and governs by His Spirit.” (McCain, p. 170)

In his magnificent treatise *“On the Councils and the Church”* (1539) Martin Luther expanded upon the crucial concept of *“the marks of the church”* - the outward signs by which the presence of the one, holy, Christian Church might be found throughout history. In this expanded listing, the Reformer included seven external characteristics which would always serve to identify the Church of Jesus Christ. The list is worthy of being repeated, if only in summary, for it reveals the essential character of the Christian Church.

“First the holy Christian people are recognized by their possession of the holy Word of God... We are speaking of the external Word, preached orally by men like you and me, for this is what Christ left behind as an external sign, by which His Church, or His Christian people in the world, should be recognized. We also speak of this external Word as it is sincerely believed and openly professed before the world... Many possess it but do not believe in it or act by it for the number of those who believe in and act by it is small... Now wherever you hear or see this Word preached, believed, professed and lived, do not doubt that the true ‘ecclesia sancta catholica,’ ‘a Christian holy people,’ must be there, even though their number is very small... Second, God’s people, or the Christian holy people, are recognized by the holy Sacrament of Baptism, wherever it is taught, believed and administered correctly according to Christ’s ordinance. That too is a public sign and a precious, holy possession by which God’s people are sanctified... Third, God’s people, or

Christian holy people, are recognized by the Holy Sacrament of the Altar, wherever it is rightly administered, believed and received, according to Christ's institution. This too is a public sign and a precious, holy possession left behind by Christ by which His people are sanctified so that they also exercise themselves in faith and openly confess that they are Christian just as they do with the Word and with Baptism...Fourth, God's people or holy Christians are recognized by the Office of the Keys exercised publicly...Now where you see sins forgiven or reproved in some persons, whether publicly or privately, you may know that God's people are there. If God's people are not there, the Keys are not there either; and if the Keys are not present for Christ, God's people are not present. Christ bequeathed them as a public sign and a holy possession, whereby the Holy Spirit again sanctifies the fallen sinners redeemed by Christ's death, and whereby the Christians confess that they are a holy people in this world under Christ...Fifth, the Church is recognized externally by the fact that it consecrates or calls ministers, or has offices that it is to administer. There must be bishops, pastors or preachers, who publicly and privately give, administer, and use the aforementioned four things or holy possessions in behalf of and in the name of the Church, or rather, by reason of their institution by Christ...The people as a whole cannot do these things, but must entrust or have them entrusted to one person...It must be entrusted to one person, and he alone should be allowed to preach, to baptize, to absolve, and to administer the sacraments. The others should be content with this arrangement and agree to it. Wherever you see this done, be assured that God's people, the holy Christian people, are present...Sixth, the holy Christian people are externally recognized by prayer, public praise and thanksgiving to God. Where you see and hear the Lord's Prayer prayed and taught, or psalms or other spiritual songs sung, in accordance with the Word of God and the true faith; also the creed, the Ten Commandments, and the catechism used in public, you may rest assured that a holy Christian people of God are present... Seventh, the holy Christian people are recognized by the holy possession of the sacred cross. They must endure every misfortune and persecution, all kinds of trials and evil from the devil, the world, and the flesh (as the Lord's Prayer indicates) by inward sadness, timidity, fear, outward poverty, contempt, illness, and weakness in order to become like their head, Christ. And the only reason they must suffer is that they steadfastly adhere to Christ and God's Word, enduring this for the sake of Christ...Whenever you see or hear this, you may know that the holy Church of Christ is there...This too is a holy possession whereby the Holy Spirit not only sanctifies His people but also blesses them." (LW, AE, 41: pp. 148-165, passim)

This brief abbreviation of the Reformer's superb discussion of the Church's marks anticipates the major themes of our discussion. Luther's clear understanding of the irreconcilable difference between the Church and the world is evident throughout. At the same time, the Reformer recognized that the true Church would always have to endure persecution and hostility because of that difference. As it was for her

Master so it must be for her. The Church is called to bear the cross. In Martin Luther's view, the faithfulness of the Church to her Lord and His Word necessitated the unequivocal repudiation of worldly falsehood in every form. The result of the Church's faithful witness would be scorn and rejection by the children of this world. The true Church, therefore, would always be the small steadfast remnant amid the massive numbers with which the world is so enamored and impressed. Power, glory and popularity are the things of this world. We who would follow the Lord Jesus must be willing to live and die by the cross. Christ was an outcast and a failure, by every worldly standard. The world will always judge true Christians the same way.

III. The Nature of Post-Modern American Culture

The inevitability of the conflict between the Church, thus defined, and contemporary society should be immediately obvious. Sociologists and historians utilize the term "postmodern" to describe contemporary American culture. This designation is designed to indicate the replacement of the modernism which characterized the 19th and 20th centuries. Modernism, growing out of the Enlightenment, was scientific and rationalistic. Modernists confidently asserted the rational human mind and ongoing scientific progress would resolve all of our difficulties. In the aftermath of Nazism, Communism, a series of horrific world wars and the onset of the atomic age that confidence has been shattered. Postmodernists no longer trust human reason or believe in human progress. They have given up. Arthur Schlesinger Jr, a leading American liberal historian of the Kennedy era, offered a classic expression of postmodern disillusionment when he declared: "*History is a constant tragedy in which we are all involved, whose keynote is frustration and anxiety, not progress and fulfillment.*" (Wells, p. 17) LCMS scholar Dr. Gene Edward Vieth describes the post-modern world view in this way: "*These views respond to the failure of the Enlightenment by jettisoning truth altogether. The intellect is replaced by the will. Reason is replaced by emotion. Morality is replaced by relativism. Reality itself becomes a social construct.*" (Vieth, p.28-29) Post modernism is, in the most basic sense, a world view of despair. In the bleak perspective of postmodernism all that is left for man to believe in is himself.

