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An Analysis of the Changing View of the Relationship of Doctrine and Liturgy within the WELS

or

The Black Geneva Piety of the Wisconsin Synod

Mark Braun

The topic for this paper was prompted by a comment recorded in my 2003 book, *A Tale of Two Synods: Events That Led to the Split between Wisconsin and Missouri*. Asked in a 1997 survey what indicators suggested that a change was taking place in The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, one veteran Wisconsin Synod pastor said he had observed “a growing high church tendency” in Missouri which, he said, “almost inevitably breeds doctrinal indifference.”¹ A 1993 graduate of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary called that comment “a striking observation in view of the current voices within our synod which advocate the liturgy as a connection with the ancient church and as a kind of bulwark against false doctrine and human innovation.”²

But the comment made by that veteran pastor would not have been regarded as such a “striking observation” at all by a 1947 graduate of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, or a 1958 graduate, or even a 1978 graduate. Pastors who graduated from the Seminary in earlier decades did not hear their teachers advocate use of the liturgy as a “bulwark against false doctrine and human innovation.” Some of their teachers and synodical leaders considered “high church tendencies” a dangerous precursor to false doctrine, ritualism, Catholicism, and human ceremony. Graduates during the 1940s and beyond were more likely to hear cautions, warnings, disapproval, denunciation, and ridicule of “high church” worship.

What has occurred is a paradigm shift.

That paradigm shift is what this paper is about. It is not about the history, value, meaning, nomenclature, purpose, practice, or superiority of the liturgical rite of the Western Church. Instead, it is about questions like these: Did pastors who introduced chanting, led processions, wore clerical collars during the week and white robes on

¹ Mark E. Braun, *A Tale of Two Synods: Events That Led to the Split between Wisconsin and Missouri* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2003), 322.

² Geoffrey Kieta to Mark Braun, January 18, 2005.

Sundays reveal tendencies of “liberalism”? Did pastors and professors who left the Wisconsin Synod for Missouri or the old American Lutheran Church depart over liturgy and worship? Was interest in liturgical matters a bellwether of doctrinal indifference, an indicator of a low view of the inspiration of Scripture, evidence of a looser practice of church fellowship, or a sign of greater openness to ecumenism? Was the wearing of a black Geneva gown a paradigm for a particular brand of conservative Lutheran theology and practice? If, indeed, a paradigm shift has occurred in the WELS, particularly among younger and more recent graduates of our Seminary, when and why did it happen? And have older pastors kept up with the shift?

A major portion of the research for this paper comes from the results of an e-mail survey sent to 68 pastors and professors of the Wisconsin Synod, active and retired, in March 2006. Forty-one of the 68 responded—a 60.2 percent response. Those who responded to the survey graduated from college or seminary as early as 1942 or as recently as 1983. The identity of all survey respondents has been kept confidential; responses are referenced by number. These are the three questions I asked:

- 1.) Was there an attitude of distaste or distrust in the Wisconsin Synod toward the higher liturgical practice of the Missouri Synod, particularly during the period of the growing liturgical movement in such groups as the St. James Society and others in the 1930s and 1940s?
- 2.) In the 1960s and early 1970s, when some WELS seminary students left for the LCMS or the ALC, was there a sense that higher liturgics were a bellwether of more liberal theology?
- 3.) When was it that higher liturgical practice (white alb, vestments, chanting, processions, etc.) became more acceptable in our circles, and what caused that change?

“The liturgy is catholic, hymnody is Protestant”

It is generally well known that the Wisconsin Synod was less confessional, more unionistic, and more “liberal” than its sister synod Missouri during the first two decades of their entwined histories.³ As late as early 1868, Missouri’s *Der Lutheraner* leveled vehement and frequently inaccurate attacks on the Wisconsin Synod for its unconfessional, unionistic practices.⁴ But already during the lifetime of

³ See Mark Braun, “Faith of our Fathers,” *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 74 (Winter 2001): 198–218.

⁴ See Walter D. Uhlig, “Eighteen Sixty-Eight—Year of Involvement,” *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 41 (August 1968): 107–08.

the Synod's founding Pastor Johannes Muehlhaeuser, and with greater resolve after his death, Wisconsin moved to align itself with Missouri.⁵ Wisconsin's turn to the right came about not so much because of Missouri scolding and prodding but because of the greater confessional convictions of such men as Adolf Hoenecke, Johannes Bading, Philipp Koehler, Gottlieb Reim, and others.⁶ In October 1868, the two synods discovered themselves in doctrinal agreement, setting in motion the formation of the Ev. Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America in 1872.⁷

One might have expected that as the Wisconsin Synod moved closer to the Missouri Synod's doctrinal position, it would also have adopted a style of worship more similar to that of Missouri. Not so. In the first constitution of Grace congregation, Muehlhaeuser prescribed that "never may or shall a preacher of said congregation use the rite of the old Lutheran church, whether in baptism or the Lord's Supper."⁸ Wisconsin's move from Pietism "was neither smooth nor swift" and its halting steps are easily observed in its worship practices.⁹ Early pastors and leaders seem to have had little interest in hymns, liturgy, and church music, and there are not even any reports to suggest they displayed signs of musical ability. They simply used what they had, most of which featured a mix of Lutheran and Reformed doctrine.¹⁰

Wisconsin's early worship mood is revealed in a letter Muehlhaeuser received from a Julius Friedrich in 1858. "I have learned from a reliable source that you, in your congregation, are using the so-called

⁵ See Mark Braun, "Wisconsin's Turn to the Right: Part Two," *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 75 (Summer 2002): 80–100.

⁶ Edward C. Fredrich, "A Few, Faithful in a Few Things: Our Synod's Fathers and the Formation of the Synodical Conference," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 69 (July 1972): 155.

⁷ See Edward C. Fredrich, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans: A History of the Single Synod, Federation, and Merger* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992), 50–55.

⁸ *Kirchen-Ordnung der Deutschen Evangelische Lutherische Gnaden-Gemeinde in Milwaukee* (Milwaukee: Druck der Germania Publishing Co., 1851) 1; cited by Edwin A. Lehmann, "The Pastor Who Possessed an All-Consuming Love," *WELS Historical Institute Journal* 1 (Spring 1983): 10.

⁹ James P. Tiefel, "The Formation and Flow of Worship Attitudes in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod," *Logia* 14 (Holy Trinity 2005): 32.

¹⁰ Arnold O. Lehmann, "Wisconsin Synod Hymnals and Agendas 1850–1950," *WELS Historical Institute Journal* 16 (October 1998): 4.

United Lutheran and Reformed Hymnal,” Friedrich wrote to Wisconsin’s first president. “Very few of our good hymns are found in it,” and even the good hymns were “so shamefully mutilated and watered down to the point that they were hardly recognizable.” Because Muehlhaeuser defended use of such a “wretched hymnal,” Friedrich retracted his promise to join Muehlhaeuser’s “worthy denomination.”¹¹

By contrast, Missouri’s chief founder C.F.W. Walther insisted that the hymns included in his 1856 *Kirchengesangbuch* [Church Song Book] be “pure in doctrine,” having received “universal acceptance within the Orthodox German Lutheran Church” and displaying “the true spirit [of Lutheranism].”¹² Visitors to Missouri Synod congregations in St. Louis in the 1850s “would have experienced not only an elaborate liturgical rite based on Luther’s Reformation revisions, but chasubles, chanting, candles, and crucifixes as well.” Walther encouraged the efforts of his former students to establish his worship convictions and forms in every Missouri Synod congregation.¹³ While demanding neither complete unity of viewpoint nor absolute uniformity of practice, Walther maintained that “the Lutheran liturgy distinguishes Lutheran worship from the worship of other churches to such an extent that the latter look like lecture halls in which the hearers are merely addressed or instructed, while our churches are in truth houses of prayer in which the Christians serve God publicly before the world.”¹⁴

The very qualities of conviction and personality that made Walther an ardent spokesman for Lutheran confessionalism and a compelling exponent of liturgical worship may have come across to Wisconsin Synod pastors as “a certain ‘pushiness’ that they resented.” Perhaps Wisconsin compensated for being “smaller, poorer, and generally less sophisticated” than Missouri by “dismissing Missouri’s ways as grandiose and ostentatious.”¹⁵ An early Wisconsin Synod pastor’s wife who grew up in Missouri was heard to comment, “*Dieser Missourian-*

¹¹ Julius Friedrich to John Muehlhaeuser, Chicago, January 7, 1858; in Muehlhaeuser’s presidential papers, trans. A[rnold] O. Lehmann, WELS archives, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary library, Mequon, Wis.

¹² Quoted in *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1993), 89.

¹³ Tiefel, “Worship Attitudes in the WELS,” 32.

¹⁴ C.F.W. Walther, *Essays for the Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), 1:194.

¹⁵ Tiefel, “Worship Attitudes in the WELS,” 33.

er, sie hatten schliff" ["These Missourians— they were polished!"].¹⁶ By contrast, Wisconsin's August Pieper was fond of saying, "*Wir sind in der Wisconsin Synode; wir machen kein 'show.'*" ["We are in the Wisconsin Synod; we don't put on a show."] ¹⁷ This may have been a contributing factor to Adolf Hoenecke's remark that there was "something sectarian" about the Missouri Synod.¹⁸ Leigh Jordahl interpreted Hoenecke's remark not as a criticism of Missouri's doctrinal position but that it "had reference to a certain mind set."¹⁹

With John Philipp Koehler's tenure at Wisconsin's seminary, beginning in 1900, came greater concern for good church music. Koehler instituted music courses and programs at the seminary in Wauwatosa, organized a seminary choir and a mixed choir composed of members of Milwaukee congregations, and edited music for publication. His chief concern was to lead Wisconsin pastors and worshipers to a deeper appreciation for the fine heritage of Lutheran music, particularly in the Lutheran chorales, both in German original and English translation.²⁰ Similar efforts took place at Dr. Martin Luther College in New Ulm, Minnesota, under Profs. Fritz Reuter and Emil Backer.²¹

But Koehler's knowledge of church history and his impressions of ecclesiastical life in his own time led him to conclude that liturgy and ceremony were too often imposed on the church in a legalistic way, resulting not in vibrant faith-life but dead formalism.²² Victor Prange, reading Koehler's *History of the Wisconsin Synod*, gained the impression that Koehler "would have felt right at home in a Zwinglian church building cleansed of all distractions so that in the plain and bare setting the Word alone could impact the soul." While he clearly appreciated hymnody, Koehler apparently did not care much for liturgy. To him, "the liturgy [was] catholic; hymnody [was] protestant."²³

¹⁶ Paul Wendland to Mark Braun, e-mail, October 3, 1996.

¹⁷ Martin Westerhaus, interview, Mequon, Wis., February 10, 1997.

¹⁸ Joh. P. Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod* (St. Cloud, Minn.: Faith-Life, 1970), 251–52.

¹⁹ Leigh Jordahl, introduction to Koehler's *History of the Wisconsin Synod*, xxiv.

²⁰ Arnold Lehman, "Wisconsin Synod Hymnals and Agendas," 23–24.

²¹ Tiefel, "Worship Attitudes in the WELS," 35.

²² Tiefel, "Worship Attitudes in the WELS," 33.

²³ Victor H. Prange, "Review of J.P. Koehler's 'The History of the Wisconsin Synod,'" *WELS Historical Institute Journal* 1 (Spring 1983): 40.

When the Synod's English *Book of Hymns* was completed in 1917, Pastor John Brenner concluded that it contained "everything that is necessary and no more." Brenner considered it an advantage that the *Book of Hymns* did not include psalms, collects, and other elements "rarely, if ever, used in our services." Wisconsin church members "often do not take part in the liturgical service, as they know neither the words nor the melody of the responses."²⁴

In a follow-up article on the *Book of Hymns* the next spring, its compiler Otto Hagedorn revealed even more about Wisconsin's worship attitudes. The Invocation and *Introit* had been omitted from the order of service, the latter because "there is no good reason for it in a service which is opened with a hymn by the congregation, serving the same purpose of expressing the character of the respective Sunday." The *Gloria Patri* was also omitted because the *Gloria in Excelsis* "conveys the same sentiment." His notes concluded, "Let the pastor and choir director put all the variety into the service that their liturgical conscience will demand or permit; but for the standard forms let us confine ourselves to that which is truly essential and liturgical."²⁵

Although for several decades there had been a growing concern for the use of better Lutheran hymns, the first article commending liturgical worship did not appear in Wisconsin's *Quartalschrift* until 1938, and it was written not by a seminary professor but by a parish pastor, Gervasius Fischer.²⁶ During the years before the appearance of *The Lutheran Hymnal* in 1941, church services consisted of little more than the sermon, and 45 minute sermons were "common and virtually expected." One veteran pastor purchased his own copy of service orders in the 1940s because "no Wisconsin congregation I served in the Dakotas even owned a Liturgy and Agenda." Chanting was "witnessed" maybe "once in a blue moon," and the chanter was generally considered to be "just showing off."²⁷

Yet there appears to have been at least some sense of the church year from the beginning— if only that derived from Gospel readings in

²⁴ J[ohn] B[renner], "Our New Hymnal," *The Northwestern Lutheran* 4 (September 21, 1917): 162–63.

