

The Freedom of the Christian for Culture

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It is somewhat surprising for Timothy Lull to be invited to address a liturgical conference of any sort. I was talking to several of my colleagues at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary this week about what I would be saying, and one of them said, “Ah! Is Lull among the liturgists?” He seemed surprised. These colleagues wondered if you knew, for example, that I describe myself as a recovering evangelical catholic, or if you would know that I have the reputation in my congregation as being “the great complainer” about matters like the length of service, the fact that we sing no hymns written after 1750, that the basis for preaching almost never includes either the Old Testament or the Epistle lesson, and the kind of frightened anxiety with which we do things liturgical in our very liturgical parish.

For all of those complaints we drive fifteen miles to church, past three or four other options to go to a place in which worship is well done and full and rich; and on the high holy days it’s a wonderful thing to be there. We have just begun, as you all know, the great season of the church year. I wish sometimes that on the nineteenth Sunday in ordinary time it wouldn’t have to be High Mass with animal sacrifice. I wish sometimes that we could just do it in a lighter and simpler way. I wish that people who are on the inside—it’s a glorious thing to sing the “Our Father”—didn’t look as if they felt that if we actually *said* the Lord’s Prayer sometimes that the sacrament would be invalid and that Christ would not be present.

Of course, my plan for the time that I have is not to talk about the announced topic, although that will be part of it. I’m always changing my mind in the interval between the time when I agree to do something and when it happens. What I want to talk about is freedom in worship and the renewal of Lutheranism this morning. I think that if you want the freedom of Christians for culture, you’ll see that works pretty well as the subtitle for this presentation. The structure of this address forms a kind of sonata form of law-gospel-law. In the first part I want to sketch out somewhat discouraging remarks, but I hope they’re pathologically insightful. That is, they get around to what the problem is, especially through some remarks about our current situation as Lutherans in North America. And

then, for gospel, I want to talk about some hopeful themes in our heritage—some ways that freedom and worship, which might seem like terms that don't go easily together in the Lutheran tradition, actually complement each other very well and give us a powerful platform not only for renewal within our congregations but also as a public witness that could be most effective in our time. Then, at the end, lest we get too cozy and triumphalistic about all the positive possibilities in our own tradition, I want to share a couple of personal problems inside you and me, inside the kinds of people who are in leadership in the church, that might actually get in the way of what I see as the exciting possibilities that we have to offer.

First Movement of the Sonata: Law

Let me begin with this proposal: if we're going to be catholic Christians, we can't do "our own thing" simply in isolation as a kind of gathered little post-Christendom community; we have to make some kind of public witness. And if we're going to do that, we're going to have to forge some fresh, contemporary vision about what it means to be Lutheran Christians that is relevant to the circumstances of our own time but has deep enough roots in our own heritage and our own tradition, so that we're really able to sustain it for the long haul.

We're called to do that—to make that public witness—in a society where people are religiously hungry, spiritually hungry, but ecclesiological distrustful. So many of our contemporaries have scar tissue from bad experience they've had in all kinds of legalistic churches, Lutheran included. So while there's a very enormous "market"—if we can even use that term—for a grace-centered and gospel-centered form of Christianity that Lutherans ought to be providing in the public square, nevertheless, many of the folks who could be drawn to that are suspicious from their own earlier experience with Christianity about whether that's what we would really be up to. That is, an awful lot of the unchurched in America are the formerly churched, and they have strong enough memories of what it was like that they are not very eager to try it again.

My convictions about this spiritual hunger have developed not from research, although there's plenty of research evidence about this, but most profoundly, from the regular witnessing opportunities that come from the extraordinary amount of time I spend flying on United Airlines every year. It is my second home, and there I am in seat 5C going somewhere, usually to the upper Midwest from California in the middle of the winter of the century. And, of course, these winter meetings always provide

opportunities to test your faith by flying into snow and ice and wondering how all that will go. On those many flights I have great occasions to talk to folks, and there's a certain level of anxiety even these days about flying that makes people very chatty. I virtually never lead with who I am and what I do, but when people ask, I tell them. And nine times out of ten, we're off and running and talking until the plane lands. Great is the hunger of folks to talk about religious issues, particularly, by the way, by men in business, who must be one of the groups in our society that has the least opportunity to do that. If I'm sitting next to a woman, sometimes we have those conversations, but often she's very busy with work that she has brought with her. But it seems that a great many of the men I talk to haven't had a chance for twenty or thirty or forty years to get off their chest what they'd like to say about religion. And I hear exactly what I'm putting before you—a kind of religious hunger and spiritual quest, but at the same time from the majority of people I meet, enormous distrust of religious institutions, including our own.