"Meaning is not to be discovered in the objective world; rather, meaning is a purely human phenomenon. While there is no ready-made meaning in life, individuals can create meaning for themselves. By their own free choices and deliberate actions, human beings can create their own order, a meaning for their life that they and they alone determine. This meaning, however, has no validity for anyone else. No one

can provide a meaning for someone else. Everyone must determine his or her own meaning, which must remain private, personal and unconnected to any sort of objective truth. This existentialism provides the rationale for contemporary relativism. Since everyone creates his or her own meaning, every meaning is equally valid. Religion becomes a purely private affair, which cannot be 'imposed' on anyone else. The content of one's meaning makes no difference...Moral values, like any other kind of meaning are created by the self...Existentialism is the philosophical basis for postmodernism." (Vieth, pp. 37-38)

In his chilling book *Pagans in the Pews - How the New Spirituality Is Invading Your Home, Church and Community*, Dr. Peter Jones outlines the implications of all this for the Church. Jones contends that the majority of American church-goers are thoroughly postmodern in their thinking. Their world-view, their perspective on reality, is shaped not by the Bible or historic Christianity but by the postmodernism with which they are bombarded every day through every major communication and entertainment outlet in America. Jones aptly defines the spiritual world-view of postmodern America as a "*pagan monism*" which deifies the individual and rejects all of the moral and theological distinctions which had formerly characterized Christianity and thereby Western culture:

"If all is one, the one great problem in the world is the splintering of reality into opposing camps - making distinctions between good and evil, right and wrong, truth and error, God and Satan, human and animal, male and female, homosexual and heterosexual, pagan and Christian, heresy and orthodoxy, reason and irrationality. Monists argue that such distinctions, typical of Western Christian culture, have numbed human beings into a spiritual amnesia in which they are no longer aware of belonging to the whole." (Jones, p. 35)

Jones traces this world-view to the gnostics of the early centuries A.D. who, not coincidentally, were attempting to reconcile Christianity with the pagan religions which had preceded it. Tertullian's (A.D. 160-225) characterization of the gnostics in his day sounds distressingly modern: "*They maintain ecclesiastical harmony with all, making no distinctions. As a matter of fact, harmony exists among them although they hold different doctrines, as long as they wage common warfare against one thing, the Truth.*" (Jones p. 55)

Within this world-view, each self becomes the source of its own reality/truth and in this way tolerance, relativity and absolutely unbridled personal choice are necessarily established as the foundational values of our culture. From this twisted root a

plethora of deadly vines has sprouted including institutionalized divorce, legalized abortion, liberated homosexuality and radical feminism.

Unfortunately, the great majority of American Christendom - and American Lutheranism - has failed to recognize the antithetical nature of the choice which confronts the Church at this moment in her history. The Devil tempts us with the alluring lie that we can have it both ways. For example, *Christian Systematic Theology in a World Context*, recently published by nominally Lutheran Fortress Press, hails all of this deadly nonsense as nothing more than “*a fresh understanding of Christianity*”! Their enthusiasm is sadly akin to a chicken cheering for the technological and social progress achieved by Colonel Saunders.

In the face of this challenge, most American churches - again, including a great many Lutheran churches - have chosen to blend and bend, adapting to current cultural trends in the hope of statistical growth and institutional success. Across denominational lines, the churches “*of what’s happening now*” are engaged in a desperate dash for relevance. The values (or non-values) of postmodern culture have been transformed in the basic operating guidelines of the Church. The Church, the Bride of Christ, has entered into a bigamous marriage with worldly culture. Members become consumers. Evangelism mutates into marketing. Bible study degenerates into self-absorbed individuals discussing their own shallow ideas and experiences. Worship is degraded into the superficial entertainment of a jaded audience. Pastoral leadership is reduced to administrative skill and effectiveness. Throughout every dimension of the church’s life, style always takes precedence over substance. It is difficult to disagree with the grim conclusion of Dr. David Fitch who argues that under the pervasive influence of post-modern culture the Church has abdicated her God-given responsibilities and betrayed her Biblically defined identity. She has uncritically adopted the key components of the post-modern world-view and thereby sidelined herself in the spiritual warfare between God and Satan, life and death, light and darkness, truth and falsehood that is raging all around us. Dr. Fitch summarizes:

“Evangelicalism, by virtue of its marriage to modernity has not only failed to engage the cultural shifts of post-modernity, it has indeed structured our churches out of meaningful existence. Because evangelicals articulate salvation in such individualistic terms and because modern science and individual reason carry such authority for evangelicals, we do not need the Body of Christ for daily victorious Christian existence. In some ways, frankly, we can do without it. We don’t need the church to live salvation because we have personal salvation augmented by reason, science, and immediate (charismatic) experience. The church is left with nothing

else to do but distribute information, goods and services to individual Christians. And so, for evangelicals, in essence, the church is left to be a sideshow for what God is doing for, in and through individuals...Our people look more and more like secular Americans as opposed to Christians.” (Fitch, p. 18)

IV. No Place for the Truth - The Decline of Doctrine

The most pervasive indication of the intrusion of postmodern worldliness throughout the Church is the decline in the importance of doctrine. Every other individual manifestation of ecclesiastical worldliness is, in effect, merely a specification of this overall trend in a particular area of the Church’s life.

Scripture declares that the Church is to be **“built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone.”** (Ephesians 2:20) The proclamation and confession of that message from God has always been the hallmark of the Church’s mission. However, with postmodernism’s emphatic abandonment of the concept of objective truth that mission has been drastically transformed. David Wells offers this insightful assessment of the process and its implications for our understanding of what the Church is and what it is to be doing:

“In the modern period, for example, confession in the sense of a profession about the objective truth of God and His self-disclosure in the space-time world has become most awkward...It is often equally embarrassing in the larger social context because of the way in which modernity has reshaped our sense of what is proper. As a result, confession has either lost weight or disappeared entirely in academic theology. And once confession is lost, reflection is cut loose to find new pastures. Once it has lost its discipline in the Word of God, it finds its subject matter anywhere along a line that runs from Eastern spirituality to radical politics to feminist ideology to environmental concerns...By a different route, the same thing has happened in the Church, the evangelical wing included. As the nostrums of the therapeutic age supplant confession, and preaching is psychologized, the meaning of Christian faith becomes privatized. At a single stroke confession is eviscerated, and reflection reduced mainly to thought about one’s self.” (Wells, p. 101)

The consequences of this radical revision pertain not only to the nature of the Church and the role of Scripture in the Church but to our view of the Bible itself. Liberals in other churches, less inhibited by denominational conservatism than our own, make no bones about the fact that in the postmodern era any residual superstition about the Bible as the inspired - much less inerrant - Word of God will have to go. In her terrifying study *Ungodly Rage - the Hidden Face of Catholic Feminism*, Donna

