

PEW-POTATO OR PARTICIPANT?

By Pr. William P. Terjesen

Have you found your mind wandering when you are singing a hymn or a part of the liturgy? Do you ever daydream during the reading of the lessons, or the saying of the creed? Have you ever come to church and as the liturgy began you felt, "This again? Can't we ever do anything different?" You probably have. I have. When something becomes very familiar to us through frequent repetition it's easy to take it for granted, get tired of it, and yearn for novelty. Indeed, there is a whole industry out there offering worship novelties to Christians for whom familiarity with the historic liturgy has bred contempt.

The leaders of the 'contemporary worship' cartel are telling us that the fault is with the liturgy. "Renew your congregation's worship life! Send for our 'Worship is a Gas!' resources and watch your people trumpet like elephants!" they say. But I say beware of people who find fault with a liturgy that has endured for millenia, and which is made up largely of quotations of, and allusions to, Scripture arranged according to the proper distinction between the law and the gospel. And be aware that the alternative worship services that these novelty merchants are hawking, will, for the most part, cure you of your Lutheranism and turn you into a modern evangelical protestant charismatic (read: enthusiast; fanatic; Schwaermer).

I disagree with the contemporary worship crowd. I say that the problem of boredom at worship is not the fault of the historic liturgy of the church, or with the classic hymns of the faith. The fault lies with us. Boredom is a symptom of sin. No good thing is, of itself, boring. Boredom comes mostly when we fail to appreciate what is set before us. When someone says, "I'm bored," or "That's boring," he is, for the most part, indicting himself rather than the object of his boredom. The person who is bored by a Bach concerto or cantata is either incapable of appreciating it, or is unwilling to do so. It is one of the most common human experiences to take for granted, and be bored by, things that we are very familiar with. This very human tendency is exacerbated by life in the television age. In our time we are more and more used to being spectators rather than participants, more in need of entertainment, stimulation and immediate gratification, and less able to concentrate on any one thing for very long. This is an alarming tendency that robs us of many blessings.

It accounts in a big way, however, for the huge crowds attending churches whose worship services are more like religious variety shows. "Pastor Ron," dressed in a stylish and youthful manner, with microphone in hand, joyfully struts the "stage," emceeding the "worship experience" at which there is a pop pit orchestra instead of an organ. He will introduce the various soloists, duets, quartets, and choirs all singing very sentimental and soft-rockish (read: crummy) music. There might even be "gospel" jugglers, magicians, clowns or dancers, and maybe even a brief interview with a celebrity Christian. About the only thing you won't see or hear much of is the Word of God and the Holy Sacraments. And people love this. Why? Because it makes it easy to do what they're good at: being an audience!! (Pew Potatoes?!?) And when such people come to a real church what happens? They've got to stand and sit numerous times, follow along in the liturgy, sing hymns that aren't that easy to sing, and listen to things for more than 5 minutes at a time that actually require concentration. Too much like work! Too much like school!

But let's remember what we're doing here. We are involved in the worship of Almighty God. In the Divine Service the Lord is offering and giving us what we truly need: forgiveness, life and salvation, in short, His grace and every blessing. And these things are offered and given through the Word and the Sacraments. Therefore, the service must be rich in Word and Sacrament, and in those prayers and responses that shape our communication with God in the most Christian way. The historic liturgies of the Lutheran Church do just that. They maximize our exposure to law and gospel, properly distinguished, they facilitate proper reception of the sacrament, and shape our prayers in the most Christian and evangelical manner. This is all good. So now, what do we do when we start taking the

liturgy for granted and find our mind wandering? Do we just grin, bear it and doggedly plod on?

What about variety in worship? A little variety is a good thing as long as it doesn't become the trademark of the service. I know a pastor who writes out a different liturgy every week in his 10-page bulletin extravaganza. His poor people never get used to anything. They're always practicing and never worshipping. Variety must never distract the worshipper from attending to God. Familiar forms facilitate worship, constant variety hinders it. But a bit of variety is not bad. Our confessions tell us that it is not necessary for every congregation in every place to use exactly the same liturgy in exactly the same way (Augsburg Confession, Art. 7). Unfortunately the variety offered by the "contemporary worship" people is for the most part sub-Lutheran (as lampooned above), and the alternatives offered by the liturgical experts reveal an over-fondness for things Roman Catholic. (One of the reasons for the liturgical confusion in the Missouri Synod is the never truly embraced, NIV'ed up, Lutheran Worship of 1982, which was a quick patch job on the Vatican II inspired, anthropocentric, merely tolerated by ELCA laity, Lutheran Book of Worship.) About the only Lutheran hymnal I've seen, published since 1941, that offers seemingly variety, musical excellence, and a fully Lutheran flavor, is the ELS's Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary of 1996, which is remarkably free of fidgeting and hobby-horsing. (Note to LCMS Commission on Worship: Please pay attention to what the ELS has accomplished with this new hymnal! And avoid like the plague what WELS did with theirs!)

Let's remember, however, that even in the time-worn but still compelling Lutheran Hymnal of 1941, there is still variety enough to spice things up without novelty and fads. The little used Matins and Vespers, along with the Confessional Service, the litany, suffrages and other prayers, can inject a little spice into the "page 5 and 15" routine. And let's not forget the propers (Introit, Collect, Gradual, Lessons) which change week by week according to the themes of the Church Year, and which may be said, chanted, sung by the choir, etc. Careful attention to these details offer the worshipper enough variety to counter a sense of monotony. But please note the words "careful attention." This is the real key to enjoying the liturgy. When we come to church we should come prepared to actively give our whole attention to what we are doing. We should sing the hymns with real attention to the words. We should pray the liturgical responses intentionally, and from the heart. We should say the Creed as though our neighbor's salvation depended on what they heard us saying. We should listen with precise attention to the Scripture readings and the sermon and not allow ourselves to daydream. When the Pastor prays the prayer of the Church, or any other prayer, we should say every word right along with him silently, and add a hearty Amen at the conclusion. As we practice this intentional, attentive participation, and discipline ourselves against wandering, we will grow over time in our appreciation of the depth of meaning and the devotional value of the historic liturgy. Liturgical novelty may gratify us in the short run, but it is of no lasting value. On the other hand, it is not for nothing that the historic liturgy has persisted for so many hundreds of years. It has comforted and inspired many generations of saints through thick and thin.

And it has done so consistently despite numerous movements to ditch it. First the pietists of the 1600's and 1700's wanted to jettison the historic liturgy for something more "heartfelt." It survived. Then the rationalists of the 1700's and 1800's wanted to get rid of it for something more practical and reasonable. It survived. Next, the protestantized American Lutherans of the 1800's wanted to drop it for "American Revivalism." It survived. Now the church-growthers of the late 20th century want to chuck it for charismatic pop-music variety shows. The liturgy will survive. And it will do so because it is rich in the Word and Sacraments, and because gospel centered people who have feasted repeatedly on its riches will not be deceived by the lure of novelty into selling their liturgical birthright for a mess of pottage.