Now it strikes me, if we look at Lutherans within this cultural situation, that here we can lump together the ELCA and the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod and any other folks that happen to be around today, because for the next part of what I am going to say, we're in this together. Think about where we fit in that public map of Christianity. I would propose the following: that in most of our congregations, there is surprising vitality. Not that the “great complainer” can't find things to complain about, but on the whole the word is preached and the sacraments are administered, God is worshiped, and real community is experienced. But beyond the level of local congregations and local ministries, our public life together is not the sort of thing that would draw anyone into it except an extreme sadist or masochist who'd like to get into the endless warfare. I don't want to say it's as bad as the years after Luther's death, but we're not far from that in some circles and in some conversations. This is generally justified with the notion that truth needs to be defended vigorously and that quarrels can help. Well, they may help the people who are quarreling, but my sense is that the very strife-filled, quarrelsome, angry posture that characterizes so much of our trans-congregational public life is an enormous turn-off to many people who would otherwise be drawn to the kind of Christianity that Lutherans represent.

Now you could say, “Well, that is nothing new,” but I want to argue quite the opposite, that this is something rather different. If we go back ten, even especially twenty, thirty, and forty years ago to the immediate post-war period, American Lutherans were in many ways a pretty happy

and contented group. We have surveys from that period that showed they were probably the least alienated of any denomination in America. Lutherans were proud to be what they were. There are all sorts of ethnic and possible other explanations for that, but within our memory, things have been different. Not only was there a time when there was greater contentment within our common life, but we were in many ways the envy of many other Christians in America, who felt that in the post-war period we had so much going for us because we had not squandered our theological and liturgical heritage but really had something very powerful to offer to American society. Martin Marty has been saying throughout his whole long career that the great Lutheran themes are the unknown and unexplored ones in American society. I think that's still true. But one begins to wonder if we'll ever get around to exploring them beyond our own strife-filled inner circles, unless we can find a different kind of public posture.

If I'm at all on the right track, how can we explain why our public profile is somewhat dismal and depressing? What are the symptoms of this? Well, obviously, one of them that is a painful thing for this institute is the divided picture American Lutherans represent among ourselves. It's very hard to get into any of these conversations on airplanes without having to get into a long explanation of which kind of Lutheran you are. And, very often, depending on how you answer that question, the conversation comes to an abrupt stop, because different folks are either drawn to or put off by one or the other of those answers, or just sort of disgusted with the whole thing.

But it isn't just the tensions over our failure to come together and make a common witness as North American Lutherans that give us a rather sour public picture at this point. We also have so many issues in the lives of each of our church bodies that we have not handled well. Our battles about human sexuality in the ELCA, for example, have generated much heat and much anger and very little light—very little insight—about what strikes me as a complex mystery indeed. That is, what is the gift and burden of human sexuality? I've heard an enormous amount of venting, and I've done some myself. But I wonder if we know any more about that very complex, mysterious thing than we did before the last ten years of battling about it. Ecumenism is another area where we're really going after each other right now in the ELCA. I'll have more to say about that in just a moment.

But a sign of this dismal public posture came clear to me when I was speaking in the Southwest recently about the current proposals for the

ELCA, which I happen to favor. That's not something necessarily to get into fighting about here, and I don't expect everybody to agree with me. (Good heavens, if you're a theologian with any sense that's the last thing. You're sort of bored when that happens.) But I do pay attention to what the nature of the conversation is. And a rather young pastor in the Southwest said to me, "I don't get it! I don't understand why we have to be bothered with any of this ecumenical stuff. I can hardly stand other Lutherans, let alone other Christians!" And I thought, "Yes, yes—there we are. Not a bad partial picture of what's within us."