Steichen illustrates how this pattern has manifested itself in the Roman Church. At a 1987 gathering sponsored by “*Women-Church Convergence*” - a coalition of Catholic feminists, Sister Sandra Schneiders contended that Scripture need not be cast aside to accommodate radical feminism. However, she cautioned, a significant amount of readjustment as to our view of the identity of the Bible and methods of biblical interpretation would have to take place if the Bible is to be allowed to remain:

“Overwhelmingly patriarchal, androcentric, sexist and oppressive of women’ as it is, Scripture is still our ‘connection with our own religious tradition. Maybe we will finally have to give up,’ Schneiders said, but first feminists ought to engage not only scholars, but also ‘preachers and teachers and polemicists and translators and ecclesiastical politicians’ in ‘a concerted approach’ to ‘saving it’ with new interpretations. Modeling the process, she said that Scripture is not ‘literally’ the Word of God ‘because God does not literally speak. Speaking is something you do with your mouth, tongue and esophagus (sic -evidently the nun does not understand anatomy any better than she understands theology!), and God does not have those parts.’ For the same reason, she said, ‘if we say God is our Father, that is absurd,’ because ‘God does not have sexual intercourse with a woman, causing the conception of child.’ New rules will require feminist interpreters to assume that ‘Scripture is not the Word of God...is not a container of revelation’ and ‘to correct as we read...in the way one might say to a friend, ‘I know this is what you said, but I know this is not what you meant.’” (Steichen, pp. 167-168)

The good sister went on to lament the problem of Jesus’ masculinity for modern women and scorn the notion that there could still be anyone left today who is so primitive as to consider Christ and Christian Gospel to be the only means of salvation.

Within our own circles there is a great deal more hesitancy to follow postmodern assumptions to their logical conclusions. The influence of those assumptions, however, is clearly evident. One of the cardinal principles of the Lutheran Reformation was “*Sola Scriptura*,” that is “*Scripture Alone*,” affirming our conviction that the biblical Word of God is the ultimate and only source of authority for the Church. Our founding president, Dr. C.F.W. Walther, proclaimed Missouri’s position on the nature and role of the Bible in these completely unambiguous words:

“The Bible, word for word, is the changeless Word of God in both Old and New Testaments from Genesis through the Revelation of St. John. Therefore, these Holy Scriptures of the prophets and apostles are the only rule and norm of all faith; the only source of all saving knowledge; and the only judge of all Christian doctrine in

conflict. The written revelation of the most high God, therefore, should not be interpreted by the blinded a reason or the perverted heart of man. It interprets itself. Nothing should be added to it or subtracted from it. No one should deviate, either to the left or to the right from its literal meaning. Instead, the words should be accepted as they read with simple, humble, child-like faith.” (Walther, p. 1)

As Dr. Walther correctly points out, the confidence that there can be only one correct understanding (“*the literal sense*”) of any given biblical text (“*Sensus literalis unus est.*”) is an essential corollary of the conviction that the Word of God must be the only authority in the Church. These affirmations, of course, directly contradict the postmodern relativization of truth for every individual. In effect, postmodernism declares “*Ego sum sensus literalis!*” (“*I am the correct understanding!*”) In this way, the Bible becomes, to use Luther’s apt phrase, “*a wax nose*” which can - and must - be endlessly reshaped to suit the preferences and opinions of every individual. No matter how bizarre or contrary to the language and grammar of the text a particular interpretation may be, it must be valid because someone has proposed it. “*That’s your interpretation*” has become the stock phrase which liberates us from subservience to the text of the Bible to pursue our own inclinations and desires. In the midst of this relativistic mire, there is a growing hesitancy among us to unequivocally declare “*Thus saith the Lord*” on any controversial issue. Declarations of absolute truth are perceived as intolerant and judgmental in a worldly culture which views intolerance and judgementalism as the only remaining sins. Here the great God “*I*” reigns supreme. He is a most jealous God who will permit no rivals.

The same tendency can be seen on a synodical level in the trend to replace clear affirmation of absolute Bible truth with delicately crafted synodical statements and regulations, the most recent of which, in the ongoing development of an infallible “*magisterium,*” are binding upon every member of the Synod and may not be contradicted. Thus have the heirs of Luther inadvertently built their own Rome on the Mississippi. The devaluation of doctrine and doctrinal unity in Missouri is also evident in the practice of adopting those doctrinal resolutions by simple majority vote, thereby tacitly acknowledging and condoning the existence of doctrinal diversity within the Synod.

Unfortunately, evidence of the declining priority of doctrine within the Synod is not isolated to any particular interest group or faction. Missouri’s confessional minority has found itself unable to formulate a compelling specification of the doctrinal differences which exist within the Synod. We are learning, to our chagrin, that it is

considerably easier to forge political coalitions and carry on endless struggles for institutional control than it is to achieve genuine doctrinal consensus, even among ourselves. Missouri's self-styled confessionals are riven by their own theological divisions on the doctrines of church and ministry, women in the church, and worship and liturgy, to cite only the most prominent examples.

At the same time, the nature of the Synod's travail has mutated with the departure of our most outspoken liberals into the ELCA. Those liberals who remain, and their numbers are not insignificant, have learned to remain silent and bide their time. Culturally, everything is moving their way. All they have to do is be patient and wait. The tides of history will deliver hapless Missouri to their door. Meanwhile, their coalition partners in the center constantly affirm their personal belief in seven day creation, their opposition to the ordination of women, etc., while assuring us that nothing has changed and all is well. It is difficult to tell whether our centrists actually believe that, or just don't care. In any case, the political strategy is most effective. The moderates have maintained that the conservative insurgency was really about politics and power, not doctrine, from the very beginning. The longer we keep trying to fight our battles in the courtroom and on the convention floor, the more compelling that argument becomes. We have come to look more like a pack of hyenas and jackals snarling over the bones of the corpse than pastors and theologians of genuine biblical integrity. My friends, the time has arrived for Missouri's confessional remnant to put up or shut up. We must either articulate the false doctrine being tolerated and taught in the Synod or admit that there are no real doctrinal issues and this struggle has been about power and politics all along.