²⁵ O[tto] Hagedorn, "Concerning Our Order of Service," *The Northwestern Lutheran* 5 (May 5, 1918): 71–72.

²⁶ Gervasius Fischer, "What Benefits May Be Derived From More Emphasis on the Study of Liturgics," *Theologische Quartalschrift* 35 (April 1938): 109–30; 36 (April 1939): 97–118.

²⁷ Survey responses 29, 5.

the historic pericope. One of the few remaining documents from Muehlhaeuser's ministry is a sermon he preached on the Third Sunday of Advent in 1851.²⁸ *The Northwestern Lutheran* for 1936, as an example, contained articles by Pastor John Jenny on Epiphany, Lent, Good Friday, Easter, Jesus the Good Shepherd, Pentecost, the Holy Trinity, Reformation, End Times, Advent, and Christmas.²⁹

Also in 1936, in an essay delivered to the Minnesota District convention, Herbert Sitz warned that wherever churches discarded "our good Lutheran chorales for the vastly inferior subjective Gospel hymns that originate under sectarian patronage," there came "an ever increasing amount of the sectarian spirit encroaching upon congregational life."³⁰ Sitz observed that in the Synod's "emphasis upon the importance of the spoken Word, upon the sermon," the importance of the liturgy may have been underemphasized. "Most of our churches are listless and apathetic" in their responses, and many regarded the liturgy "simply as a form to be gone through" and "a rather long time to be kept standing upon their feet."³¹

By the appearance of *The Lutheran Hymnal* in 1941, more Wisconsin leaders sensed the need for a new hymnal, yet there were still reservations. Brenner, now Synod President, specifically told one of Wisconsin's representatives on the Synodical Conference hymnal committee that he wanted someone there "who had both feet in the congregation so that we don't get a monument to the musicians of the Missouri Synod."³² By 1946 *The Northwestern Lutheran* contained

²⁸ Muehlhaeuser's presidential papers, trans. A[rnold] O. Lehmann, WELS archives.

²⁹ "Seeds of Light Sown on the Paths of the Righteous," *The Northwestern Lutheran* 23 (January 19, 1936): 17-18; "The Tempter and our Defence Against Him," (March 15, 1936): 81-82; "The Work Finished," (March 29, 1936): 97-98; "Christ the Risen Lord our Life," (April 12, 1936): 113-14; "Hearing the Voice of Jesus the Shepherd," (April 26, 1936): 129-30; "The Witnessing Spirit," (May 24, 1936): 161-62; "A Hymn of Praise to the Holy Trinity," (June 7, 1936): 177-78; "Not Ashamed of the Gospel," (October 25, 1936): 337-38; "Judgment— The Most Consequential Act in Eternity," (November 8, 1936): 353-54; "The Christian's Perspective on the Future Life," (November 22, 1936): 369-70; "Now— the Acceptable Time," (December 6, 1936): 385; "God's great Gift," (December 20, 1936): 401-02.

³⁰ H[erbert] Sitz, "The Use and Abuse of Music in the Lutheran Service," *The Northwestern Lutheran* 23 (August 30, 1936): 275.

³¹ H[erbert] Sitz, "The Use and Abuse of Music in the Lutheran Service," *The Northwestern Lutheran* 23 (September 13, 1936): 289.

³² Tiefel, "Worship Attitudes in the WELS," 34.

more deliberate teaching regarding the church year and the liturgy. Improved cover art frequently depicted scenes from the Gospel readings. In addition, the major festivals were highlighted,³³ as well the theme for each individual Sunday of the church year³⁴ and occasional in-depth explanations of the church seasons.³⁵

In the next decades, Northwestern Publishing House sold thousands of copies of *The Lutheran Hymnal*. Yet some congregations resisted using the liturgy into the 1960s,³⁶ and many congregations used only the page 5/15 service, ignoring Matins, Vespers, and other liturgical orders.

From the beginning, Wisconsin Synod pastors wore black preaching gowns. Many early Wisconsin pastors came from areas of Germany where that was the expected garb. The black robe proved practical on the American frontier: it did not show dirt and it kept preachers warm in poorly heated church buildings. One respondent's father, a Missouri Synod pastor, "simply stuffed his black robe into a satchel" when traveling between congregations he served. The black robe was "very convenient" and "the thing to do." The black robe also distinguished Lutheran preachers from Catholic priests. Another respondent "tried a Roman collar for a few weeks" in the 1940s, until he wore it to visit a patient in a Catholic hospital and was almost "fathered to death."³⁷ In the 1950s it was sometimes said among Wiscon-

³³ A[rthur] P. V[oss], "Epiphany— The Mission of the Church," *The Northwestern Lutheran* 33 (January 20, 1946): 18, 25; J[oh.] P. M[eyer], "The Transfiguration" (February 3, 1946): 38–39; A[rthur] P. V[oss], "Lent— The All-Sufficient Sacrifice," (March 3, 1946): 66, 70; J[oh.] P. M[eyer], "Lent," (March 3, 1946): 69–70; C[arl] J. L[awrenz], "Pentecost: The Blessed Indwelling of the Holy Spirit," (June 9, 1946): 178–79; C[arl] J. L[awrenz], "Advent: Jesus Christ Come to Fulfill the Law and the Prophets," (December 8, 1946): 386, 392;

³⁴ For example, "Christ the Great Liberator: Invocavit— First Sunday in Lent; Reminiscere— Second Sunday in Lent," *The Northwestern Lutheran* 33 (March 17, 1946): 82; "Oculi— Third Sunday in Lent; Laetare— Fourth Sunday in Lent," (March 31, 1946): 98; also pp. 116–17, 132, 146, 148, 162, 164, 196, 211, 242, 259, 275, 284, 289, 305, 321, 338, 356, 372, 388, 404.

³⁵ For example, G[ervasius] W. Fischer, "The Harmony of the Sundays in Lent," (March 17, 1946): 84–85; G[ervasius] W. F[ischer], "The Christian Church Year," (November 24, 1946): 374.

³⁶ Tiefel, "Worship Attitudes in the WELS," 34–35; survey response 1.

³⁷ Victor H. Prange, "Black or white?" *The Northwestern Lutheran* 73 (August 1986): 264; survey responses 32, 5.

sin pastors that “a man who wears a white robe is making up for his theological inadequacies,” and “those who can’t preach it, wear it.”³⁸

A Leaven in Missouri

Despite the richer liturgical legacy of Walther and others in Missouri, one reads frequent, at times almost comical complaints regarding the state of Missouri’s worship life in the 1920s. Part of what Theodore Graebner called Missouri’s “liturgical chaos”³⁹ arose from difficulties in transition to the English language. The change to English was repeatedly hailed as necessary and inevitable, yet many Missourians feared the Synod’s doctrinal purity would be lost in translation.⁴⁰ Walter A. Maier identified three attitudes which he believed inhibited the Americanization of the Synod, the third of which was held by those “opposed strenuously and systematically to the adoption of English as the evangelistic and liturgical language of the Synod.”⁴¹

The American Lutheran Publicity Bureau, organized in 1914, and its monthly magazine *The American Lutheran*, launched in 1918, sought to “translate [Missouri’s] Teutonic faith into the American culture” without compromising Missouri’s doctrinal substance.⁴² *American Lutheran* writers frequently criticized “disorder and slovenliness” in church services. One 1919 editorial warned against the “sin of irreverence” in worship, which was “assuming alarming proportions among our members.” Services often began ten or fifteen minutes later than announced starting times, with some members straggling in during the sermon.⁴³ Giggling and gossiping persisted through Scrip-

³⁸ Interview with James P. Tiefel, in David L. Holmes, “Pietism and Old Lutheranism in the Wisconsin Synod,” *Anglican and Episcopal Review* 62 (1993): 605–06.

³⁹ Theodore Graebner, “Our Liturgical Chaos,” in *The Problem of Lutheran Union and Other Essays*, ed. Theodore Graebner (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1935), 135.

⁴⁰ John H. Tietjen, “In the Language of the Children,” *A Tree Grows in Missouri*, ed. John H. Baumgaertner (The English District of the Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States, 1975), 50.

⁴¹ Walter A. Maier, “The Americanization of the Lutheran Church,” *The American Lutheran* 8 (October 1925): 119–21.

⁴² J. Jeffrey Zetto, “My Fair Chasuble: Eastern Lutheran Influence on the Liturgy,” *Eastern Lutheranism and the National Church—The Lutheran Historical Conference* (Essays and Reports of the 19th Biennial Meeting, Wegner College, Staten Island, N.Y., October 29–31, 1998), 293.

⁴³ “Church Decorum,” *The American Lutheran* 2 (February 1919): 2.

ture readings, prayers, and preaching. The liturgy was often rendered as “a thing of horror,” played “atrociously” by organists and “murdered vocally” by congregations.⁴⁴ The organ prelude opening the service sounded “like the prize piece in a collection of lullabies,” while the pastor intoned ordinary and propers “like an ancient prophet of doom.”⁴⁵ After the organist “mutilated” the hymns, the pastor turned “ballyhoo artist for a sale put on by the Ladies Aid Society, a farce presented by the young people, or an oyster supper under the auspices of the Men’s Club.”⁴⁶ One *American Lutheran* editorialist concluded that Lutheran churches ought to require “musical censors” in order to spare worshipers from having to sit through a prelude consisting of selections from “The Pink Lady” and an offertory featuring a rendition of “Glow Worm.”⁴⁷

Most disconcerting was that such slipshod behavior was often justified by an appeal to the efficacy of Word and Sacrament. Many churches were “guilty of surrounding the means of grace with handicaps of slovenliness and disorder and carelessness which from the outset repel [any] possible interest of the unchurched.” Of course the Word of God works, but “a church that in every phase of its physical appearance represents carelessness” and that “presents dusty pews, dirty windows, torn hymnals, an untuned organ, an indifferent organist, an ill-prepared sermon, languid deacons and a general air of slovenliness will not impress the unchurched much by the claims about the purity of its message.” The casual church attender “has enough natural prejudices to overcome” against the message of salvation without surrounding him with additional obstacles.⁴⁸

In the typical Missouri Synod congregation of 1930, Holy Communion was celebrated four to six times a year, and the average Missouri member received the Sacrament on average just over twice each year. The standard liturgical vestment was the black preaching gown.

⁴⁴ “Church Decorum,” *The American Lutheran* 10 (March 1927): 2.

⁴⁵ “Lugubrious Churches,” *The American Lutheran* 12 (January 1929): 5.

⁴⁶ “The Importance of a Church Service,” *The American Lutheran* 19 (May 1936): 6.

⁴⁷ “Musical Censors Needed,” *The American Lutheran* 4 (March 1921): 1.

⁴⁸ “Pure Goods in Slovenly Packages,” *The American Lutheran* 8 (January 1925): 3.

Though an official English *Agenda* existed, there was little uniformity in the forms of English-language worship.⁴⁹

But by the late 1920s, there was a growing appreciation of good church music. “Barber-shop-chorus type of church music” and “Moody-Sankey” hymns were being replaced by “music worth singing and worth listening to.”⁵⁰ A 1935 survey revealed that younger clergy “almost to a man” voted for the use of cassock, surplice, and stole, with a surprising number of older clergy also preferring them. “We are going through a transition period,” wrote F.R. Webber, moving “in the direction of Europeanism” and to “the more cheerful clerical dress of pre-Prussian-unionism.”⁵¹ It was “cruel libel” to insinuate that those adopting new vestments and worship styles were doing so to the neglect of sound indoctrination of their congregations. “A pastor who is ready to accept a new idea in matters external is not necessarily unsound in faith.”⁵²

One *American Lutheran* editorialist, while wholeheartedly in favor of improved worship, voiced caution that “our good liturgical extremists, consciously or unconsciously,” tended to “give the preaching of the Word a subsidiary position in the order of service.”⁵³ In “sectarian” [read: Protestant] churches, “the sermon and the anthem are the big things, and the Sacraments of slight importance. In the Roman Catholic Church, the Sacrifice of the Mass (Communion) is the important thing, and the sermon of lesser importance.” Lutheran worship sought to occupy a middle ground, “for both the preaching of the Word and the celebration of the Holy Sacraments are important.”⁵⁴

The chief value of any liturgical practices lay in the truths they teach. Liturgy dare not be “degraded into a mere concert,” or worse, become something “done by man in order to please God and cause

⁴⁹ Zetto, “My Fair Chasuble,” 264.

⁵⁰ “The Growing Appreciation of Good Church Music,” *The American Lutheran* 12 (December 1929): 1.

⁵¹ F.R. Webber, “Some Comments,” *The American Lutheran* 18 (May 1935): 15–16.

⁵² F.R. Webber, “Prepare to Be Surprised,” *The American Lutheran* 18 (May 1935): 15–16.

⁵³ “The Liturgical Question,” *The American Lutheran* 18 (November 1935): 6–8.

⁵⁴ F.R. Webber, “F[ine] A[rts]: “We Would Have Toleration,” *American Lutheran* 17 (January 1934): 2043.