But if we go beyond the symptoms and try to analyze the deeper questions—What is this about? And where did this come from?—I'd like to suggest two sources of this dismal public life. First of all, it's a pretty good reflection of what our society is like generally. And lo and behold, though we get caught off guard about this in every generation, once again, we're having to learn in the 1990s what we've had to learn to our surprise in every decade, that the world sets the agenda. Back in the 1960s, some activist types were suggesting that we ought to let the world do that. You don't need to let the world do it—it will do it. The world has set the agenda from the very beginning, from Paul's speech in Athens, and the debates within the Jerusalem church, and the Corinthian community, in a far more powerful way than Christians have generally acknowledged. We live in response to very, very powerful cultural forces that we tend to underestimate. And I would say that those cultural forces in our public life in America since 1968 have been essentially strife-filled and negative and resentful, and full of the kind of anger and bitterness that has characterized our politics that, of course, spills over into our church politics as well. I think that is some of what has marginalized mainline Protestant Christianity, for example. We had, if I understand our heritage within that group, a rather complex version of the Christian story, which, if you're a grownup, you would hope would be the case. But in the kind of angry and bitter public life that we've lived, I would say at least since the 1968 presidential election, everything gets reduced to sound bites and frustration and bitterness, and complex answers are deeply distrusted. In the end the effect of thirty years of that strife has been a great skepticism about connectional structures of any sort.

Now in one way, Lutherans can play that game as well as anyone. We're true to our heritage: *semper reformanda* is one of our most important slogans. The church is always in need of reform, and if the church, then surely society as well. I would argue, for example, that we are much more a mirror of that larger society than we like to think. And

in some ways, if things are going to change and improve for us, it will probably need not be just our own doing but reflect opportunities that will come with some sort of societal change of direction. You may think things are moving in a more positive direction or you may not—I'm not sure. I see mixed kinds of evidence. I think people are certainly weary of the squabbling, but it's so addictive. It really feels so good to tell each other off. And we love the short term high that comes with that but aren't very attentive to the long-term consequences.

A good example of what I see is the way in which so many of our independent Lutheran publications that have their own very, very important vocation to play, become basically adversarial pieces whose message again and again and again is "Don't trust what people are trying to do to you." I invite you to look not just at the one you dislike, but the one you're drawn to, and I think you'll see a very similar and troubling kind of pattern. And that doesn't mean we don't need challenges and independent thinking, but we need them in a way that's more successfully countercultural. Sometimes, in what looks on the surface to be countercultural, there is just a mirror of what I hear on angry talk radio on the West Coast. And what comes through as positive suggestions for how we can sustain a vision is pretty minimal.

This brings me to the even more crucial thing I want to discuss in this initial section, namely, that I think we're partly in trouble as North American Lutherans because we're out of gas with the various visions that have sustained our renewal of the church in the period since the Second World War. Now some would say, "Why in the world do we need a vision? That's the great thing about being Lutherans, we have the gospel—that's enough." Well, yes and no. It seems to me the gospel is so vague a thing, unless we're talking more about what we mean, that it probably doesn't have the concrete energizing power to give us the sort of vision that could tie us together not just to do interesting local stuff, but to let us feel that we are part of a movement together that is trying to make an impact for faith and hope and love on this particular society.

Now we've had some powerful visions that have sustained us in these various church bodies in the last generation or two. Both of them have been, interestingly enough, places that Lutherans have repented of their past ways and changed direction. One was ecumenism, and the other was the search for social justice. If you know the history of North American Lutheranism, you will know that we were late to come to each of these issues. We were cautious for what I consider to be good reasons, cautious about the kind of homogenizing ecumenism that went on in the nineteenth

century. We held back, and I think it's a good thing we did, in retrospect. We were cautious about social justice because of a particular immigrant experience that lasted longer for us and because of a particular kind of understanding of two-kingdom theology that made us very nervous about the kind of transformationist-crusader-Protestant-Christianity that was so much the dominant feature in American life up until the postwar period.