As our confidence in the authority and clarity of the Word is eroded by the worldly denial of all objective truth, the nature of preaching changes. The exposition of the text comes to be replaced by entertaining anecdotes and "*real life, practical*" application. Note the insinuation of the language that the text of the Bible itself does not pertain to real life and is therefore impractical! This realization would, no doubt, have come as quite a shock to the Psalmist who declared: "***Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.***" (Psalm 119:105) The disappearance of expository preaching signals a crisis of confidence in the relevance of the Word of God. Again and again the question is posed - how can a book written thousands of years ago address the complexities of our modern lives. The obvious answer is twofold. First of all, this is no ordinary book. The Bible speaks across centuries and millennia because it is the Word of God. Secondly, you arrogant fools, your modern

lives are no more complicated than those of any of your human predecessors. The trappings may change, but for all of the fallen descendants of father Adam the issues of life remain the same. Nonetheless, the trend toward non-biblical preaching continues. If there is a text at all, it is little more than a pretext for whatever the preacher wanted to say. Each individual assesses for themselves whether a particular sermon meets their needs or satisfies their desires.

The same pattern is readily evident in that which is nominally described as “*Bible Study*” in our churches. The focus is constantly on “*small group dynamics*,” interaction and discussion, and relevance. People whose level of Bible illiteracy is nothing less than amazing, come together to talk about “*what God is doing in their lives*” - that is, what they are deigning to allow God to do in their lives on their terms so that they are enabled to achieve their own goals and self-satisfaction. They pool their Bible ignorance, share their emotions, and sometimes go forth feeling better. It’s all about me, because the world is constantly telling us that “*me*” is the only thing left to believe in. There is little, if any difference between such “*Bible Studies*” and the secular self-help personal improvement programs which abound through our culture.

Conservative churches, evangelical and Lutheran alike, may continue to affirm their formal allegiance to the Bible as the inspired and inerrant Word of God but under the influence of secular culture the life of the Church and the lives of individual Christians have come to be based more and more on personal experience rather than Bible truth.

Confirmation instruction has become one of the foremost combat zones in our struggle to maintain the significance of Lutheran doctrine in a postmodern culture. Beleaguered parents - many of whom are in single parent or double wage earner families as a result of current cultural trends - are overwhelmed by scheduling demands for themselves and their children. They are running from school programs, to an endless array of sports activities, to dance, to art, to this, that and the other. At the same time, children today are becoming increasingly assertive in determining their own life-styles as a consequence of those same cultural trends. These harried parents often react with frustration, and occasionally hostility, to the requests and requirements of a Church which takes confirmation instruction seriously and recognizes that such instruction requires a meaningful investment of time and effort. The problem is further complicated by the fact that for many of these children

thorough catechesis may be their first encounter with substantive education after the fluff and nonsense of government schools. To such unfortunates, the expectation that they will actually learn the Six Chief Parts of the Catechism and their biblical foundation comes as a mystifying innovation.

The consequences of the declining importance of Bible truth can be seen in a dramatic increase in what the sociologists have labeled “*denominational ambiguity*.” Denominational ambiguity means that individual church members have come to feel increasingly free to disagree with the doctrinal position of the church to which they belong. One may no longer safely assume that a Lutheran holds to Lutheran doctrine or a Roman Catholic agrees with the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, and so forth. This is the age of the individual. People choose the church to which they will belong for a broad variety of reasons. Doctrine is, at best, only one among many. The personality or entertainment skills of the of the preacher, the variety of the program, geographic convenience, demographic make-up, etc., all figure in church membership choices. So, for instance, self-avowed atheist Robert Jensen recently justified his decision to become a member of St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church in Austin with these incredible words:

“I’m a Christian, sort of. A secular Christian. A Christian atheist, but, in a deep sense, I would argue, a real Christian...My decision to join a church was more a political than a theological act...The pastor and most of the congregation at St. Andrews understand my reason’s for joining, realizing I didn’t convert in a theological sense, but joined a moral and political community. There’s nothing special about me in this regard - many St. Andrew’s members I’ve talked to are seeking community and a place for spiritual, moral and political engagement. The church is expansive in defining the faith; the degree to which members of the congregation believe in God and Christ in traditional terms varies widely. Many do, some don’t, and a lot of folks seem to be searching. St. Andrew’s offers a safe space and an exciting atmosphere for that search, in collaboration with others.” (Jensen, p., 2)

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that we’ve joined Alice in Wonderland. John Knox must be turning over in his staunch Presbyterian grave!

Closer to home, we see the same pattern at work in the lives of young Lutherans who vowed in their confirmation oaths “*to remain steadfast in the confession of this church, and suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it.*” Most often these same confirmands experience no scruples of conscience whatsoever when leaving the

Lutheran Church to join that of their spouse. Perhaps we should insert a “*marriage exemption*” in the confirmation vows to avoid the moral dilemma! The doctrinal distinctives between the various denominations tend to be viewed as insignificant details by the average American, rather like choosing a particular brand of spaghetti sauce in the supermarket. They are all really the same anyway. What difference does it make? Which flavor do you prefer? We’re all Christians, aren’t we. When a pastor attempts to explain to a departing member that it hardly seems worthwhile to give up the body and blood of Christ in the Holy Sacrament for a more active singles program, the 21st century American looks at him like a dinosaur who somehow inconveniently failed to become extinct with all the others. John Q. Average Pew-Sitter (and John Q. Average Pulpit-Stander) has evidently come to equate the American tradition of the freedom of religion and religious pluralism with doctrinal indifference.