Him to overlook our sins.”⁵⁵ Churches that adopted forms and ceremonies merely for their own sake without understanding of their meaning were afflicted with “formalism—the same sin our Lord bitterly denounced in the Pharisees,” who failed to understand that “the liturgy of their Church pointed directly to Him.”⁵⁶

In 1934, *Time* magazine recognized these “Lutheran Liturgists” in *The American Lutheran* for its unceasing efforts at church improvement. *American Lutheran* leaders advocated “a change not in theological doctrine but in church services, with pastors wearing proper vestments, decking their altars with flowers and tapers, emphasizing the crucifix, reviving traditional Lutheran rubrics, singing only the purest liturgical music.” They sought nothing new, but wished to follow Luther, who “called a mass a mass” and favored vestments, tapers and incense.⁵⁷

Besides *The American Lutheran*, and perhaps emboldened by it, Missouri Synod Pastor Berthold von Schenk and several clergy friends formed the Liturgical Society of St. James in 1934. Von Schenk saw “in the ancient liturgies a way of sharing the faith and proclaiming the Gospel that was absent in the sterility” of Missouri worship and preaching.⁵⁸ The purpose of the Society was “to bring to our attention our rich liturgical heritage by restoring such things as have been neglected in many parts of the church,” and “to further all forms, rites, and ceremonies as will beautify our services, help the faithful in their devotions, and assist them to get as much as possible out of worship,” provided that such practices were “not contrary to the Word of God and clear Scriptures.”⁵⁹ The Society stood in the tradition of Fredrich Lochner’s *Hauptgottesdienst*, which had enjoyed positive reception from a previous generation of Missouri theologians, including Walther, who “favored the restoration of the old liturgical

⁵⁵ F.R. Webber, “[F]ine A[rts]: Reading Between the Lines,” *American Lutheran* 24 (April 1941): 97.

⁵⁶ Herbert Lindemann, “The Church and Her Worship,” *American Lutheran* 20 (September 1937): 3077–78.

⁵⁷ “Lutheran Liturgists,” *Time*, (February 19, 1934): 26.

⁵⁸ Zetto, “My Fair Chasuble,” 271–72.

⁵⁹ Berthold von Schenk, “Policies for the Society,” *Pro Ecclesia Lutherana* 1 (1933): 1.

usages as a handmaiden to the pure doctrine they had so nobly preserved.”⁶⁰

In time, Von Schenk became concerned that the St. James Society was “proceeding down the wrong path.” Fearing that the Society “was developing into a group of externalists who were merely interested in the archaic and external things,” he looked for men “who were primarily interested in the sacramental life,” not in “ecclesiastical dressmaking, chants, and ceremonies.”⁶¹ In 1937, he formed “The Eucharistic Fellowship of the Augsburg Confession,” and “The Fellowship of the Blessed Sacrament” in 1946.⁶² The Fellowship of the Blessed Sacrament was open to pastors who celebrated and lay members who wished to receive Holy Communion every Sunday.⁶³

Another notable voice in Missouri’s liturgical renewal was Arthur Carl Piepkorn, 1928 Concordia Seminary graduate, Ph.D. in Babylonian Archaeology from the University of Chicago, who wore vestments, chanted the liturgy, and introduced other “new practices” to his little parish in Chisholm, Minnesota.⁶⁴ By World War II, many more pastors and church members had been introduced to liturgical changes gaining acceptance in the Missouri Synod.⁶⁵

In the 1950s, Valparaiso University took interest; its new President O.P. Kretzmann appointed an Institute for Liturgical Studies (one member of which was Jaroslav Pelikan) because he believed the church—particularly the Missouri Synod—needed such an organization.⁶⁶ John Tietjen called the worship life experienced by students at Valparaiso a “leaven” for the Synod. As graduates would join Missouri congregations around the United States, they would be bound to raise questions about the frequency of Holy Communion reception,

⁶⁰ Berthold von Schenk, “The Task of the St. James Society,” *Pro Ecclesia Lutherana* 2 (1934): 4.

⁶¹ “Report on the First Convocation of the Eucharistic Fellowship of the Augsburg Confession, June 24, 1937, 2–3; cited by Zetto, “My Fair Chasuble,” 282.

⁶² Zetto, “My Fair Chasuble,” 282–83.

⁶³ Interview, Robert Lindemann with J. Jeffrey Zetto, Long Island, N.Y., December 13, 1978; in Zetto, “My Fair Chasuble,” 283.

⁶⁴ Zetto, “My Fair Chasuble,” 278.

⁶⁵ Arthur Carl Piepkorn, “The Protestant Worship Revival and the Lutheran Liturgical Movement,” in *The Liturgical Renewal of the Church*, ed. Massey Hamilton Sheppard, Jr., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), 73–74.

⁶⁶ Zetto, “My Fair Chasuble,” 287–88.

say "blunt things" about the congregation's music, and make reference to "unfamiliar vestments." Their "Valpo" worship experience, Tiejten predicted, would make it "practically inevitable that local pastors will not be able to leave such interests simply 'to those who go in for that sort of thing.'"⁶⁷

Henry Reimann, in a 1959 evaluation in *Concordia Theological Monthly*, though initially questioning even the existence of a clear liturgical "movement," and though cognizant of the potential abuses of such a movement, nonetheless clearly approved the liturgical developments. Worship "is being elevated to the high importance that it should have in the faith and life of the church." The movement has caused "a higher regard for the Sacraments" and should be thanked for sparing especially the Lord's Supper from "Anabaptist denials," "Calvinistic spiritualizing," and "Lutheran minimizing." Greater appreciation of the Sacraments brought with it "a higher regard for the holy ministry," as congregations grew less likely to treat pastors as "their hirelings and 'firelings.'" Reimann noted "a real nexus" between the liturgical movement and increased loyalty to the Lutheran Confessions.⁶⁸

Most controversial was Reimann's statement that "there [were] also blessings resulting from the liturgical movement's interest in ecumenicity." Participants in the movement have "usually been people who yearned for the true unity of the body of Christ." The Lutheran Church "stands in continuity with the Catholic Christian Church," and Missouri men in the liturgical movement "have been rather conscious of devotional, exegetical, catechetical and even doctrinal areas of agreement between the liturgical churches." Their studies in the liturgy resulted in more contacts with members of the Roman, Anglican, and Greek churches, and "all this [was] to the good."⁶⁹

By 1960, monthly (and in some places weekly) celebration of Holy Communion had become the rule rather than the exception in many Missouri congregations, and average attendance at the Sacrament increased accordingly.⁷⁰ Piepkorn, now a professor at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, summarized the changes: in 1885, the most that

⁶⁷ John Tietjen, "The Valpo Leaven and the Liturgical Level," *American Lutheran* 48 (October 1965): 257.

⁶⁸ Henry W. Reimann, "The Lutheran Liturgical Movement: An Appraisal," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 30 (June 1959): 421-25.

⁶⁹ Reimann, "The Lutheran Liturgical Movement," 425.

⁷⁰ Zetto, "My Fair Chasuble," 264.

could be expected of a Lutheran pastor was that he would wear a gown while conducting worship. In 1925, most Lutheran pastors wore the black gown. By 1960, cassock, surplice, and stole— and even the combination of alb and chasuble— “have become sufficiently common and widespread that they no longer evoke strong reactions”⁷¹

“Plain, unpretentious communion with God”

By the 1940s, however, many also regarded *The American Lutheran* as a leading advocate for the establishment of church union between the Missouri Synod and the American Lutheran Church. *American Lutheran* writers were endorsing a change in Missouri’s fellowship teaching and practice, even attempting to demonstrate that such a change would be a return to the Synod’s earlier position at the time of Walther.⁷² *American Lutheran* supporters, perceived “Eastern” Missourians,⁷³ the Synod’s non-geographical English District, and those interested in things liturgical seemed to form an alliance that would change the Missouri Synod’s doctrinal legacy. Predictably, this change provoked opposition.

Missouri Synod President Frederick Pfothenauer warned in 1933 that it was “undeniable” that “the Word of God would be pushed into the background” through the liturgical innovations introduced in some parishes. Pfothenauer urged that pastors and worship leaders cause their congregations “no anxiety” so that their ministries would not be “compromised” through “stumbling blocks” which “thrust the person of the pastor into the foreground.”⁷⁴ Two years later, Missouri’s Minnesota District President warned Piepkorn that the

⁷¹ Arthur Carl Piepkorn, “Lutheran and Protestant Vestment Practices in the United States and Canada: A Survey,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 37 (November 1966): 645–55.

⁷² See “The Problem of Lutheran Unity: V. c. Prayer Fellowship and Unionism,” *The American Lutheran* 26 (February 1943): 6; “The Problem of Lutheran Unity: I. Our Fathers and Prayer Fellowship,” (August 1943): 6-8. .

⁷³ See Marvin A. Huggins, “Missouri in the Northeast: Hostile Outpost or Cutting Edge?” in *Eastern Lutheranism and the National Church*, esp. 111–16; John R. Hannah, “The New York Role in the Missouri War,” in *Eastern Lutheranism and the National Church*, 408–24.

⁷⁴ Frederick Pfothenauer to Theodore Graebner; October 13, 1933; Graebner Collection, Concordia Historical Institute; cited by Zetto, “My Fair Chasuble,” 275.

changes he and other young pastors were introducing “had proved to be a source of offense to many.”⁷⁵

In 1934 (the same year von Schenk began the St. James Society), Concordia Seminary Professor Paul Kretzmann argued that first century Christian worship displayed “democracy and simplicity of form” and insisted that there was no evidence of elaborate ritual, special clerical vestments, incense, or splendid Eucharistic vessels in the early Church—in fact, “no ritualism or formalism to any degree.” Kretzmann attributed the evolution of worship ritual to “the growing distinction between clergy and laity,” an “undemocratic” differentiation “not at all in agreement with the principles of pastoral deportment” contained in the New Testament. In time, especially larger churches featured “a most elaborate wardrobe of tunics, and albs, and dalmatics, and penulas (chasubles), and palls, and stoles, and maniples, and gremials, and subuculas, and amices, and rochets, and cassocks, and almuces, and what not.” Kretzmann also denounced the rise of practices which contained “strange secrecy” and “an air of mystery.” Sacramentalism surrounding the Mass “became so prominent a feature of the Roman liturgy” that “the preaching and teaching of the Word finally became a very secondary issue.”⁷⁶

Drawing a near straight line from ritual to the Antichrist, Kretzmann charged, “No sooner had the last apostle closed his eyes in death than not only hierarchical tendencies began to manifest themselves, but the ‘mystery of iniquity’ referred to in 2 Thess. 2 gave evidence of its power in other ways, especially in the corruption of apostolic doctrine.” He cited an unnamed “noted scholar” in support of his contention that “*externalism and deterioration* [of doctrinal orthodoxy] *have always run parallel in the church.*”⁷⁷

The American Lutheran printed occasional warnings against liturgical excesses. Edgar P. Witte observed in 1934 that many in the church seemed especially busy with such “weighty matters” as “whether the cross on the altar should be veiled during Passiontide.” Witte asked, “Is this the time to be occupied with matters that are at best externals, concerned rather with preferences and tastes” than

⁷⁵ J.C. Meyer, Field Secretary for the Mission Board and President of the Minnesota District, to Arthur Carl Piepkorn, July 3, 1935; Piepkorn Collection, Seminex Archives; cited by Zetto, “My Fair Chasuble,” 279.

⁷⁶ P[aul] E. Kretzmann, “Externalism and Sacramentalism,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 5 (October 1934): 761–63.

⁷⁷ Kretzmann, “Externalism and Sacramentalism,” 763–64.

eternal truths? At worst, such “preoccupation with ritual” became “an escape mechanism from reality, a withdrawal from the world, [and] a confession of failure.” How long “are we going to busy ourselves with ecclesiastical dressmaking” while enemies destroy the flock of God?⁷⁸ A layman marveled at “the nationwide publicity ‘liturgics’ receives and the speed with which these things find acceptance.”⁷⁹

Walter A. Maier, writing in the *Walther League Messenger* in 1934, characterized the typical Lutheran as “an average simple American” and claimed that the norm for American Lutheran worship was not the historic practices of Reformation-era Europe but “the American mind” which valued “a plain, common service.” On the basis of Mark 10:15 [“Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein”(*King James Version*)], Maier equated “simple faith” with the “plain, unpretentious communion with God that touches the heart most deeply.”⁸⁰

In 1945, Maier quoted a letter writer to the *Messenger* who was “sorry to hear” that there would be more liturgy, vestments, and ritual in the Lutheran Church. Jesus “seemed to rebel against ritualism,” and he and the apostles “did not stop to change into fancy vestments or insist on gorgeous churches in which to preach.” Ministers should win followers by preaching the “simple Gospel.” The correspondent knew other Lutherans who were also troubled that they could not tell Lutheran ministers from Catholic priests.