So in a wonderfully energizing way, in the years after 1945, and particularly in the years after 1960, a whole generation of church leaders and theologians and parish pastors and folks in the pew brought North American Lutheranism kicking and screaming, but with an enormous vigor, into these two great twentieth-century movements. Some of the finest documents that have been produced in twentieth-century ecumenism came from the Lutheran entry into those dialogues because of the theological seriousness that we brought to them. We not only learned to know others more charitably and accurately, we learned more about our own tradition. I could argue that Lutherans in the last generation have been more deeply confessional than has been the case for many, many generations. Confessionalism has ebbed and flowed in our five hundred years of Lutheranism, but it was particularly those ecumenical talks that got some dusty volumes off our shelves and got us to do some remedial work about who we were so we could talk to Episcopalians or Presbyterians or Roman Catholics or whoever it might be.

Lutherans have been powerful leaders in ecumenism and in the area of social justice, where I think we looked with real regret and real sorrow at the quietest tradition in much of Lutheranism and at the terrible example of the kind of complicity of so much of German and even European Christianity with Hitler, the Third Reich, and what was done there. You know those debates go on up to our own time, and I'm not sure we've yet seen the worst of it. I'm reading Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* right now—it's a very, very sobering book. Do you know about this debate? Goldhagen argues that it wasn't just a few people. It's a challenge to your faith to look at this and try to enter into the thesis that he's exploring.

Well, spurred by some wonderful work of theological reconstruction in the years after 1945 and particularly after 1960, the North American Lutherans came with power into the area of making social witness. And if we came to it late, we not only said, we *did*, and continue to do some very extraordinary things—so much so that it's sometimes said that our social service organizations and our relief organizations are as credible as

those of any Christian group in North America. Thanks be to God, if that's true, even here and there, even from time to time.

But now I think in more recent years, perhaps since 1980, but certainly in the 1990s, the kind of energizing consensus that many Lutherans shared is really crumbling in many ways. We're losing the energizing consensus we once had around the importance of ecumenism, even if there were differences on how far to go or who the favored partners were. We're losing that energizing sense that we have in our theology as not only a basis but as a necessity for an effective social witness. At the very least, they are being reconstructed, so that some of the very folks who were theological leaders, pressing us toward ecumenical commitment and social justice in my branch of the Lutheran church, for example, are now among the deepest critics, playing in old age and retirement a kind of spoiler role. And while I am sure that they do it with integrity and from commitment, it seems to me to be a sad ending to what had been such a happy story of Lutherans, bearing fruit in a public way that was really quite wonderful and quite astonishing. It may be that we'll re-gather, that we'll regroup around each of these things. But I sense that perhaps an era is coming to an end. Certainly in the ELCA, there were extravagant and probably naïve hopes for this being a justice church that very, very quickly crumbled as people tried to make some of those commitments concrete. It was a bad miscalculation of what the traffic was willing to bear.

I hear a lot of talk these days that the new focus for vision, the new rallying cry, is a church in mission, and I pray that the Holy Spirit may make it so. It's certainly what's needed, particularly mission in the kind of religiously starved society that I've been talking about, and mission in the kind of multicultural society that's emerging all throughout North America. And yet, I really wonder if Lutherans are going to be able to do that. An early, thoughtful, North American Lutheran pastor in Pennsylvania, Henry Melchoir Muhlenberg, had some interesting reflections. They weren't doing anything with the Native Americans in Pennsylvania. He has in his journals very interesting reflections on what it would have taken to do successful cross-cultural ministry in the eighteenth century. One could go back and read these and be a little less arrogant toward those who have gone before. It's pretty insightful stuff.

But we know from the history of missions that it takes enormous flexibility and great focus on what those outside the church are like and what they're looking for to do outreach successfully. I don't sense that is widespread among Lutherans at all. You know, the joke, don't you? How many Lutherans does it take to change a light bulb? Change?? So I'm

torn on this one. I'm around stirring the pie, or stirring the soup or whatever it is we're stirring. I'm around hoping that we'll see the mission challenge that is before us, but I'm not at all sure that's the case. That's pretty hard work. Here's the kind of mission that I see Lutherans interested in at the local congregational level: we hope that a few rather affluent and well-presented folks who will not be very different from us will come in and like the way we do things so much that they will embrace it enthusiastically and give a lot of money. I think that's the kind of mission we're interested in. It's a very limited sector that is available.