Denominational ambiguity also applies to individual congregations within particular denominations, most certainly including our own. One need not look beyond the LCMS congregations of southeastern Texas to discover a broad variety of doctrine and practice on issues like the role of women, pulpit and altar fellowship, church and ministry, or worship and liturgy, to name only a few. There was a time when such diversity would have been unthinkable in the Missouri Synod. Doctrine was first and foremost in everything the Synod did and doctrinal unity was Missouri’s most prized possession. Professor Frederick Bente delivered the convention essay at the Synod’s national convention in 1923. He described the remarkable unity of Missouri in this way:

“Our fathers in the faith surrendered nothing; made no concession; deviated not a hair’s breadth from the Old Lutheran position concerning the inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures. They delivered to us a fortress intact - where no rock was torn from its foundation, nowhere a breach, all of its walls strong and plumb. Results? Down to the present day, not a solitary modernist has every been heard on the floor of the Synod which our fathers founded. Not a liberalist ever occupied a chair in her colleges and seminaries or filled a pulpit of her congregations. Concordia Publishing House, also founded by our fathers, in its publications from the first issue of ‘Der Lutheraner’ down to its latest book or pamphlet, there cannot be found a single sentence endorsing Darwinism, evolution, or any single Lutheran doctrine. The entire literature of our Synod does not contain a single statement which in any way denies the incarnation, the virgin birth, the atonement, the resurrection or any other Christian miracle - not even a single passage that charges the Bible with any kind of error - religious, historical, chronological or astronomical. This large convention, together with all the pastors, professors,

teachers, and laymen which it represents, believes and confesses the old creeds of Christendom...entirely, unanimously and without reservation, or without taking exception to a single clause. We all, with all our hearts, still sing our old Lutheran hymns. As to the old Lutheran liturgies and sacred forms for baptism, the Holy Eucharist, ordination, etc., there cannot be found among us a single pastor or congregation desiring to modify them doctrinally.” (White, p. 13)

Such unity cannot be maintained unless the members of the Synod, both pastors and congregations are united in their conviction that doctrine is the foremost priority of the church and consistent doctrinal discipline is practiced throughout the church body. Sadly, such things are only distant memories in the LCMS, as we have allowed ourselves to be increasingly influenced by the permissive spirit of the times.

The ongoing evolution of denominational ambiguity, throughout American Christendom, calls into question the viability of the traditional Lutheran concept of altar and pulpit fellowship. As diversity increases within our own denomination and others, can we responsibly continue to maintain that access to our altars and our pulpits will be based upon nothing more than denominational affiliation? To do so virtually guarantees that our assertion of doctrinal unity in the celebration of the sacrament and the preaching of the Word will be reduced to nothing more than institutional pretense. At some point in the not too distant future, these realities will compel conscientious confessionals to reluctantly consider some form of what has traditionally been called “*selective fellowship*.”

Dr. Franz Pieper, writing in “*Lehre und Wehre*” (“*Doctrine and Defense*”), the Synod’s German theological journal, in 1890, noted that for a church body which genuinely considers doctrine to be of primary importance there is a direct connection between a pastoral concern for the welfare of souls and our practice in these matters. What the world tends to dismiss as self-righteous legalism is actually the recognition as the true doctrine brings life and salvation so false doctrine brings death and damnation. A church which really cares about people must care about doctrine:

“In short, the mark of an orthodox church body is that throughout the church the true doctrine alone prevails, not only officially and formally, but also in actual reality. The entire practice of our church rests upon this fact. For example, we unhesitatingly transfer members from our congregations in St. Louis to our sister congregations in San Francisco. But this only occurs because we know that the member who has been released will find the pure doctrine in all its articles in that new congregation. Under the same assumption, other congregations can release

their members to the congregations in St. Louis. The unhesitating transfer of members of our fellowship would be unconscionable if we could not assume that the pure doctrine sounds forth from every pulpit in the Synodical Conference. If we were to define an orthodox fellowship in any other way, if we would say that it does not depend on the doctrine which actually sounds forth but only on the officially recognized doctrine; or if we believed that it was sufficient for a majority of the pastors to teach the right doctrine; we would then have already given up the distinction between an orthodox church and a unionistic fellowship. We would then be deceiving orthodox Christians when we encouraged them to join any one of our congregations without misgivings.” (White, p. 12)

It is evident from these brief citations that Missouri’s fathers also recognized the inseparable connection between the formal confession of pure doctrine and the actual practice of the Synod’s pastors, teachers and congregations. To profess the doctrine of God’s Word while permitting teaching and practice which contradicts that profession to continue among us is dishonest and hypocritical. As Dr. Pieper declared, *“The mark of an orthodox church is that throughout the church the true doctrine alone prevails, not only officially and formally, but also in actual reality.”* That which we believe, teach and confess becomes real when our actions are governed and determined by those convictions.

“Doctrine is the source of practice. Doctrine is the content of practice. Doctrine is the goal of practice. In short, when it comes to practice, doctrine runs the show. Practice grows out of, is shaped by, and serves the purpose of doctrine...Scripture teaches that practice and doctrine are inseparably related. Scripture expects and requires that Christian practice conform to Christian doctrine. Scripture teaches that doctrine isn’t only something that Christians believe, doctrine is also something that Christians practice.” (Wilkin, pp. 1,4)

In some instances a particular practice is the direct expression and application of our doctrine. For example, the historic practice of *“Closed Communion”* is the direct result of the biblical doctrine that the bread and wine of the Sacrament are the true body and blood of Christ. Therefore, Scripture teaches that those who receive the Sacrament *“unworthily”* - without discerning the real presence of Christ’s body and blood - do so to their condemnation (1 Corinthians 11:23-29). Furthermore, the Bible also teaches that by sharing together in the body and blood of Christ we acknowledge that we hold to the same faith, we believe the same things (1 Corinthians 10:16-22). In the face of unresolved doctrinal differences that confession of unity is false. Therefore, throughout the history of Christendom, the practice of *“Closed Communion”* has been the direct correlate of the Bible doctrine of the Real Presence

of Christ in the Sacrament. The Scriptural practice of “*Closed Communion*” is increasingly controversial today because it contradicts the absolute sovereignty of personal choice which is the keystone of our worldly culture. As a result of that controversy a growing number of churches have yielded to the culture and abandoned the biblical practice. This is an ominous precedent. That which we do must be consistent with that which we believe, or eventually what we believe will be transformed by what we do. The 5th Century theologian Phillip of Aquitaine correctly expressed this correlation in regard to worship in the famous maxim: *Lex orandi, lex credendi.*” (Latin - “*The law of praying is the law of believing.*”) In this instance, it is inconsistent and illogical to believe in the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Sacrament and to acknowledge the Sacrament as a genuine means of grace which offers and conveys the forgiveness of sins and then not to practice Closed Communion. Open Communion is completely logical if the Sacrament is nothing more than symbolic action with bread and wine. Eventually that logic will out. Over the long term it will prove impossible to maintain the biblical doctrine in the face of the unbiblical practice. “*Lex orandi - Lex credendi.*” Where Open Communion prevails, the Sacrament will slowly become less prominent, less frequent and less substantive. The devolution will be gradual but inevitable. Ultimately, the biblical doctrines of the real presence and sacramental forgiveness will be lost as the consequence of practice which contradicted that doctrine.