In response, Maier acknowledged that liturgical garb was a matter of freedom, yet he warned against the use of “any program or procedure that would tend to identify us with church groups opposed to us, cause offense to earnest Christians, and minimize the proclamation of our Savior’s Gospel.” Regarding vestments, too, “the entire issue is left to us in our Christian liberty,” yet “if the wearer of the ecclesiastical apparel makes people falsely associate our Church with others whose doctrines we condemn as anti-Scriptural,” and if costly vestments “unduly emphasize the person of the clergymen and are honestly offensive to earnest Christians, we cannot see how they can be used with blessing.” Maier believed that the “plain, unpretentious gown” long worn by Missouri pastors had distinguished them well from “the flamboyant type of sectarian preachers, with either the

⁷⁸ Edgar P. Witte, “Nero Fiddles,” *The American Lutheran* 17 (May 1934): 8.

⁷⁹ B.J. Jordan, “From a Layman’s View Point,” *The American Lutheran* 17 (May 1934): 9.

⁸⁰ W[alter A.] Maier, “Sterling Simplicity,” *The Walther League Messenger* 42 (April 1934): 457.

over-costly, super-stylish garb or the multi-colored, careless style of dress.”⁸¹

The most consistent opposition to Missouri’s liturgical changes came from *The Confessional Lutheran*, magazine of the Confessional Lutheran Publicity Bureau. Formed in 1940 by Missouri pastors who disagreed with many viewpoints of the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau, the C.L.P.B. especially opposed Missouri union with the A.L.C. Beginning in 1949, opposition to the liturgical movement also became standard fare on the magazine’s pages. The titles tell the story: “The Deadly Menace.” “Catholics Take Note of Romanizing Tendencies of High Churchism in Missouri Synod.” “A Return To The Religion Of The Dark Ages.” “A Roman View Toward Re-Uniting Christendom.” “UNA SANCTA Labels St. Paul Resolutions as ‘Ridiculous’ and as Having ‘the Odor of Rome.’” “Romanizing Sacramentalism.” “The Roman Catholic Doctrine of the Mass and the Missouri Synod.” “The Return to Rome.” “Pining Away before Rome’s Pomp and Circumstance.” “Funeral Crucifix to Feature Procession at Missouri Synod Convention, June 1965.”⁸²

The Confessional Lutheran also took aim at many other innovations and developments which in its view signaled a radical change in the teaching and practice of the Missouri Synod, among them the erosion of Missouri’s long-standing position that the Pope is the Anti-

⁸¹ W[alter A.] Maier, “Ceremonies or Simplicity?” *The Walther League Messenger* 53 (March 1945): 239–39, 260, 262.

⁸² [Theodore] D[iercks], “The Deadly Menace,” *The Confessional Lutheran* 10 (August 1949): 92; “Catholics Take Note of Romanizing Tendencies of High Churchism in Missouri,” *The Confessional Lutheran* 12 (April 1951): 39–40; [Theodore] D[iercks], “A Return To The Religion Of The Dark Ages,” (October 1951): 110–13; [Theodore] D[iercks], “A Roman View Toward Re-Uniting Christendom,” *The Confessional Lutheran* 13 (February 1952): 13–17; [Theodore] D[iercks], “UNA SANCTA Labels St. Paul Resolutions ‘Ridiculous’ and as Having ‘the Odor of Rome,’” *The Confessional Lutheran* 17 (December 1956): 124–25; L[udwig] Fuerbringer, in *Concordia Theological Monthly* 1934, p. 528; cited in *The Confessional Lutheran* 18 (March 1957): 30; “The Roman Catholic Doctrine of the Mass in the Missouri Synod,” (March 1957): 30–32; “The Return to Rome,” *The Confessional Lutheran* 20 (January 1959): 6–11; “Pining Away before Rome’s Pomp and Circumstance,” *The Confessional Lutheran* 23 (December 1962): 135; “Funeral Crucifix to Feature Procession at Missouri Synod Convention, June 1965,” *The Confessional Lutheran* 26 (June 1965): 61–63.

christ;⁸³ the growing number of reported instances of unionistic practice;⁸⁴ the re-interpretation of Romans 16:17–18;⁸⁵ the perils of ecumenicity;⁸⁶ troubles at Valparaiso University and in its publication *The Cresset*;⁸⁷ the dangers of the Social Gospel;⁸⁸ the problem with Boy Scouts;⁸⁹ the offense of *The Statement of the 44*;⁹⁰ rumors of false doctrine at Concordia Seminary;⁹¹ concerns about renegade theologians Jaroslav Pelikan,⁹² Martin Marty,⁹³ and Martin Scharlemann;⁹⁴ and many others.

Were Missouri's liturgical developments rooted in Lutheranism, or did they derive from Roman Catholic and other sources? Jeffrey Zetto argues that the early twentieth century movement was "decidedly Lutheran." He depicts the movement as a tree, with roots in the Reformation, Henry Melchior Muehlenberg, and Wilhelm Loehe; its soil, Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions; its trunk, Friedrich Loch-

⁸³ J[ohn] Buenger, "Does Scripture Teach That The Pope Is The Antichrist?" *The Confessional Lutheran* 13 (June 1952): 66–69.

⁸⁴ P[aul] H. B[urgdorf], "Concerning Unionism Among Chaplains Of The Missouri Synod," *The Confessional Lutheran* 13 (April 1952): 38–39.

⁸⁵ A[rthur] V. K[uster], "Rom. 16:17,18 Declared Troublesome, Secondary, And Unclear," *The Confessional Lutheran* 12 (April 1951): 43.

⁸⁶ P[aul] H. B[urgdorf], "The Perils of Ecumenicity," *The Confessional Lutheran* 19 (March 1958): 30–33.

⁸⁷ "Troublesome and Contentious Men Who do Not Suffer Themselves to be Bound to any Formula of the Pure Doctrine," *The Confessional Lutheran* 20 (November 1959): 114–16.

⁸⁸ [Paul] H. B[urgdorf], "Laymen Speak Out Against Social Gospel," *The Confessional Lutheran* 18 (November 1957): 112–13.

⁸⁹ R[obert] Preus, *Lutheran Sentinel*; in "Some Hard Facts About Scoutism," *The Confessional Lutheran* 18 (March 1957): 33–34.

⁹⁰ A[rthur] V. K[uster], "'A Statement' Revisited Again," *The Confessional Lutheran* 12 (April 1951): 44.

⁹¹ "Modernism at St. Louis Seminary," *The Confessional Lutheran* 22 (January 1961): 8–14.

⁹² P[aul] E. Kretzmann, "Doctor Pelikan and Missouri Synod Theology," *The Confessional Lutheran* 12 (December 1951): 140–41.

⁹³ "Men on a Mission: Martin E. Marty, Ecumenist," *The Confessional Lutheran* 26 (February 1965): 17–18.

⁹⁴ "A Summary and Evaluation of Dr. Martin H. Scharlemann's Attack on Scripture in His Essay, 'The Bible as Record, Witness, and Medium,'" *The Confessional Lutheran* 20 (December 1959): 125–29.

ner, Luther Reed, Paul Zeller Strodach, Arthur Carl Piepkorn, and others.⁹⁵

By contrast, Frank Senn places the American Lutheran Liturgical Movement together with its cousins in the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and European Lutheran liturgical movements.⁹⁶ In his view, it was “a European import” with origins in Benedictine monasteries in France, Belgium, and Germany in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, first brought to the United States by monks at St. John’s Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota.⁹⁷ Timothy Quill has written that Lutheran liturgical scholars in America “found the vast resources of the Roman Catholic liturgical movement impossible to pass up.” In Quill’s view, the impact of the Catholic liturgical movement upon American Lutheranism has been “extensive.”⁹⁸

“Romanizing externals creeping into Protestant churches”

The Wisconsin Synod was forced to take sides in what was becoming an increasingly visible and volatile Missouri Synod civil war. Invariably, Wisconsin took *The Confessional Lutheran* side of the debate— supporting its position even if not always approving its style or tone. Wisconsin’s President Oscar J. Naumann wrote in 1965 that the Lord had used the *Confessional Lutheran* and its editors as a voice of repentance. “The dangers against which *The Confessional Lutheran* warned years ago and the trends which it saw developing have matured and borne fruit.” Its warnings “had been very much in place” but had not been heeded.⁹⁹

Key areas of debate between Missouri and Wisconsin were the doctrines of church fellowship and the inerrancy of Scripture, but Missouri’s liturgical changes also troubled many Wisconsin observers. These changes came to be a paradigm for what Wisconsin found wor-

⁹⁵ Zetto, “My Fair Chasuble,” 265, 300.

⁹⁶ Frank C. Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1997), 608–25.

⁹⁷ Frank C. Senn, “What has Become of the Liturgical Movement,” *Pro Ecclesia* 6 (Summer 1997): 320.

⁹⁸ Timothy Quill, *The Impact of the Liturgical Movement on American Lutheranism* (Lanham, Md.: The Scarecrow Press, 1997), 221.

⁹⁹ “President Naumann Concerning Developments Within the Missouri Synod,” *The Confessional Lutheran* 26 (January 1965): 3.

risome in Missouri and sought to avoid. It was probably not a difficult identification; Wisconsin had never been favorably disposed to liturgical ceremony, even when things were good between the synods.

In Wisconsin's 1947 *Quartalschrift*, Edmund Reim commented on liturgical innovations introduced by the Society of St. James. Though he "appreciated highly" much of what he read in the first two issues of Missouri's liturgical magazine *Una Sancta*, Reim nonetheless voiced "vigorous protest against this tendency to reintroduce a terminology and traditions which are reminiscent of Rome."¹⁰⁰

Carleton Toppe in 1951 noted "the growing emphasis on ritual and ceremony under the guise of going back to Luther's day." Toppe faulted Synodical Conference churches, where "we hear of perpetual lamps burning, custodians crossing themselves before exhibiting sacramental vessels to visitors, altar boys, marriage communion for the bride and groom, and, in general, the dangerous tendency to crowd out the sermon by expanding the liturgy."¹⁰¹

E.W. Wendland remarked in 1952 that "many of us" conducted "our order of service as though we have to apologize for it," yet as an over-corrective "we possibly feel that a flair for more pomp and ritual will restore a little effectiveness," even though "our people may not understand what it is all about."¹⁰²

In 1953, Reim cited the *Valparaiso Bulletin's* report of a lecture "which demonstrates with unusual clearness the length to which our liturgical extremists seem ready to go in their chosen direction of sacramentalism." Each portion of the liturgical service was depicted as a successive act in a liturgical drama enacted by worshipers, all of which too easily "places the emphasis on the action of man rather than God." It could be "only a small step to thinking of the service as something by which man influences and propitiates God—which is, of course, the basic idea of the Roman Mass!"¹⁰³

E. Arnold Sitz warned, also in 1953, that the high church movement stood alongside the Ecumenical Movement as "one of the most

¹⁰⁰ E[dmund] Reim, "The Society of St. James," *Theologische Quartalschrift* 44 (October 1947): 284–85.

¹⁰¹ Carleton Toppe, "A Time-Honored Warning Against Present Dangers to the Church from Pharisaism," *Theologische Quartalschrift* 48 (April 1951): 124–25.

¹⁰² E[rnst] W. Wendland, "Present-Day Pietism," *Theologische Quartalschrift* 49 (January 1952): 34.

¹⁰³ E[dmund] Reim, "Valpo Professor Explains Drama of Church Worship," *Theologische Quartalschrift* 50 (April 1953): 134–36.

powerful agents in preparing our people for a return to Roman Catholicism and for the temporary triumph of the Anti-Christ before the coming again of our Lord Jesus." The "high church man learns to commute genuine contrition of the heart into an easy genuflection."¹⁰⁴

Henry Nitz in 1959 cautioned that "certain Romanizing externals" were "creeping into some Protestant churches," including use of the term "sacrifice of the mass," the employment of a sanctuary lamp, the practice of genuflecting before the altar, and the use of incense. "Even a Roman Catholic writer has pointed out that it is a mistake to speak of 'externals' in worship," because such "'externals' are— or should be— an expression of the faith confessed by pulpit and pew." Worship "demands forms" that are "dignified and in good taste," but when these forms become "needlessly elaborate" and when they "ape denominations that have 'another Gospel,' they are a nuisance and an offense to the spiritually minded worshiper."¹⁰⁵

In 1963, Nitz cited favorably an article from *The Lutheran* which warned that the "rigid insistence of some pastors upon 'the high church excessiveness that exists in pockets of our church today' may be driving people away." The writer of *The Lutheran* article maintained that "unchurched people and people of nonliturgical backgrounds couldn't care less about all the liturgical folderol" they see in some congregations. "If we can't communicate with these people because of high liturgical fences that we erect, we ought to rethink our reason for being in the community."¹⁰⁶

Was there an attitude of distaste or distrust among Wisconsin's rank and file toward Missouri's changes? Not so much "distrust" but some "distaste," said one respondent, while another acknowledged "distaste, distrust and disapproval," and a third observed a "remarkably hostile" attitude toward the changes. Some in Wisconsin "seemed unable to separate the wheat from the chaff" and rejected the entire movement out of hand. Arthur Carl Piepkorn was especially "suspect in the minds of the Thiensville faculty" in the early 1950s and came in for particular criticism.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ E. Arnold Sitz, "Observations on Ecumenicity," *Theologische Quartalschrift* 51 (January 1954): 15–16.