Second Movement of the Sonata: Gospel

Would there be something else? Would there be another vision, another transcendent cause that might rally us beyond simply doing our ministry faithfully at the local level and allow us to make some public impact together? Of course, the question that emerges in a gathering like this is, Could worship be the area? Now, at first glance this seems unlikely, doesn't it? Has it not been proclaimed by those "in the know," the writers and editors of the various independent and not-so-independent journals, that this is a time of worship wars and that we are tearing ourselves apart with all of this? I don't know—I think some of that is the kind of natural fallout that you get twenty years after some new worship books come out. At that point you enter into a new era of experimentation, and I think some of the reporting of that as "wars" has more to do with the search for something journalistically stimulating than really providing an accurate map of what's there.

Worship has often been a real strength of our tradition, and I'm quite intrigued that H. George Anderson, the presiding bishop of the ELCA, seems to be ready to present this summer the renewal of worship as the first of his six initiatives for action for the next five years. Part of what he heard on his visits around the country last year was an enormous hunger for transcendence, for a sense of mystery. It really is just not coming through. I would add that I think that it's a hunger for a transcendence you can trust. There's lots of God talk around, but part of that scar tissue I was referring to before is a result of people having so often been manipulated and victimized in the name of God. The question is, how can we worship that God who is beyond simply our projections and our desires and encounter the One who is truly other? How can we truly worship that God in a way that both the grace and the mystery of who that God is comes through to us?

I think this is as good a possibility as any that we might find as we struggle to know how to worship God in our local communities. The worship question will lead into important conversations with one another that could be the source of real renewal in some of our tired congregations and a kind of fresh public profile for Lutherans to have. What would it mean for worship to become that kind of visionary, uniting thing? What kind of worship could we do that would be a broad tool for renewal and could win acceptance within our increasingly diverse local congregations? Well, maybe those are the wrong questions. Maybe our own tendency is to go too quickly to the question of what rite would be right, and instead, we ought to be talking more generically about what worship *is*. What is it that we have from our particular heritage that shapes and informs Christian worship in a way that would let us farther down the line or at another part of the conversation be in the business of devising rites?

I hope you've read Luther's interesting liturgical writings recently, and that you will see some of the freedom and spontaneity and astonishing openness that is suggested there. In a way Luther had the advantage, if I make speak charitably, of not having Augsburg Fortress to deal with. And there was the disadvantage, too, but the model was not that it would all be decided in Wittenberg, and that's what everybody would do. Luther was just shrewd enough politically to know that the Nürnbergers weren't about to do it exactly the way it was done in Wittenberg. So what Luther does in these writings is to spell out broad principles that I continue to find extremely stimulating, even some of the ones that I disagree with. And one doesn't just read a checklist where you just say "yes, amen" to everything. Even the ones I disagree with I find very helpful as I work through why it is that I think something different.

If we look not at what Luther did but at how Luther thought and how Luther proceeded in the renewal of worship in those years after 1522 when he came back to that crisis in the Wittenberg congregation, there at the heart of that witness about worship we find an interesting priority, even centrality, of the concept of freedom in Luther's discussion of liturgical matters. And that's what I'd like to turn to next and address for a few minutes: some of the diverse ways in which thinking with Luther about the task of liturgical renewal could help us discover dimensions of Christian freedom. I think, by the way, Christian freedom and the theology of the cross truly are two of the remarkable and neglected concepts within our own tradition. They are remarkable and neglected because they are really scary when you get into them. The truth is we are all very prone to say, "Why did you lead us out into the wilderness to die?" That's our response

the minute we really have to think about what we would do, rather than have orders that we can obey when we like them and rebel against when we don't. I think that's descriptive of the kinds of churches or denominations that we are at this point, and shows that kind of passive-aggressive relationship to those in any kind of leadership.