The link between doctrine and practice is not always this direct but in every case they remain interconnected. In his recent book on pastoral theology, Pastor Klement Preus uses the helpful analogy of the shepherd’s fire and his staff to describe the relationship between doctrine and practice.

“The fire and the staff captures the relationship between doctrine and practice. Doctrine is like a fire. It lights our way and warms us. The evangelical Lutheran doctrine gives us our identity and attracts others to the Lutheran Church. Practice, by which I mean the regularly accepted actions of a church body, a congregation, or an individual, is a staff that points to our doctrine and reinforces it. Doctrine and practice are more closely related, even interdependent, than is often realized. Doctrine effects practice and practice effects doctrine. The two are so intimately woven together that when you change one you will inevitably change the other, sometimes without realizing what has happened.” (Preus, p. 14)

Glib distinctions between “*evangelical style and Lutheran substance*” have served to sever what is actually happening in our churches from our official doctrinal

position. In this way, districts, congregations and individuals are free to pursue their own inclinations and preferences while the church body's official conservative credentials remain technically intact. But what is actually happening is that the artificial separation of practice from doctrine becomes a fig leaf to cover over our cowardly unwillingness to consistently confess God's truth before the world.

The infiltration of worldly relativism and individualism has robbed the Church of her most precious possession, the Truth of God in His holy Word. When she allows herself to be deprived of that Word, the Church forfeits that which empowers her and enables her to play an essential role in the lives of her people. Without the Truth of God there is nothing left of her but an hollow shell. Without the Truth of God she is helpless before the destruction and death which sin has wrought. Masterful style and effective technique cannot substitute for that truth and churches that settle for such things will find that they have rendered themselves impotent and irrelevant. The doctrines of the Bible are the Church's life. The preaching and teaching of the Bible are, and must always remain, the core activity of the Church of Jesus Christ. By allowing the nostrums and nonsense of the world to supplant solid Bible preaching and teaching, the Church of today has betrayed her Lord. Like foolish Esau of old, she has traded her birthright for a worthless bowl of worldly porridge.

V. That's Entertainment - The Trivialization of Christian Worship

The worship assembly of God's people is a most solemn and majestic event. In the Divine Service (German - *Gottesdienst*) - initiated and empowered by God - we are given the awesome privilege to come into the presence of the Most Holy One. We gather at His command to hear the proclamation of His Word and to receive the forgiveness of our sins through the Means of Grace, the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. Here we join with all creation, angels and archangels, and the saints who have preceded us to heavenly glory, in celebrating that which God has done for the salvation of men and anticipating the great day when the Lord will return in glory to judge the living and the dead. Martin Luther's succinct definition, included in his sermon at the dedication of the first Lutheran church building, the Castle Church in Torgau, says it well: "*What ought to take place within this House of God is that our dear Lord Himself talk to us through His Holy Word, and that we, in turn, talk to Him in prayer and song of praise.*" (Brunner, p. 123)

Nowhere is the nature of the Church more clearly expressed or dramatically

demonstrated than in the worship assembly. The Church is the “*ecclesia*,” that is, the gathering of those who have graciously been called out of the world by God to come together around the Means of Grace; there to receive His forgiveness and to strengthen and encourage one another in our common faith. There is an inherently corporate dimension in the life of the Church which is, of course, the “*Body of Christ*.” (Ephesians 1:23). This togetherness transcends the rampant individualism of our culture. In his definitive study, *Worship in the Name of Jesus*, German theologian Peter Brunner explains the necessity of this assembly for the Christian life with these well chosen words:

*“But to remain in the saving Word involves more than the private reading of the Bible. The saving Word must be addressed to me. The saving Word is vibrant in what takes place between persons. There must be a person who addresses this Word to me in the Name of God... Since my baptism, I no longer occupy an isolated position. Since my baptism, I am integrated into the people of God of the end time, into the **ecclesia**, which is, in a hidden manner, an epiphany of the Body of Jesus Christ on earth. They who have been joined together as members of the Body of Jesus cannot do otherwise than retain and preserve this being in Christ especially by means of this togetherness. They assemble as **ecclesia** to the end that the saving Word may become vital in this assembly and the believers may be preserved in the faith. The worship of the **ecclesia** is necessary because we are unable to preserve the obtained salvation in this earthly life, otherwise than by resorting ever anew to the living Word, in which Jesus Christ Himself is present with His acts and fruits of salvation and with which He works on us.”* (Brunner, p. 112)

An accurate understanding of the biblical doctrine of the Church and her worship directly contradicts two of the fundamental assumptions of worldly culture. First, it reminds us of our absolute dependance upon the undeserved love of God in Christ. We cannot help ourselves. Without the grace of God we would remain lost and condemned sinners. Second, and perhaps most pertinent in this context, the biblical doctrine of the Church reminds us of our interdependence within the community of the faithful. Our society is obsessed with the absolute sovereignty and satisfaction of the individual. We hear endlessly of individual rights, individual needs, and individual satisfaction. The theme of contemporary culture is the grating wail of the spoiled child - “*I want what I want and I want it now!*” The biblical doctrine of the Church carries us beyond such self-defeating selfishness to genuine community in which the needs of others must take precedence over our own. Thus, in the most fundamental sense, the worship assembly of the Church is not about me. It is about God and my fellow believers. Only in this context can worship become a meaningful

and empowering experience.

The “*worship wars*” which rage throughout our churches tend to categorize the debate as a conflict between “*contemporary*” and “*traditional*” approaches to worship. This perspective misconstrues that actual nature of the disagreement. The issue is not chronology. Neither the church of what’s happening now nor the church of this is the way it’s always been recognize the character of biblical worship. Both are fixed upon the selfish needs of sinful men, not the glory of God and the edification of His people. Nor is the issue musical style or formality vs. informality. The Divine Service must be unequivocally focused upon the God who comes into our lives through the Means of Grace which He has established, so that His message of Law and Gospel may resound among us with clarity and power. Anything and everything which distracts from or diminishes that focus is of the Devil.