¹⁰⁵ H[enry] C. Nitz, "High Church' Practices," *The Northwestern Lutheran* 46 (September 13, 1959): 291.

¹⁰⁶ H[enry] C. Nitz, "High Liturgical Fences," *The Northwestern Lutheran* 50 (December 15, 1963): 395.

¹⁰⁷ Survey responses 19, 1, 12, 13.

Sitz charged that Piepkorn and others “have done the Lutheran Church in America a grave disservice in departing from the sober-minded and simple dress and ritual of the past century into the labyrinth of the high church movement.” They and others were “pressing so on this high church trend as to insist that the climax of the service can be nothing other than Holy Communion or, as they prefer to term it, the Eucharist.” Such an approach “already gives a biased slant toward Roman Catholic terminology and toward Roman Catholic sacramentarianism.”¹⁰⁸

For many pastors, “black gown only” was how it was and always had been. One respondent recalled being told by his pastor in catechism instruction in the 1940s that the black gown was intended to de-emphasize the “person” of the pastor leading worship, so that preacher and worshipers alike could focus “on the Word and the message of the Gospel.” Black was “a neutral color,” acting as an “equalizer” that “made all pastors look alike,” serving “to hide rather than call attention to the individual.” The black robe was “a meat and potato” thing, denoting that a man wanted “no show, no glitter or glamour.” There was “a kind of personal pride in the fact that ‘we don’t go for the frills; we just came out in black robes and preached the Word.’” To wear more was considered “high church” and was “bordering on mere ritual.” One respondent speculated that his father and his father’s contemporaries chose the black Geneva, partly to reflect “a quiet opposition to a higher liturgical movement” in Missouri but more to express “their modesty in ministry.” Another recalled that when his father and other pastors in the 1940s got together, their conversation reflected distaste for any “show of pomp” in worship. A “respectable gown” was important for upholding “the dignity of the preaching office.” Even proper “preaching ties” came under discussion; they should be “dark, preferably black.”¹⁰⁹

And so, if the purpose of a black robe was to cover the person, “I guess it seemed to us that if the preacher wore more than a black robe, he was actually calling attention to himself.”¹¹⁰

One respondent recalled his father’s participation in the installation of a Missouri pastor in the late 1950s: “[There were] all these guys in white robes followed by the Wisconsin Synod ‘crows’ in black.” Yet his father did not recall hearing any distrust expressed “as far as

¹⁰⁸ The Sitz essay is cited without reference by Tiefel, “Worship Attitudes in the WELS,” 36.

¹⁰⁹ Survey responses 19, 17, 20, 4, 31, 34, 27, 38, 35, 28.

¹¹⁰ Survey response 30.

the LCMS men because of their liturgical garb." Another respondent's father was a Missouri pastor aligned with the *Confessional Lutheran*, yet he never criticized Missouri's liturgical movement. The father was a proponent of "good Gothic architecture" in church buildings, was "quite liturgical" (referring to New Year's Eve as "St. Sylvester's Eve"), and loved the "old Lutheran hymns." He, too, joked about being the only "blackbird" when he took part in installations.¹¹¹

Some saw a "linkage" between higher liturgics and emerging liberalism. Concern was voiced about the St. James Society "because of its pushiness in downplaying the importance of the sermon in the Sunday services." Yet several respondents with Missouri connections said that the St. James Society provoked more concern in Missouri than Wisconsin. One who went to Concordia Milwaukee heard more "cracks" about the St. James Society there than when he later attended Wisconsin Synod schools. "My general impression," he remarked, "is that WELS people [then and now] just didn't keep up on things outside the WELS."¹¹²

Even if there was distrust, liturgics was not the real cause. One respondent considered Wisconsin's "wooden interpretation [of Scripture] and [the] hyper-rigorous application" of the Synod's "pet theology of fellowship" to be at the heart of intersynodical suspicions. A "generally assumed" cause of distrust was the higher education some professors acquired at non-Synodical Conference schools, which led to "dissatisfaction with the perceived stodginess of the WELS." One respondent remembered a particular Missouri "academician" who was "trying helpfully to warn me against the supposed anti-intellectualism" of the Wisconsin Synod with the dire prediction, "Wisconsin is a sinking ship."¹¹³

"Beribboned dandies"

Attitudes toward liturgy were formed already in school. While Koehler's disinclination for liturgy is generally credited with having had an effect on many Wisconsin pastors, another such influence may have come from Erwin E. Kowalke, professor at Northwestern College in Watertown for virtually his entire ministry and its president for forty years, 1919–59. One respondent viewed Kowalke as "cut from the Koehler cloth" and called Northwestern's chapel in its original

¹¹¹ Survey responses 26, 30.

¹¹² Survey responses 28, 24, 29, 32.

¹¹³ Survey responses 16, 31.

“very bare” form “a Kowalke creation.” Kowalke once “stomped his feet” at the conclusion of a Reformation service in Northwestern’s chapel at which trumpeters played a melody-only accompaniment to two stanzas of “A Mighty Fortress.” Raising his voice, he said, “I come to chapel to worship and not to be entertained.” Chapel services at Watertown into the 1960s and 1970s “were nothing more than a lecture on a section of the Bible,” said one respondent, for which he blamed the faculty. “The sermonette was the important thing.”¹¹⁴

A student from Kowalke’s later days remembered him as negative toward LCMS “church growth methods”—before that term became invested with its present connotations. His apparent distaste for some elements in Missouri fostered an anti-intellectualism at Watertown, in this respondent’s view, as if to say, “*We* don’t need anything besides what our training schools provide. That’s enough. No M.A.s or Ph.D.s for us!” Since LCMS pastors more frequently wore clerical collars, cassocks, surplices and stoles, these vestments came to be emblematic of concerns about Missouri.¹¹⁵

Another respondent, though remembering Kowalke for his “stinging and sarcastic wit that could terrorize students at will,” suggested that Kowalke was most concerned that students knew what they were talking about and how to say it clearly. Trying to “snow somebody with impressive words” was to Kowalke “manipulative and unacceptable.” He “regularly extolled the virtues of clear, concise Anglo-Saxon vocabulary” and probably “would have lumped [liturgical proponents] in with the same questionable practice of trying to impress people with what you were not.” For him, “manipulating people emotionally with words and actions was not a suitable substitute for relying on the Word.”¹¹⁶

One respondent, who came from the English District of the Missouri Synod to complete his final two years of college at Northwestern, remembered: “As happy as I was to be in the Wisconsin Synod for doctrinal reasons, I was appalled at the sloppy liturgical practice that was taken for granted. People seemed to be proud of the fact that they ignored rubrics and did the liturgy however they pleased.” Several students who transferred from the pastor track course at Concordia Milwaukee to Watertown were seen wearing clergy collars to classes and around campus, which a Wisconsin student and his like—

¹¹⁴ Survey response 32, 35, 29.

¹¹⁵ Survey response 23.

¹¹⁶ Survey response 31.

minded friends took “as a sign of ecclesiastical arrogance, which translated in our sophomore minds as liberalism.”¹¹⁷

The introduction of Wednesday evening Vespers in the early 1960s “was promptly dubbed by us students as ‘High Mass,’” though by any other standards it was hardly that. Students sensed that Professors Ralph Gehrke and Richard Jungkuntz “were into ‘strange’ things involving liturgy.” Gehrke, Jungkuntz, and classmate Walter Wagner, known as “brains” at Northwestern, transferred to Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, for the 1939–40 school year, then returned to Mequon with what one classmate considered “a new spirit” which “remained with them, as their later histories revealed.” When Gehrke and Jungkuntz left Northwestern and the Wisconsin Synod for Missouri in 1961, “there was a perception that they were on the liberal side and the collars seemed to be part of that perception.” The two professors feared that “in-breeding and parochialism were making WELS a theological backwater,” and they viewed changes in teaching and scholarship as “necessary for survival and intellectual respectability.” Liturgics “got carried along with the movement. It wasn’t the driver.”¹¹⁸

In the Synod’s outlying districts there were rumors that “something was happening at Northwestern College.” In the late 1950s, two young men assigned to a congregation near Moberly tried to introduce additional liturgy into the congregation’s worship services. “The reaction of the congregations and organist was almost unbelief [disbelief?].” It was hard even to find an organist who could play the entire liturgy. The pastor who succeeded them recalled the “great relief of the congregation” at the departure of these two young men and their insistence on liturgical reform. One of the two young pastors was Kurt Eggert.¹¹⁹ A later story had it that a board member of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary spoke against calling Eggert to the Seminary because his wearing of the “high church” cassock and surplice rendered him doctrinally “unsafe.”¹²⁰

In the 1970s, “a rather noticeable case of confrontation” occurred between “rank and file” students and a handful of their classmates who were viewed as pietists because they devised worship centers in their dormitory rooms, usually consisting of an improvised altar with paraments, candles, and sometimes incense, mostly for private use.

¹¹⁷ Survey responses 8, 11.

¹¹⁸ Survey responses 18, 5, 28, 31.

¹¹⁹ Survey response 5.

¹²⁰ Tiefel, “Worship Attitudes in the WELS,” 36–37; survey response 5.

Those students involved “tended to be the ones also favoring more liturgical public worship patterns.”¹²¹

Also in the 1970s, a war of words erupted in Northwestern College’s student magazine, *The Black and Red*. Two students charged that “the degeneration of ceremony in the Lutheran Church,” brought about by the influences of Zwinglianism, Calvinism, Pietism and Rationalism, was “fairly common knowledge.” Although they insisted that they respected the “low church” views prevalent in the Synod, “many of our pastors and professors do not reciprocate.” It was common, they said, to hear supporters of liturgical worship referred to as “beribboned dandies” and accused of being “the beginning of the downfall of doctrinal purity in the church.” In the remainder of their article, they explained the symbolism of clergy garb and extolled the value of religious ceremony.¹²²

Regarding the black robe, the student authors noted that “the Church has never adopted or even approved its use formally” and that it “goes against our history, tradition, and heritage” because it is an academic gown taken from the university. In fact, the black robe was “neither Lutheran nor Genevan” but evolved from the Roman *cappa clausa*. The *real* “beribboned dandies,” they concluded, were “those who, consciously or not, end up flaunting their own individuality during worship services by donning brightly-colored ties (sometimes even socks!) either to match the altar paraments or to merely brighten their own appearance.”¹²³

Their endorsement provoked a response from a student not normally inclined to weigh in on such issues. “You yourselves contend that ceremony and vestments are adiaphora,” he wrote. “Why didn’t you treat them as such?” Instead, he felt they left the impression that “worship and praise of any choir not in ‘proper uniform’” was unacceptable. “The vast majority of the members of our synod are not students of church history,” but were more likely to consider such practice “extreme ceremony bordering on cheap show.”¹²⁴

This led to “A Refutation of the Rebuttal,” in which one of the two original authors covered largely the same ground in an even-handed

¹²¹ Survey response 31.

¹²² David Last and Timothy Ziebell, “Beribboned Dandies?” *The Black and Red* 76 (November 1972): 68–70.

¹²³ Last and Ziebell, “Beribboned Dandies?” 70.

¹²⁴ David D. Bock, “Rebuttal to ‘Beribboned Dandies,’” *The Black and Red* 76 (December 1972): 102.

way,¹²⁵ followed by yet another article in which its author urged readers to steer a middle course by refocusing on “God’s Word” rather than overemphasizing “some comparatively insignificant adiaphoron.”¹²⁶

At Seminary, most students “didn’t care two hoots about liturgics.” They disliked anything that smacked of “high church.” One respondent recalled a classmate who would say, “Yeah, that stuff is adiaphora, but we know what it *really* means”— to which the respondent would reply, “We know what a Geneva gown *really* means— [that] the one wearing it was a Calvinist or worse.” Professor Irwin Habeck was known to warn students favoring the collar that those who “wear the enemy’s uniform get shot.” There were dismissive remarks about “chancel prancing” and “wearing your mother’s clothes” when assisting with Communion. One respondent remembered a “great debate” over whether to light the altar candles in chapel; those opposed to it feared it would be too “high church.” Another remembered that when several students wore “reverse collars” to class, one of his classmates “stood up in the dining hall and said, ‘If this is the way we want to go, then all we have to do is look to Europe where the churches are liturgically rich but spiritually empty.’”¹²⁷

“Das verdammte weise Kleid der Pastoren”

Growing up the son of farmers in a small central Wisconsin congregation, it was one respondent’s understanding that “all such pagantry” was “Catholic” and “to be avoided.” Another, who grew up in South Dakota, remembered that “anything beyond a black robe was associated with Catholicism.” When higher liturgical practices became more common in Missouri churches, people were heard to say, “They’re getting just like the Catholics.”¹²⁸

The high church movement was “identified with Anglican, Episcopalian, Liberal Lutherans and Rome.” One Episcopalian prospect attending a Wisconsin Synod installation service at a mission congregation remembered hearing fellow Episcopalian church members ridi-

¹²⁵ David Last, “A Refutation of the Rebuttal to the Beribboned Dandies,” *The Black and Red* 76 (February 1973): 164–66.

