

Author: Richard Stetson
Series: Pastoral Essays on the Statement on Sacramental Practices
Series Editor: André Lavergne
Issue: Easter 6, 1992

Copyright: © 1992, 1998 Sub-Committee on Worship and the Arts, Parish Life Committee, Eastern Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. This document may be freely reproduced for non-commercial purposes with credit and mention of <http://www.worship.ca/> as the source.

Richard Stetson is (1998) Assistant to the Bishop, ELCIC, with responsibility for worship.

SP = Statement on Sacramental Practices

Not Conformed but Transformed: Frequency and Form in Eucharistic Practice

The Body of Christ

The ancient north African teacher of the western church, St. Augustine, spoke on the celebration of Holy Communion as a time when the church learns more of the mystery of what it is as the body of Christ in the sharing of the sacred bread and wine of the Lord's Table (Sermon 272). What you are told that you receive, the body of Christ, you affirm with your amen, spoken or silent, to that proclamation. Therefore, we are to be living members of the body of Christ so our amen to Christ's body and blood in the sacramental meal may be completely true.

The parallel between being and receiving the body of Christ is striking. The interplay within this image, used in different ways in the New Testament, is thought provoking. It was surely meant to be so. It may be ignored, but it can hardly be escaped.

Themes of Incorporation

Statement on Sacramental Practices is a document on themes of *incorporation* (SP 2.2). It reminds us of the statement in the seventh article of the *Augsburg Confession*, that the church is the assembly of believers in which the Gospel is taught purely and the sacraments administered rightly. Particularly in the Lord's Supper, are we confronted with the mystery of ourselves as the body of Christ.

As the introduction notes (SP 2.5), there are both corporate and personal dimensions to the sacraments. Perhaps due to continuing influence of the medieval Church's penitential tradition among Lutherans, and the overwhelming influence of Luther's *Small Catechism* (a testimony to the continuing usefulness of this Christian classic), a Communion service has often been seen mainly as the occasion of an individual encounter with God, for the forgiveness of sins, at times creating considerable stress for the communicant. Enriching and enlarging our understanding of the right administration of the sacrament of Holy Communion, in the corporate dimension, is a major concern in *Statement on Sacramental Practices*.

Weekly celebration of Word and Sacrament

Statement on Sacramental Practices says, "According to the Lutheran Confessions, Holy Communion is offered every Sunday." (SP 6.8) *Nothing* works more positively for the "normalization" of a congregation's relationship to Christ at the Lord's Table than making the full weekly celebration of the Word and sacrament the normal and expected Lord's Day worship rather than an exception.

This is the experience of the parish I served, Shepherd King, in Calgary, where the weekly celebration of the Eucharist has been the norm for a number of years. The congregation is satisfied with this practice, and, although they realize this is not the most common practice among Lutherans, it is an authentically Lutheran custom and is pleasing to God. Most people realize this is not something that somehow makes us "better" than others, but it is a characteristic of our congregational life which is positively distinctive and contributes to our particular identity as a community of faith in a highly visible way. Many members miss the opportunity to receive communion weekly, if they are away, and one summer, a lack of supply clergy made it necessary to provide lay-led services of the Word for three Sundays. One of the first comments by a member on my return was, "I'm so glad you're back, Pastor, so we can have Communion again."

Not everyone communes every Sunday at Shepherd King, but most members present commune at every Eucharist, even the

elderly, who were raised on much scantier sacramental fare. They no longer consider it necessary to be an extraordinary sinner in order to go to Communion often.

For me, as pastor, there is little I find more helpful in my life and ministry, especially after preparing for worship and preaching, than being able to go to Christ in the Eucharist each Sunday. It never ceases to bring our common life and ministry into focus for me. To have had this every Sunday since the first Sunday I served this parish has been a personal spiritual plus for me, and has no doubt equipped and strengthened me for ministry.