But I want to talk about Luther as a renewer, as a kind of practical liturgical theologian, and notice some of the things I think would be germane to this process of renewal in our own time. The first would be a freedom for the means of grace. Since some of you are anxious note takers, let's get the list out and go back and talk about them. Five aspects of freedom in worship:

- Freedom for the means of grace
- Freedom for the world (for culture, if you like)
- Freedom for expansive ministry
- Freedom in form and style
- Freedom from human notions of success

Let me say just a bit about each one of those. Of course, the central concept of freedom for Luther has to be explored in Pauline and Johannine terms, in its christological sense, doesn't it? Who is the one, who is the free lord of all, subject to none, and yet the one who is, at the same time, servant of all, subject to all? It's Jesus Christ, who, though he was in the form of God found equality with God not a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself. Christ is the model of Christian freedom, and it's the way in which Christ redoes our concept of God from what we think, or from what Aristotle would think, or what somebody told us God would probably be like—all those projections—that lets us imagine the world and ourselves and the church in a very different way.

The first of those freedoms is a kind of interesting thing. It's not a freedom from something but a freedom for something. It's a freedom for word and sacrament, if you will. A freedom to make that the most central thing in the life of the church and go with it and take the consequences. Here, at least at this point, I can say a fervent "Amen" to the work of Stanley Hauerwas. Making word and sacrament central is the first task of the church, the first social task of the church, the first thing for public witness to be the church. And one of the great things in our Lutheran heritage is that we know what that's about. There are six million things we *might* do as we look around us at religious organizations, but one thing is needful. It's that sense of the gospel in its richest sense. You know that

most important passage of Luther's from the Smalcald Articles: that God gives us the gospel in more than one way, because God knows we need reinforcement. And so we have these diverse means of grace in which the gospel comes to us in a mutually reinforcing way. The word—typically the preached word—baptism, confession and absolution, the supper, and the mutual conversation and consolation of the saints, of the brothers and sisters. It's a rich package that no generation can ever unpack completely. It doesn't seem like we can ever get focused on more than about three of those five things, and we're always losing something. For example, small group ministry has to be invented outside of us even though it's such a deep part, not only of our pietists here, but of a communal insight that goes back to Luther's 1519 writings on the sacraments. It's so rich we can never quite take it up.

It's a wonderful freedom, that we can make liturgical matters our number one priority and not what we do with the time that's left over after all of the possible human needs that can be met have been met. So isn't it surprising that people put pressures on those of us who are pastors to make everything else under the sun priorities, and isn't it surprising that a lot of us who work in ministries of worship and music feel marginalized? People look around them anxiously at what other organizations do and say, "Why can't we be like the other nations?" as Israel in one of its not-very-good moments said to God. God answered their prayers, and you know how that worked, at least in one of the two versions of where the monarchy came from. When we're faithful to our tradition at this point, we have a certain freedom not to have to feel we can answer every question about how all the problems of the world are going to be solved, because God doesn't work just through the church. God has more going than just our feeble ministries, but what God can do only through the church is bring that message of grace and gospel and redemption, that message which, I think, in the current religious climate in America, is a very marginal one. It's not superfluous in this society to have Lutheran churches if they're doing their task, if they are really faithful to that central vision.

But the nice thing is, when it gets rolling, when we roll up our sleeves and go to work, as all of you here do on a regular basis, to ask we how shall worship God, it doesn't end there. In our tradition, it doesn't get stuck in a way that we've got to keep people in the church or in the monastery all the time. There's that second wonderful Reformation freedom—for the world—that our worship turns us inside out in such a way that we have not only peace with God, but peace with our neighbor, and that we're sent freshly forth into the world for new ventures and new

adventures, to live out those vocations that we have in all the exciting places that God sends us.

Yesterday was the fifty-second anniversary of the death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Has he not been superbly important to us, among other things, as a witness to that sense in the twentieth century that, though Christianity is a serious matter, it's also a joyful matter? And the point of life together ought to be not simply to get us stuck there, but to send us out in a fresh and renewed way to make this public witness in the world. That means, of course, that we have a freedom for the world, which God loves so much, and a freedom to use what is within the world that is positive and good. It's as if we actually noticed for a change that remarkable verse in the book of Revelation that the leaders of the nations bring the gifts of the nations into the holy city. As wonderful as that city is, something comes in, even there: something from the world, something from culture. Luther was so much better than most Lutherans have been at understanding creation and fall as simultaneous realities rather than a sequence in which the fall cancels all the positive possibilities of what's in nature and what's in culture. That's why Luther could feel so firmly and concretely that the finite is able to bear the infinite.