¹²⁶ S[cott] K[lein], “A Matter of Priority,” *The Black and Red* 76 (March 1973): 216–17.

¹²⁷ Survey responses 8, 1, 21, 9, 26.

¹²⁸ Survey responses 19, 35.

culing the “cornfield theology” of the WELS. In the late 1980s, when two WELS pastors wore white gowns at the commissioning service in northern Wisconsin for a world mission worker, they were greeted: “I guess we know who is from the Vatican around here.”¹²⁹

One pastor who accepted a call to serve a congregation composed mostly of recent German–Russian immigrants learned that his members had left a previous church over concerns about false doctrine, which they summarized in complaints about “*das verdammte weisse Kleid der Pastoren*” [“the pastor’s damned white gown”]. The District President agreed that a white gown was “not in itself false doctrine” but that it was “the best those people could do to sum up the ‘other spirit’ of the false teachers from which they were fleeing.”¹³⁰ Like Joseph’s richly ornamented robe, the white gown became a symbol of their doctrinal fears and resentment.

By the 1960s “there was a perceived link between the ‘looser’ doctrine of the LCMS and almost everything else they did or wore.” Subsequent events at Concordia Seminary seemed to confirm that their suspicions regarding the theological positions of some St. Louis professors had been justified. “While I was a sem student,” one respondent recalled, a classmate’s brother-in-law, a St. Louis student with “clerical collar in place,” visited Mequon and after classes “brazenly pooh-poohed” the classroom study and use of Scripture texts and mimeographed dogmatics notes. “If you’re not reading Scripture in your St. Louis classes,” we asked, “what do you read in order to study doctrine?” Barth and Bultmann, Tillich, other great scholars, they were told. Wearing clergy collars and espousing liberal theology became “one and the same in our minds.” Said another, “I think it was felt in the past that the more pastors in the LCMS showed a willingness to yield to unionism, they more they dressed up.”¹³¹

A more disturbing aspect of opposition to the higher liturgics came in the occasional implication that those who endorsed it were not sufficiently manly. One respondent admitted that as a young pastor he “wasted some time” reading a book about “psychological problems of the clergy,” one chapter of which dealt with men “who loved vestments because they could dress like their mothers.” Reading that book, he said, “prejudiced” him, and for some time he gave voice to that prejudice, even imagining a link between “weak preaching and liturgical niceties and effeminacy and liturgical niceties.” This res-

¹²⁹ Survey responses 1, 14, 25.

¹³⁰ Survey response 8.

¹³¹ Survey responses 18, 11, 4.

pondent also recalled perusing several volumes of a liturgically-oriented magazine published by the LCMS. Pencil on the front page of one of the issues of the magazine were the words, "Liturgics is not just for queers."¹³²

A similar sense existed in Missouri. "I think 'high' vestment and liturgy people also had an image of gay mannerism," recalled Martin Marty, who attended Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, 1947–52.¹³³ The very term "beribboned dandies" from Northwestern's *Black and Red* had effeminate overtones,¹³⁴ as did references to "chancel prancing," "wearing your mother's clothes," and owning (or never owning) a "white dress."

Classmates who left Northwestern or the Seminary to earn doctorates later taught at Missouri Synod colleges, in schools of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, or at private or public universities such as Duke, Ohio State, Washington State, and Oberlin. They left "because of anti-intellectualism," but then, if they remained in church work, "went liturgical. In the WELS, liturgical apparel became a bellwether of liberalism."¹³⁵

But did Wisconsin pastors actually leave the Synod for the greener pastures of a richer liturgical life? Probably not. More likely, some left hoping to "better themselves by going to a larger, more with-it synod." Others left over fellowship issues. "Those I have known who left since then, have had a whole host of reasons for doing so," but in Missouri it seemed "they felt they were able to do as they pleased, in doctrine and practice—and yes, I suppose in liturgics, too." Yet liturgics was not viewed as a primary reason. A classmate of one respondent transferred to St. Louis during Concordia's turbulent years, probably because "he had just had it with the WELS restrictive policies and practices in general." Another had a classmate who left because "he wanted to be part of an ecumenical inner-city ministry in Milwaukee and felt our fellowship teaching and practice was not his."¹³⁶

Black robes and white robes may both have symbolized larger issues. "Just as the 'black robers' saw their style of dress as a statement of being from the 'old guard,' it seemed that the use of elaborate

¹³² Survey response 1.

¹³³ Martin E. Marty to Mark Braun, e-mail, March 24, 2006.

¹³⁴ Last and Ziebell, "Beribboned Dandies?" 68.

¹³⁵ Survey responses 18, 11, 23.

¹³⁶ Survey responses 6, 8, 9, 33.

garb and worship forms suggested a more ‘enlightened’ approach by the wearer.”¹³⁷

No More Black and No Going Back

Change came in small steps and not without disapproval. When the WELS established its campus ministry at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, some ex-Missourians lobbied for passage of a congregational resolution that black robes, unadorned with stoles, be the only acceptable garb for pulpit and chancel. The resolution passed but was later rescinded. The cover of the November 1, 1988, issue of *The Northwestern Lutheran* featured a photograph of participants in the installation service for two Synodical administrators. All participants, including Synod President Carl Mischke, were pictured wearing white albs and red stoles, neither uncommon nor outlandish in 2006. The photograph prompted several letters of outrage (not printed in subsequent issues of *The Northwestern Lutheran*), one of which charged the wearers with sinning, denying the Lutheran Confessions, and causing serious offense. After a Reformation service conducted at an area Lutheran high school, several students asked their parents what discipline the preacher would receive for wearing a white robe.¹³⁸

Some wanted to stay black for less than theological reasons. “I think most overweight preacher types (myself sadly included) ought to avoid wearing an alb because it makes us look like boiled bratwurst,” said one. Another theorized that staying black was “more a matter of doing what daddy did.”¹³⁹

Following are a dozen reasons— in no particular order— for the change from black to white:

*Someone else bought it for me.*¹⁴⁰

If did it for my daughter. “I got an alb about ten years ago when my daughter wanted me to wear one for her wedding.”¹⁴¹

They’re cheaper. “I got my first alb after [neighboring] pastors reported they bought their albs for \$85, and that [the alb] could [be

¹³⁷ Survey response 34.

¹³⁸ Survey responses 1, 22, 7, 3.

¹³⁹ Survey responses 14, 39.

¹⁴⁰ Survey responses 10, 12, 39.

¹⁴¹ Survey response 23.

thrown] into the wash machine once a month! Practicality overcomes false theology!"¹⁴²

Black is for Law, white is for Gospel. One Easter morning, in a church adorned with hundreds of bright spring flowers, two members commented to their pastor that "while everything [else] in the church was celebrating life, the pastors were in mourning." Within a week, he purchased his first white alb. Black came to signify Good Friday and funerals. At one church, when the pastors appeared on Good Friday wearing black, an audible gasp rose from the congregation: "The judges are here!" One veteran observer recalled that sermons of the 1920s to 1940s "were more concerned with the law than with the gospel." As a youngster he would hear people say, "Boy, he preached a strong sermon today"— meaning strong on law. "Gospel was there but law was predominant." When the gospel became more prominent in sermons, "black seemed to deaden it, and 'white as snow' seemed to take over."¹⁴³

White makes the congregation feel cooler. Although warned about his new congregation's conservative leanings, one respondent was soon encouraged to wear an alb. "Was it because a black Geneva appeared too hot for the high desert? [Did it appear] less friendly than a cheery white?" Appearance sometimes counted for more than reality. "They felt I would be cooler [wearing white] while preaching during the summer months," one pastor said of his congregation, "but the white Geneva they bought me was twice the weight of my black one and I just died in it during the summer heat."¹⁴⁴

White came sooner to the South. Changing to white seems to have been a "rite of passage" south of the Mason–Dixon line. "I was not brave enough to cross over into the world of alb-dom or whiteness until I moved to the South," said one. Another proceeded cautiously: "I first gained permission from the church council and voters. I didn't want them to think that the heat was going to my head and turning me into a liberal." On his ordination day, another Southern pastor was presented by his congregation with the gift of a new white Geneva. "You are in the South now and we all wear white."¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² Survey response 11.

¹⁴³ Survey responses 10, 17, 29, 31, 25, 20.

¹⁴⁴ Survey responses 10, 12, 17, 39, 30.

¹⁴⁵ Survey responses 18, 11, 28, 36.

It's in the Bible (maybe). South Atlantic District President Ray Wiechmann quoted Ecclesiastes [9:8] to a Florida transplant. "Let your garments be white," he said with a wink and a smile. Another pastor, the first time he wore a white gown for worship in his congregation in 1975, preached on Exodus 29:4–9. He saw vestments of a sort in the tunic, robe, ephod, breastplate, belt, turban and crown worn by the Aaronic priest, and liturgical colors in white linen, blue robe, gold ephod, and blue, purple, and scarlet threads. New Testament Christians "do not follow the ritual laws of the Old Testament," he allowed. What a pastor wears "is for human judgment to decide." One "cannot make this a matter of sin." Yet there was valuable symbolism in traditional vestments as there had been in Old Testament priestly robes.¹⁴⁶

White isn't that outrageous. One pastor was remembered for wearing a white robe, green pants, and Pat Boone style "white bucks" as he officiated at a pastor's installation. At another time and place, a respondent sitting with Wisconsin Seminary Professor John M. Brenner (when he was still Pastor Brenner) watched a girl from the congregation serve as the "candle lighter" before worship. "I remarked to him, 'Your grandfather [former Synod President John W.O. Brenner] just flipped over in his grave,' to which the younger Brenner responded, 'Twice.'"¹⁴⁷

The people I admired wore them. "I was influenced by WELS intellectuals whom I admired, Kurt Eggert, Jeb Schaefer, [and] Erhard Pankow at Garden Homes, while I was at Sem."¹⁴⁸

It's more stylish. "I couldn't stand those dumb ties sticking out."¹⁴⁹

To keep up with the young guys. "I now wear [white] sometimes up here with the youngsters."¹⁵⁰

Wearing a collar gets you into hospitals easier. When medical staffs see the collar, they may grant you speedier access to patients' rooms and the emergency ward.¹⁵¹

Blame it on color TV. "Color television would be, from my perspective, one of the significant causes of the switch." Black was "no longer

¹⁴⁶ Survey responses 28, 32.

¹⁴⁷ Survey response 15.

¹⁴⁸ Survey response 23.

¹⁴⁹ Survey response 23.

¹⁵⁰ Survey response 23.

¹⁵¹ Survey response 11.

viewed as a neutral color.” Maybe white is seen today the way black used to be viewed. “Our people want their pastors to be down to earth,” remarked another. “This is not so much a fear of high church or [even] liberalism as a desire to have their preachers be ‘plain-old, plain-old.’ In the days when darker clothes and serious-faced newscasters prevailed, black was the color. Today lay people want their preachers to wear happier colors to reflect the better times.”¹⁵²

White gives permission for other changes. Some found a switch in robe color made their congregations willing to sample other innovations—richer Tenebrae services, the “Farewell to the Alleluia,” intentional silence during prayers or the confession of sins. “My interests were more aesthetic (good music performed well) than liturgical theology or movement.” One pastor recalled having a strong disagreement with a veteran colleague over banners: “He called them Roman Catholic and came close to telling me I’d end up in eternity next to the pope for thinking banners were OK in church.”¹⁵³

Putting things in perspective, one man with a very long memory observed, “I heard more objections to the new hymnals and the replacement of old hymns than I heard about pastors wearing [something] other than black robes and stoles.” The “black robe days” should not be recalled too fondly: “The sermon was it, and there was no liturgy [at all]. Communion was offered four times a year, on the Sundays when the quarterly meetings were held,” in apparent compliance to a remark Martin Luther once made that he would question whether a person was a Christian if he or she did not receive the Sacrament four times a year.¹⁵⁴ “Most of our churches made that a maximum, not a minimum.” Churches commonly held “chicken suppers,

¹⁵² Survey responses 17, 39.

¹⁵³ Survey responses 12, 28, 32.