The Corporate Action of a Royal Priesthood

The practice of public worship, and what constitutes faithfulness to the traditions of the Reformation in worship, is under considerable discussion in some parts of the Lutheran Church. I recently heard a pastor-colleague declare quite publicly that many of our customary worship practices are “out to lunch” as far as he was concerned. Others crisscross the continent presenting seminars showing how much their congregation has grown since discarding liturgy and putting in pop music and formats that are pure presentation rather than requiring any congregational participation. Some say discarding participation means gaining an audience, and a big one!

Something further from the spirit of Reformation principles of congregational participation in worship is difficult to imagine. The *Statement on Sacramental Practices* speaks of the gathered people as celebrating the Eucharist (SP 6.1) and of liturgical practice embodying the priesthood of all believers (SP 6.4) which certainly includes not only the trained worship assistants mentioned there, but the entire congregation serving before God as a royal priesthood. Liturgy facilitates this corporate action. Weekly celebration of the sacramental meal is God’s gift and challenge to congregations to be *corporate*, being confronted with and opened to the mystery of the body of Christ as ourselves.

A fully corporate expression of worship is, in principle, a liturgical expression. According to *Statement on Sacramental Practices* the whole celebration of the Word and sacrament is to be surrounded by prayer, praise and thanksgiving (SP 6.7). The liturgy incorporates the whole congregation into these actions. There is no audience.

Worship and Culture

Liturgy does show contact with its culture. Even though Lutherans in North America started to worship in English, well over a century ago, our liturgies still show traces of our Greek, Latin and north European roots. This demonstrates Christian liturgy has been inculturated in a number of situations and times before our own, yet preserves a pattern and elements that have been proved useful throughout the process.

Rereading Frank Senn’s book, *Christian Worship in its Cultural Setting* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983) reminded me of several points to ponder. I recommend it. Here we have reminders that we constantly seek balance in worship and the church, rather than either failing into cultural capitulation or cultural irrelevancy. But, whatever cultural aspects we bring to church with us—and it is only natural that we do so—we are responsible for sorting elements which contribute to worship’s integrity from those which detract from it.

The Canadian multicultural scene offers a rich variety of cultural elements that we may draw upon to enhance our liturgies. It is good for us to make use of them within the pattern of prayer, praise and thanksgiving that makes up the celebration of the Word and sacramental meal. At Shepherd King, this has meant the occasional use of a chant or song in Greek, Latin, German or Swedish. We use hymns and music from Taizé in France, from Africa, India, Japan and Latin America. We also intentionally seek to make use of music and texts by Canadian musicians. Sometimes the Prayer of Thanksgiving or another text is a translation from a Lutheran liturgy from another country.

For You

After incorporation into appropriate prayer, praise and thanksgiving with the gathered church, the people come to the Table of Christ for a liturgical moment that uses few words, though its importance cannot be missed by anyone who has the privilege of serving at the altar. The *Manual on the Liturgy for Lutheran Book of Worship* makes this clear: “The moment of reception is an intensely personal appropriation of what is being celebrated corporately. The pace of distribution must be such that the minister can address the words to the communicant personally.” (*Manual*, page 245) The *Manual* notes that the touch of the minister’s hand, placing the bread on the communicant’s palm, and the extending of the chalice, are significant to the communication which underscores the “... for you” so strongly emphasized by Luther, and unique among western liturgies to the Lutheran churches. This is of such significance that the *Manual* is uncharacteristically firm in its instructions. “The wording of the formulas of distribution—“The body of Christ given for you;” “The blood of Christ shed for you”—is to be followed precisely.” (*Manual*, page 246)

Not Conformed But Transformed

Liturgical, sacramental worship is a call and a guide toward a mind set of excellence in service and a challenge to the church to be the body of Christ. It is not a minimalist medium for maintenance of mediocrity. Bishop Richard N. Jessen wrote recently to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Nebraska Synod "mere programs of songs and Scripture This isn't worship Visitors can be attracted to a church because of its liturgy, beautifully celebrated. When we design alternate services, I hope we will use a liturgical format based on the traditional western mass much as Luther did. The drama and movement of a liturgical service adds so much The mystery and reverence of Lutheran worship can speak so powerfully to visitors who haven't sensed God's presence recently in much of their lives..." (quoted in *Forum Letter*, March 4, 1992).

+ + +