The problem with much of contemporary worship is not that it is contemporary but that it is superficial and selfish, deliberately design to do nothing more than titillate an already over-entertained constituency. By uncritically adopting the methods and techniques of worldly marketing and entertainment, the modern church has unwittingly transformed the nature of her worship. In her thought provoking study *When the Church Became Theater*, Professor Jeanne Halgren Kilde uses megachurch Willow Creek Community Church as the model of contemporary American worship style:

*“The oft-told story of Willow Creek Community Church founder Bill Hybels going door to door to ascertain just what would appeal to suburban Chicago residents in a church is emblematic of the utilitarian bent of the megachurch movement; identify the needs and desires of the target group and fulfill them...The megachurch mission grew from a negative model. The new church would **not** be like traditional churches. There would be no pleas for money during services. There would be no belaboring of abstruse theology or exegesis of irrelevant Scriptural passages, no emphasis on troubling elements on troubling elements like sin or guilt. There would be no religious symbols designed to overawe worshipers. The new church would minimize social class and not make people feel like they had to dress or behave in certain ways inside the building. Most of all, the new church would not evoke an otherworldliness that made people feel uncomfortable. It would be an institution marked by its familiarity, not its distinctiveness...Thus, the megachurch phenomenon is admittedly consumer oriented. Church organizations following Hybel’s model regularly engage marketing experts in assessing the desires of their target audiences, and in designing their religious product, they fully intend to satisfy those desires...They provide a space, time and place in which one might get away from it*

all. Attending a service is an activity akin to going to a movie. One need not dress up, worry about the kids misbehaving, or be upset by a depressing message...Hundreds of congregations, building churches in the newest rings of suburbs, now quite distant from their urban centers now choose the amphitheater form..The congregations they house may be anything from Baptist to Lutheran to Roman Catholic...The audience centered nature of evangelical worship is aptly expressed by this architectural form.” (Kilde, pp. 216-220, passim)

The malignant nature of this transformation should be obvious. Worship in this model is no longer about God or the Body of Christ. Worship is about me and my own perception of my needs. The problem, of course, is that sin distorts my perceptions and turns me ever inward upon myself. Therefore, the church which bases its approach to worship on the “*felt needs*” of its target audience, will, necessarily end up with distorted, self-focused entertainment in place of genuine worship. This worship can be trans-denominational because it ignores doctrine anyway and focuses exclusively on techniques and the cultural expectations of the audience. Such worship may fill the pews and draw the numbers, for a time, but it cannot meet man’s - most often unrecognized - real needs. The Church is reduced to being nothing more than another shop in the great mall of life, simply mimicking society’s other customer oriented businesses and service organizations. This perspective is clearly indicated by the manner in which “*worship events*” are conducted in what John MacArthur has scorned as “*the Church of St. Barnum.*” *The Market Driven Church*, a 2004 assessment of “*the worldly influence of modern culture on the church in America*” by Dr. Udo Middelman, offers this analysis of typical contemporary worship:

“There is a powerful dynamic in such a gathering...Here a large number of people, the cheerful enthusiasm, the coordination, the event of a ‘happening’ itself, concentrate everything and everyone on what’s going on. Careful choreography, precise timing, and multiple colorful visual images unite the fellowship into obviously common experiences, which are set out in a program. A well-managed team guides the audience through a sequence of exciting events. They sing, they weave and sway, they pray and they share and give. Overhead projectors throw words of hymns and praise choruses onto a large screen. Close-ups of the members of the choir are also projected onto the screen. There they stand in loose formations, in small groups of different voices on the platform, as if casually united in music and experience. The orchestra plays, and the lights are dimmed the continuous smile is contagious...Personal stories, anecdotes, and other illustrations from life, more funny than serious, introduce the worship experience. Even the study of the Bible readily falls into the format of after dinner speeches, which start with light and

attractive commentary. It assumes that people will more readily listen if they feel relaxed and amused and on an equal, folksy footing with the leader...Personal interest stories, self-help programs, recovery hints, and manuals for living now form the core of what used to be exposition and application from the study of a text..People attend this church because they like it. It is fun. I struggle in vain to find this liking as a criterion of a faithful church in the New Testament. The joy of the Lord must certainly be more than this!” (Middelmann, p. 143)

Dr. David Fitch, a pastor of the Christian Missionary Alliance, breaks with his own denominational tradition to argue that only a return to the historic liturgies of the Church can alter the pre-occupation with self which has characterized both traditional and contemporary evangelical worship. In his fascinating book, *The Great Give Away -Reclaiming the Mission of the Church from Big Business, Parachurch Organizations, Psychotherapy, Consumer Capitalism and Other Modern Maladies,* Fitch correctly diagnoses the essential problem of evangelical worship:

“Evangelical worshipers, therefore, have need for more than a lecture hall or a feel-good pep rally...Both traditional and charismatic forms of evangelical worship thwart the immersion because they put the worshiping self at the center of worship. Traditional evangelical worship targets the mind of each individual as the center from which each worshiper digests teaching and makes decisions as to what he or she agrees with concerning the pastor’s sermon. In the same way, contemporary worship targets the individual’s emotions and experience as the center from which God engages and meets the worshiper in the service. In both cases, the Holy Spirit’s involvement with this process is assumed. Yet in both cases, the worship service isolates the self at the center of the worship in relation to God. Sitting in the pew, the self is separate from God and is essentially still in control. Therefore, our worship cannot form the self into the work and glory of God without our granting permission.” (Fitch, p. 105)

In direct contrast to this mishmash of self-serving, worldly glitz and glitter, until recent decades Lutheranism had chosen to remain a liturgical church, that is, a church which maintained the historic forms and structures of Christian worship. While rejecting the ecclesiastical legalism of Rome which made particular liturgical forms a matter of divine command, Lutherans recognized in the liturgy a biblically authentic approach to worship which was deliberately designed to assist the congregation of God’s people in transcending the inherent human pre-occupation with self and the present moment to focus upon God and the gifts of His grace. Luther explained his own hesitance to alter or discard the liturgy in this characteristically colorful manner:

“Nor did I make any innovations. For I have been hesitant and fearful, partly because of the weak in faith, who cannot suddenly exchange an old and accustomed order of worship for a new and unusual one, and more so because of the fickle and fastidious spirits who rush in like unclean swine without faith or reason, who delight only in novelty and tire of it as quickly, when it has worn off. Such people are a nuisance even in other affairs, but in spiritual matters they are absolutely unbearable.” (AE, 53, p. 19)

The basis for the reformer’s reluctance to innovate was twofold. First of all, we catch a glimpse of Luther’s pastoral heart, as he expressed his concern for those who are “*weak in the faith*” and would be troubled or offended by the abandonment of “*an old and accustomed order of worship for a new and unusual one.*” Today’s Church is full of such sad souls, who feel like strangers in their own congregations, where change is the only constant and everything that they had held near and dear has been contemptuously cast aside in the endless quest for novelty. Is there no one left who still cares about these people? Luther’s second concern however, was primary - “*and more so.*” He recognized man’s obsession with novelty as an ominous symptom of the sinner’s inherent preoccupation with himself. That point is much clearer in the original German version of the paragraph. The German text literally says that those “*who delight only in novelty*” are actually “*seeking only their own self-assertion*” (German - “*suchen nur ihren Vorwitz*”). Would that more modern Lutherans still had the perceptive insight of their namesake!

The liturgy transcends my own moment in history - and the fads and fashions which titillate today - to connect me with the worship of all the faithful who have gone before and those who will come after I am gone who will carry on the worship of the Church. This timelessness is, and should be, a humbling experience. To self-focused man, the present is the crucial moment because it is “*MY*” moment. What makes today more important than any other day is “*ME*” standing in the middle of it. All such nonsense contradicts and obstructs genuine worship. The use of the liturgy assists me in struggling against myself. Its language reaches back across centuries and millennia to join my worship to that of the Hebrews with “*Hosannas*” and “*Hallelujahs*”; to the Greeks with the “*Kyrie*”; and the ancient Romans with the “*Sanctus*” and the *Glorias*.” Thus am I reminded that others have gone this way before, oftentimes through circumstances much more difficult than my own. They fought the good fight. They kept the faith. Perhaps, I too can do as they have done, so that the faith may be passed on to those who will come after me. The liturgy helps to humble me and remind me that I am but one more link in an ongoing chain forged by God across the ages.

Liturgical worship is biblically authentic because its focus is neither the mind nor the emotions of man, but upon the self-disclosure of God in Christ revealed in Holy Scripture. In 2000, then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger published a book entitled *The Spirit of the Liturgy*. The man who would become Pope Benedict XVI had it exactly right when he observed:

“Man himself cannot ‘make’ worship. If God does not reveal Himself, man is clutching empty space. Moses says to Pharaoh, ‘We do not know with what we must serve the Lord’ (Exodus 10:26) These words display a fundamental law of all liturgy...Real liturgy implies that God responds and reveals how we can worship Him. In any form, liturgy includes some kind of ‘institution.’ It cannot spring from imagination, our own creativity - then it would remain just a cry in the dark or mere self-affirmation. Liturgy implies a real relationship with Another, who reveals Himself to us and give our existence a new direction.” (Ratzinger, pp. 21-22)

While I do not often find myself quoting the Roman Pope with approbation, in this instance the Pontiff make the crucial point both eloquently and effectively. Worship that man makes for himself is indeed nothing more than “*clutching empty space.*” Genuine worship cannot “*spring from imagination, our own creativity. Then it would remain just a cry in the dark our mere self-affirmation.*” Benedict went on to use Israel’s worship of the Golden Calf as an apt illustration of every human attempt to worship God on our own terms. His words about ancient Israel described the character of most contemporary worship with precise accuracy:

“The people cannot cope with the invisible, remote, mysterious God. They want to bring Him down into their own world, into what they can see and understand. Worship is no longer going up to God, but drawing God down into one’s own world. He must be there when He is needed, and He must be the kind of God that is needed. Man is using God, and, in reality, even if it is not outwardly discernible, he is placing himself above God.” (Ratzinger, pp. 22-23)

This is indeed the essence of the problem with much of what passes for worship today. We have dragged God down to our level, on our terms. We have refashioned Him in our image to meet our own perception of our needs. And if He does not give us what we think we want, we will go elsewhere, because we are in charge. Thus, in the end we are left “*clutching empty space.*”

The historic liturgies of Christendom are drawn directly from God’s self-disclosure in Christ through Scripture. The rhythms, and in most cases the very language of the liturgy, are thoroughly biblical. Therein lies their authenticity and their power.

Liturgical worship is a dialog between God and man, a dialog initiated and defined by God Himself in His Word. The ancient liturgies of the Church are specifically designed to direct man's attention beyond his natural pre-occupation with himself to the Means of Grace through which God conveys His undeserved love to us in Christ. Therein lies their authenticity and their power. That direction was never more urgently needed than it is today.

It is presumptuous to the point of arrogance to assume that a busy pastor or minister of music could produce worship services of comparable substance on a weekly basis. It is equally unrealistic to conclude that the structure of our worship may simply be copied from successful (in terms of bodies and bucks) mega-churches. Generic evangelicalism worships in the way that it does because of its doctrinal convictions (or the absence thereof). The same is true of historic Lutheranism. If you worship like an Arminian, decision theology, non-sacramental protestant, you will ultimately become one. "*Lex orandi - Lex credendi.*"

VI. Conclusion

Time will not allow us to continue this analysis of the intrusion of worldliness into other areas of the Church's life. Our preoccupation with worldly statistical success in place of Biblical faithfulness; our changing perceptions of the office of the ministry in terms of secular management skills and effectiveness; our willingness to consign the Church to irrelevant silence on the great moral issues of life and family now before the culture because of a mistaken equation of the biblical doctrine of the Two Kingdoms with the secularist assertion of the absolute separation of church and state; and, our abdication of responsibility for the mental and emotional health of our members to the godless, often overtly anti-Christian practices of modern psychiatry and psycho-therapy are among the most obvious of other concerns related to the intrusion of worldliness into the life of the Church which urgently require discussion and resolution. Unhappily we cannot pursue them today.

We must, instead, conclude where we began, with the humble repetition of our Lord's prayer that we who are His people may remain in the world but not of the world. To that end we pray, as did He, that our gracious God may sanctify us in the Truth of His Word.

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