¹⁵⁴ “We are to force no one to believe, or to receive the Sacrament, nor fix any law, nor time, nor place for it, but are to preach in such a manner that of their own accord, without our law, they will urge themselves and, as it were, compel us pastors to administer the Sacrament. This is done by telling them: Whoever does not seek or desire the Sacrament at least some four times a year, it is to be feared that he despises the Sacrament and is no Christian, just as he is no Christian who does not believe or hear the Gospel; for Christ did not say, This omit, or, This despise, but, This do ye, as oft as ye drink it, etc. Verily, He wants it done, and not entirely neglected and despised. This do ye, He says.” Martin Luther, preface to *The Small Catechism*, 22; *Triglott Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), 537.

raffles, games played at picnics for prizes, and other events were often the main means of income for many churches.” Musicians were hired from other churches. “Dues were collected for salaries” and other church expenses, and “in some places, elders went to their assigned homes to collect them.”¹⁵⁵

The One and the Many

If the WELS paradigm shift can be ascribed to a single individual and fixed at a certain point in time, it occurred with the acceptance of the call as Professor of Church Music at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary by James Tiefel. “It seems to me,” said one respondent, “that Jim Tiefel almost single-handedly made white albs, chant and processions legitimate in the WELS when he came to the Seminary.” Another agreed, adding, “I don’t say this in a critical way. It’s just a fact of life that if you want to influence a synod for good or bad, the seminary which trains the future clergy is the most effective way to do it.” Whatever is done at Seminary “is presumed to be *echt* [orthodox].”¹⁵⁶

Where did Prof. Tiefel acquire the interest and the desire to bring his influence to bear at such a relatively young age? (He accepted the call to Mequon when he was, by his own estimate, “a veritable pup” of 35.) One respondent remembered that his uncle, a pastor near Detroit, wore liturgical apparel in the early 1970s, though Tiefel said he almost never saw his uncle “function as a pastor.” His nine-year pastorate at St. Paul’s in Saginaw put his congregation and its worship life at the center of the Michigan District. Conferences and conventions of the district were generally held at Michigan Lutheran Seminary, with conference worship conducted in his congregation.¹⁵⁷ Only eight months out of the Seminary in Mequon, he already offered numerous practical suggestions for improving worship to a conference of pastors and teachers.¹⁵⁸ After accepting the call to the Seminary, Tiefel completed a final act of service to the District by arranging worship for the Synod’s 1985 convention, meeting for the first time at

¹⁵⁵ Survey response 29.

¹⁵⁶ Survey responses 1, 18, 22, 31, 30, 35, 23.

¹⁵⁷ Survey responses 23, 34; James Tiefel to Mark Braun, e-mail, May 9, 2006.

¹⁵⁸ James P. Tiefel, “Practical Suggestions For Change In The Service,” (Essay presented to the Northern Conference Pastor-Teacher Conference, Owosso, Mich., February 14 and 15, 1977; <http://www.wlsessays.net/authors/T/TiefelPractical/TiefelPractical.rtf>.)

MLS— and he drew favorable attention from *Northwestern Lutheran* editor James P. Schaefer: Noteworthy “were the liturgical elements and the hymns, many of them contemporary,” he wrote. “His debut at the convention was impressive.”¹⁵⁹

Veteran pastors have come to welcome the instruction on church music and liturgical practice he now gives Seminary students. One retired pastor said, “How I wish we would have had a course like that when I was at the Sem!”¹⁶⁰ In conference essays and popular articles, he (and other members of the hymnal committee) introduced WELS people to a deeper liturgical understanding.¹⁶¹ To the question—or, rather, the accusation—“But isn’t that Catholic?”—once a sure way of putting to death any new idea in a Wisconsin Synod church—Tiefel now offered a variety of persuasive replies: “It’s not Catholic at all,” but part of the long history of the church, Lutheran and Christian. “We use many Catholic forms,” both ancient and contemporary. “It only sounds Catholic,” because it was often easier to oppose “differences in form and style than to identify and understand differences” in teaching. “So what if it’s Catholic?” Luther willingly retained all the worship traditions that had been developed in fifteen centuries of the church’s history; he rejected only what was false. “Let me explain,” which he promised patiently to do.¹⁶²

“I found almost immediately upon my arrival at the Sem,” Prof. Tiefel himself has reported, “that there was a different attitude among the students when it came to public worship, and that attitude has continued.” Yes, the first student who chanted in chapel was consigned to the [cafeteria’s mock] leper colony for three weeks, “but after that no one said ‘Boo.’” One brief opposition, inspired perhaps by

¹⁵⁹ James P. Schaefer, “Quiet Convention,” *The Northwestern Lutheran* 72 (September 15, 1985): 295.

¹⁶⁰ Survey responses 19, 35.

¹⁶¹ See, for example, Victor H. Prange, “Worship that Matters,” *The Northwestern Lutheran* 76 (February 1, 1989): 44. Victor H. Prange, “In Defense of the Liturgy,” *The Northwestern Lutheran* 77 (May 1, 1990): 164. Victor H. Prange, “To Chant or Not to Chant,” *The Northwestern Lutheran* 78 (February 1, 1991): 56. Kurt J. Eggert, “The Shape of the New Hymnal,” (April 1, 1991): 120-21. Victor H. Prange, “Adiaphora,” *The Northwestern Lutheran* 79 (February 1, 1992): 55. Bryan M. Gerlach, “Hymnal Introduction Already?” (June 1, 1992): 206-07. Victor H. Prange, “The way Lutherans worship,” (September 1, 1992): 295.

¹⁶² James P. Tiefel, “But isn’t that Catholic?” *The Northwestern Lutheran* 77 (July 1990): 248-49.

the movie “Men in Black,” was driven by a Middler with the battle cry, “Aden to Zabell in black Genevas,” but, “We popped that bubble fairly quickly,” Tiefel recalled, “and have never seen a problem since.”¹⁶³

Yet change has come about not through the work of just one man. Ralph Gehrke and Richard Jungkuntz ultimately had positive effects on Wisconsin’s worship history. “Both of those men had outstanding knowledge of liturgics and proper practice.” Gehrke’s *Planning the Service*¹⁶⁴ “was a classic for many years.” While Gehrke and Jungkuntz may have been viewed as suspect by a certain generation of Wisconsin pastors, men like Carl Schalk, Paul Bunjes and others became better known in the WELS through their work as well as in personal contact.¹⁶⁵ Also cited as an early positive influence was Prof. Edmund Reim, who taught at the Seminary from 1940 to 1957, serving also as professor of liturgics in the 1940s. “What Prof. Reim had taught my dad about how to conduct a dignified service was the same thing that Prof. Albrecht was teaching me,” one respondent remembered.¹⁶⁶

Martin Albrecht was called to the Seminary in 1962 as its first full-time liturgics professor. He soon reorganized the liturgics and church music curricula, revitalized the Seminary chorus and kept students informed on liturgical developments in the wider Lutheran world. Albrecht “did not seem to mind innovation here and there, and never openly discouraged high church practices.” He led students to a greater appreciation for liturgical practice than he is often credited with. His greatest contribution “may well have been to at least soften some [negative] attitudes toward higher liturgical practice.”¹⁶⁷

Arnold Lehmann came to Northwestern College in 1962 with a Ph.D. in liturgical history and “grabbed Northwestern’s musical reins with dogged determination.” He insisted on higher standards for Northwestern’s musical groups, refused to excuse students from mus-

¹⁶³ James Tiefel to Mark Braun, e-mail, March 13, 2006; Survey response 31.

¹⁶⁴ Ralph Gehrke, *Planning the Service: a Workbook for Pastors, Organists, and Choirmasters* (St. Louis : Concordia Publishing House, 1961). See also Ralph Gehrke, “Suggestions for Furthering Congregational Appreciation of the Better Lutheran Hymns,” *Theologische Quartalschrift* 53 (October 1956): 287–90. Ralph Gehrke, “The Hymn-of-the-Week Plan,” *Theologische Quartalschrift* 56 (October 1959): 274–94.

¹⁶⁵ Survey response 27.

¹⁶⁶ Survey response 27.

¹⁶⁷ Tiefel, “Worship Attitudes in the WELS,” 37; survey response 27.

ical rehearsals for sports activities, and insisted that a “classically voiced pipe organ be placed in the chapel.” Though “certainly no ‘wild and crazy’ high church advocate,” he got some students to consider “the place of liturgy in the overall presentation of the gospel.”¹⁶⁸

Kurt Eggert “stood on the front lines, encouraging the synod to reclaim its worship and musical legacy and to strive for catholicity in form and excellence in performance.” He “set high standards for those who followed him,” and though “never quite convinced that the best had been achieved,” Eggert still encouraged singers and musicians “to strive for what was better.”¹⁶⁹ The abilities and accomplishments of Eggert and Albrecht combined in fruitful synergy. Albrecht was the technician, Eggert the artist. Eggert wrote the music which Albrecht scribed in meticulous hand.¹⁷⁰

Prof. Tiefel’s efforts at the Seminary were supported by colleagues David Valleskey and Armin Panning. “The influence of Dave Valleskey should not be minimized,” Tiefel has said. Prof. Valleskey brought his alb and stole to Mequon when he accepted a call to the Seminary in 1984, and he “wasn’t going to put that Geneva back on for anything.” As a Professor of Evangelism and New Testament, Valleskey “gained a natural respect from students.” When going to guest preach in congregations, “I’d ask what [kind of robe] guys wanted me to wear,” Tiefel remembers. “Dave didn’t ask.” Prof. Panning supported any and all worship innovations on campus as long as they were, in his word, “transferable” to the parish, and as long as Tiefel never said the old ways were wrong. The support of both men, not only as faculty colleagues but also in their service as Seminary presidents, “can’t be overstated.”¹⁷¹

Many others also helped pave the way for changes. In Milwaukee, Ernest Lehninger at St. John’s, Wauwatosa, wore surplice and cassock; after him Ron Heins and Mark Freier wore white albs. Even earlier, at Garden Homes, (sometimes referred to as “the Roman Lutheran Church”) Erhard Pankow wore collar and surplice, and was assisted by altar boys. Pankow served as chairman of the old joint Lutheran High School Conference during the difficult years of the breakup between the synods and played a key role in establishing

¹⁶⁸ Tiefel, “Worship Attitudes in the WELS,” 37; survey response 27.

¹⁶⁹ Tiefel, “Worship Altitudes in the WELS,” 38.

¹⁷⁰ James P. Tiefel, “They Sang a New Song to the Lord,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 90 (Fall 1993): 299.

¹⁷¹ Survey responses 37, 32; Tiefel to Braun, May 9, 2006.

and building Wisconsin Lutheran High School. A colleague and contemporary observed, “I don’t think anybody would have dared to infer that his theology was suspect because of the color of his robe.”¹⁷² The first Sunday morning Mark Jeske wore his new off-white alb at St. Marcus, one of his elderly members remarked, “Gaudy, gaudy, gaudy.”¹⁷³ James Schaefer, Kurt Eggert, and Kurt Koeplin at Atonement wore cassock, surplice, and clerical collars on Sundays, and occasionally clerical collars during the week as well. Richard Stiemke wore cassock and surplice at Parkside. “My father *chanted* the liturgy in the 1940s in the *German* services at Fairview, Milwaukee,” said one respondent, but “the practice of chanting, generally speaking, did not transfer in the 1940s with the coming of *The Lutheran Hymnal*.” Mentor Kujath was remembered for appearing *entirely* in white—robe, shirt, bow-tie, pants, socks, shoes. “It was the first time I had ever seen an all-white guy.”¹⁷⁴

William Lange in Wisconsin Rapids and Harold Kleinhans in Oshkosh wore surplice, cassock, and vestments; Lange at least since the late 1960s, Kleinhans perhaps had “always worn them,” and “because he enjoyed the respect and affection of the other conference and district brothers, it was OK.” There were always a few such men who were “given a pass” on liturgical matters, perhaps “because of long-standing tradition in certain areas of the Synod.” The collar was popular in the Twin Cities. Carl Bolle at St. James church in St. Paul and one-time Minnesota District President Adolf Ackermann “always wore a Roman collar.” Some of that inclination was attributed to Scandinavian Lutheran influence, as “there would have been no cause to ascribe ‘liberal tendencies’” to the men who served there. Dr. Martin Luther College hosted the Synod’s first conference on worship in the early 1970s, which led to the formation of WELS Commission on Worship.¹⁷⁵

Paradigm Shift Complete

By the new millennium, the shift has become all but complete. Thirty years ago, Seminary students taking their turn conducting

¹⁷² Survey responses 15, 21, 20.

¹⁷³ Mark A. Jeske, “Worship in the WELS— Changing Practices,” (paper presented to the Southeast Wisconsin District Convention, Wisconsin Lutheran High School,” June 12, 1990), 3; <http://www.wls.wels.net/library/Essays/Authors/IJ/JeskeWorship/JeskeWorship.pdf>; accessed April 27, 2006.

¹⁷⁴ Survey responses 32, 17, 24, 33.

¹⁷⁵ Survey responses 40, 27, 33, 15, 21, 30, 16.

chapel, as well as their professors preaching for festival services, always wore black. "To have done anything different would have been 'making a statement.'" By 2001, wearing a black gown "would have been viewed as 'making a statement'" in an opposite direction. Half of the Seminary's graduates in 2006 do not own black robes. This generation seems to have abandoned the notion—or never to have had it to begin with—that white draws attention to the messenger and distracts from the message. "With everyone wearing white, it obviously hides as well as black previously did."¹⁷⁶

Of course, change is observable in many other worship practices. Chanting became more acceptable with the appearance of the Psalm settings in *Christian Worship*. "Some people shouldn't chant," but many "do it very well." *Christian Worship*, though described by one respondent as "vestment neutral," has fostered openness to responsive reading, litanies, optional liturgies, and more¹⁷⁷ In a larger sense, the change is not merely about the use of externals like alb, vestments, and chanting, but the practices have become symbolic of "an improved focus in worship." One respondent cited Robert Webber's comment in *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail* that even people with roots in a Baptist missionary family and with a fundamentalist college diploma could discover something meaningful in a liturgical orientation.¹⁷⁸ And yet "the way we experienced liturgy in WELS seemed to be missing something important." Though the WELS did the liturgy, it did not always think liturgically. One "salt of the earth" member summarized his changed outlook: "I used to come to church; now I come to worship."¹⁷⁹

Some would even call the change a paradigm reversal. "When I entered the ministry in 1964, pastors who wore the black Geneva were considered to be conservative, [and] those that had white albs were the liberals. This has now changed, so that those who have albs and clerical collars are now the confessional conservatives, [and] those that have sweat shirts, no collars, and no robes are the opposite, non-confessional, church growth." In the 1960s, "it was common practice for conservatives to emphasize preaching and [to have] little or no

¹⁷⁶ Survey responses 31, 37.

¹⁷⁷ Survey responses 31, 22, 1.

¹⁷⁸ Robert Webber, *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail: Why Evangelicals are Attracted to the Liturgical Church* (Wilton, Conn.: Morehouse-Barlow, 1989).

¹⁷⁹ Survey response 12.

liturgy.” Those who emphasized liturgy were often considered liberal. “When I was a boy, prep, and college student and at the beginning of my ministry,” said another, “the ‘Christmas tree look,’ as it was sometimes scornfully called, was considered a sign of liberalism, or at the very least, a failure to follow the accepted norms (which in the WELS is in itself sometimes viewed as liberalism).” Today, in both Missouri and Wisconsin, “because of what are perceived as Reformed tendencies copping up in our worship life, ‘high church’ = orthodoxy.”¹⁸⁰

From another perspective, however, change in colors and practices does not necessarily demonstrate a paradigm shift at all. Wearing white or black, choosing to chant or not to chant, may carry no great significance after all. One respondent, who travels frequently throughout the Synod, finds there is “no pattern by region” and there may be “little or no relationship to the pastor’s theological leaning. Sometimes the liturgical garb of the preacher is totally unrelated to his liturgical leanings.” One pastor in a black Geneva may chant, carry the cross in procession, and preach in the nave instead of from the pulpit, while another pastor wearing an alb may “eschew anything upchurch.” Said another observer, “It still amazes me that so dramatic a cultural shift in worship could occur so rapidly.” Even those who do not favor the changes themselves no longer associate vestments and liturgical practices with liberalism.¹⁸¹

Some who have reached three score years and ten not only accommodated themselves to the changes but have come to embrace them. “I am happy (or at least willing) to participate in things that would have troubled (or even appalled) me in 1958 or 1964 or 1971,” said one. “My theology has not become liberal while my acceptance of many and various liturgical refinements has grown.” Another remembered experiencing his own personal paradigm shift while observing the procession of the cross for the first time at a Seminary concert: “Whatever the choir was singing was quite beautiful,” he recalled. The choir members did not look “arrogant or liberal.” And his son was carrying the crucifix— “and I know he’s not liberal. That settled it for me. Processionals, albs, crucifixes, chanting, when done worshipfully, are all good things.” A third reported that his interest has been piqued: “I have learned to appreciate that more emphasis on higher liturgical practice assists in true appreciation for the Word and the message of the Gospel throughout the church year.”¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ Survey responses 3, 27.

¹⁸¹ Survey responses 39, 22.

¹⁸² Survey responses 1, 11, 19.

A Saxophone Playing Christ-Centered Hymns?

Others have simply not made the shift and probably never will. "The wearing of a white alb appears to me to be putting the emphasis back on the minister rather than from him to God's Word," said one man. "We tend to want to draw attention to God through performances rather than to the Word of God (example: carrying the cross and having acolytes at Seminary concerts)." Another said that with the acceptance of *Christian Worship*, "we have an assortment of orders of service," yet "it seems that the more we have, the more some people are bent on producing always more." Regardless how many orders of service we have, "liturgy is not meant to be entertainment. Rather, it behooves the worshiper to be a participant and not an idle observer."¹⁸³

Students insist Prof. Tiefel "is not the flag waver for high church. He only wants our students to be exposed to other things." But even "mere" exposure has had a profound effect on a generation of pastors, just as the lack of exposure had a different effect on previous generations. In congregations, where change often occurs more slowly and with greater emotional resistance, one respondent wondered how willing people were to let "fledglings" introduce unfamiliar practices they had learned in school. While one veteran pastor commended younger men for following "the practice and tradition of a congregation when they [accept] a call there, rather than upsetting everything," another voiced concern that he has seen such changes— and the manner in which they were implemented— become "a source of trouble out in the parishes" where new, inexperienced pastors have imposed higher liturgies on their members that were "cold and way too formal" for their taste. "Many of our older pastors and most of our members are not real comfortable" with "all that folderol." WELS members "are still more comfortable with a simple worship format with moderate formality."¹⁸⁴

Seeing pictures of Lutheran clergy "dressed up like Melchizedek" at ordinations and other church functions still "smacks of ecclesiastical arrogance," said one pastor. He will not even wear his robe when greeting worshipers after the service because "I don't want to go whirring around with robe and stole flowing about as I mingle among the people." If the black robe originally served as a symbol "to direct attention away from the person to the pastor," it seemed to another

¹⁸³ Survey responses 2, 4.

¹⁸⁴ Survey responses 26, 1, 30, 17.

respondent that “what is worn today has the opposite effect, and if this is what is intended, then it will find little support from me.”¹⁸⁵

Another observer wonders whether the increased practice of “high liturgics” is accompanied by an air of “false piety” [pietism?]. When he sees pastors “parading down the aisle at the beginning of the service, full garb, constant bowing, the full show,” he questions whether such practices serve as an aid to congregational growth. “These guys ought to get out and make prospect calls.” Another said that the spirit was “a hard thing to put one’s finger on because it wears so many gowns”— pun apparently intended. “I see some wearing the cassock of the monk,” while he had “never owned a white dress.” Another reported hearing a WELS pastor say recently that “the Synod’s doctrinal deterioration started when pastors stopped wearing black robes.”¹⁸⁶

The charge of “style over substance” can be leveled against any kind of worship. “If we have lost our first love” for sharing the gospel with a new generation, “it is easier [to allow an] attraction toward things stylish (whether vestments or worship bands) to take center stage.” Another pastor who served in mission congregations outside the Midwest could not ever recall having “heated discussions regarding the color of gowns or liturgical practices.” He thinks other issues merit greater concern. “The study of freedom in Christ, the urgent need to rescue and equip the lost and straying, the elements of Biblical worship, the adiaphora of worship forms, and the inappropriateness of strident contending for one form or another is desperately needed.” Said another: “Most of our clergy are struggling with funding the budgets of their churches and maintaining their preaching and teaching amid a heavy counseling schedule.” They do not or should not elevate such concerns to a greater level of importance than they deserve.¹⁸⁷

One respondent believes the Wisconsin Synod has lost the aggressive mission emphasis that characterized it in the 1960s and 70s (“every state by ‘78”). “Does declining passion and emphasis on aggressive mission outreach coincide with increasing interest and emphasis on historic, liturgical worship forms and practices? Are there any examples of highly liturgical churches, with an emphasis on worship forms and practices that are also aggressively evangelistic?” To what extent does a more liturgical worship environment serve as “the proper milieu for reaching out to the un-churched?” Or should the

¹⁸⁵ Survey responses 11, 4.

¹⁸⁶ Survey responses 10, 5, 20.

¹⁸⁷ Survey responses 18, 14, 39.

service be “primarily for those who are already there to worship God?” For those with no church background, “is the high church so transcendent or so other worldly that it turns them off?”¹⁸⁸

Now there are new issues on the table. “It seems to me, we’re leaning in the Melancthonian direction,” said one respondent, “with [some of] our men walking up and down the aisles in suits and praise bands in the chancel.” The Lutheran liturgy “may be threatened from the other side.”¹⁸⁹

And for some it is a question of taste and freedom. “Why is a procession holding ‘stuff’ high a good thing, but rhythmically ‘processing’ with a saxophone playing Christ-centered hymns is not?” asked one.¹⁹⁰

At the 2005 Conference on Contemporary Worship in Green Bay, Pastor Paul Kelm discussed the issue of freedom in worship:

Article XV of the Augsburg Confession and Article X of the Formula of Concord testify to Christian freedom in worship. Apologists for liturgical worship may be quick to affirm that worship forms are a matter of adiaphora, neither commanded nor forbidden by God. However, there is typically a large “But” which follows. But, as 1 Corinthians 10 says, “not everything is beneficial or constructive.” In other words, to give up the songs and hymns of liturgical worship is to settle for something at best inferior, at worst spiritually harmful. The argument is that the liturgy insures clear law and gospel in a service, and tried-and-true hymnody teaches doctrine. Without them, our theological heritage is at risk. The big “but” is often accompanied by a caricature of praise and worship music as “love songs for Jesus,” citing the most egregious examples of shallow sentimentalism.¹⁹¹

But worship forms in themselves do not assure orthodoxy, Kelm maintained, and complex musical forms may be increasingly incomprehensible to modern worshippers. Christians “find common ground in opposing traditionalism that turns the Christian faith into an

¹⁸⁸ Survey responses 22, 25.

¹⁸⁹ Survey response 27.

¹⁹⁰ Survey response 14.

¹⁹¹ Paul Kelm, “Christian Freedom in Worship: More Than Just a Throwaway Line,” (keynote address to the WELS Conference on Contemporary Worship, St. Mark Lutheran Church, Green Bay, Wis., July 2005), 1; <http://www.churchandchange.org/home/2384/2693/docs/Christian%20Freedom%20in%20Worship.pdf>; accessed April 27, 2006.

anachronism, museum-quality ritual that has no connection with contemporary life and no use for the creative and musical gifts of this generation's believers." Words can become meaningless and melodies mindless in any worship style, but in his view "uniformity in worship has a greater risk of formalism than does healthy variety."¹⁹²

Our sense of what is proper and reverent for worship may be "more culturally conditioned than biblically established," and it is possible that our worship forms are the result of "the subjective preferences of people whose argument for or against any practice or change in worship boils down to what they like or dislike. . . .

There is good reason to free our worship from the subtle subjectivism of the pastor's taste and experience. While the pastor may have the best understanding of worship theology and history, he doesn't necessarily have the best grasp of how to bring a specific group of people together in worship or how to communicate most clearly with the people of the community. If worship is the "service of the people," its form should express the heart language of those people. Like other church members, pastors have a "default" setting that is what is familiar and comfortable. Like all people, pastors have personalities that respond to change differently. Whether it is the introduction of chant, processionals, and vestments or praise and worship songs accompanied by guitar and drums, the reason should be broader than the subjective opinion of the pastor.¹⁹³

This and Other Shibboleths

In one of the stories of the Judges in the Old Testament, Jephthah and the men of Gilead defeated the Ephraimites and took possession of the fords on the east bank of the Jordan River. Escaping Ephraimites attempting to conceal their identity as they crossed the river were asked to say the word *shibboleth*. Unable to pronounce the *sh* sound, they said *sibboleth* instead. In itself, the word carried no deep meaning; pronounced either way, it means "river." Yet at that time and place, how a man pronounced *shibboleth* determined whether he would live or die.¹⁹⁴ Dialectic differences apparently had developed between the men of Gilead and tribes on the west bank of the river. The Ephraimite pronunciation of the word constituted what was

¹⁹² Kelm, "Christian Freedom in Worship," 4.

¹⁹³ Kelm, "Christian Freedom in Worship," 5–6.

¹⁹⁴ Judges 12:5–6.

commonly called an isogloss, a linguistic phenomenon characteristic of a given area.”¹⁹⁵

Armin Schuetze noted in a 1978 *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* foreword that from this incident has come the term *shibboleth* as “a criterion, test, or watchword of something,” a word or saying distinguishing the adherents of a party or sect.” Prof. Schuetze cited several examples of theological shibboleths from the Reformation era and in the current theological climate: the *manducatio impiorum* [the eating of the body and blood of Christ even by unbelievers], the six-day creation, the historicity of the book of Jonah, and others. “*Shibboleths*,” he wrote, “may have no profound meaning and in themselves may seem unimportant, yet what they reveal may be of great consequence.”¹⁹⁶

For most of the history of the Wisconsin Synod, wearing a black Geneva gown and exhibiting limited enthusiasm for many elements of liturgical worship served as a paradigm and a shibboleth to assure that a man was doctrinally and culturally acceptable among the Synod’s ministerium. In the last two decades, the paradigm has shifted and the shibboleth no longer holds. What many once viewed as a reliable indicator of orthodoxy and trustworthiness no longer carries that meaning. Wearing the black Geneva may have led some pastors to believe they could trust their neighboring clergymen, but not wearing it may have put many more men’s ministries under a cloud of suspicion they never deserved.

And the men and women sitting in our pews probably care much, much more about seeing genuine piety in the life and work of their pastors than about whether it comes in black or white.

¹⁹⁵ John J. Davis, *Conquest and Crisis: Studies in Joshua, Judges, and Ruth* (Winona Lake, Ind.: BMH Books, 1969), 129.

¹⁹⁶ Armin W. Schuetze, “Foreword—1978, Shibboleths,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 75 (January 1978): 3–5.