That's the freedom for culture, isn't it? That's the freedom for the world—that sense that bread and wine and water are adequate; that language, though ambiguous, is finally adequate; that the human community, though ambiguous, is finally adequate; that a human body, Jesus of Nazareth, is an adequate bearer of the fullness of the grace and the revelation of God. It means we have in every culture that we enter into, and every culture that we encounter, positive gifts that don't have to be leveled and flattened before they can be used, but things that are God's good gifts, waiting to connect with the gospel in such a way.

But the praise of God becomes ever more rich and ever more complex. This is a deep, deep part of our own heritage. I think our whole Lutheran love of music, which is nothing to take for granted but certainly so characteristically wonderful, comes at just this point. I had occasion last summer to meet Paul McCreesh, who conducts the Gabrieli Consort—some of you know their very, very interesting recordings—and to talk with him about Praetorius' Lutheran Mass for Christmas, which is one of my favorite compact discs. He said he was scared to death when he found out I was a Lutheran theologian, but then we got over that and got to talking about things. He thought I'd come to beat up on him, which is an interesting kind of picture of the public witness of Lutherans, isn't it—at least one group of Lutherans. We got into a great conversation, and

he said, “I wanted to do that CD to get people in England past the crazy notion that Lutheran worship is dour and joyless.” And if you know that glorious recording of a Lutheran Christmas service from northern Germany in the 1620s in which every bell is rung, and the town band is in on it, you know it’s just that glorious use of what was there in the culture. And it’s an empowering thing for us to try all sorts of experiments now, some of which will, no doubt, fail. But we put our controlling anxieties to rest in the grace of God and go out to see what is possible to do in new and fresh partnerships with the world.

I’ve already been anticipating in what I’ve said here the third freedom—for expansive ministry—that comes to us in Lutheranism; that is, the notion that God has something more in mind than gathering a little group of clergy and quasi-clergy folks through whom God will be praised and pleased. I suppose we have never in our five-hundred-year history been able to do much with the priesthood of all the believers. It’s one of our really underdeveloped concepts. And yet, it’s there ticking away in every generation to remind us that, if we get stuck with too small an in-group, something has badly misfired. I think it’s one of our most important missional concepts right now. I’m interested in a vague way in your church membership numbers and whether you’re growing and those sorts of things, and where there’s the possibility for growth I sure hope it’s happening. But I hope we’re not burying our talents and treasures in the ground because we’re so frightened. I know that in many contexts and many situations people serve faithfully where there aren’t going to be spectacular things to report. But what is possible as a missional goal everywhere Christians gather is to hope for expanding that core of people who have connected with the faith in such a powerful way that they’re able to make a public witness in the world. And I think that comes from their experience of worship. Is it essentially a passive thing that calms their anxieties for a brief time? Or is it, in the end, such a deeply transformative event that people have something to take with them? Our worship ought not to be a performance they’ve experienced, but an empowerment that leads an increasing group of people, each time they gather, to go forth into the world feeling that they’re really able to give a public account of the faith that is within them.

A fourth freedom I can mention fairly quickly is a freedom for diversity in form and in style. There I simply refer you to comments I’ve already made about Luther. He certainly had enormous respect for basic principles—the centrality of the word, the participation of the people, respect for tradition, including the basic mass structure that is there, and

above all the criterion of what serves the gospel best. But he is not laying out eternal rites where then to be Lutheran is to buy into the way Luther did it. I think that so much of what makes us fearful and quarrelsome and anxious comes from a sense in which the gospel hasn't fully taken root yet in our own lives, and we're looking over our shoulders so much, worrying about what someone else is doing, and whether they're getting away with something. It's usually a sign that the gospel message isn't quite there. You know that wonderful story at the very end of John 21 after "Feed my lambs," and "Feed my sheep." Peter is so upset about the beloved disciple who's going to get more than Peter is. And Jesus turns to him and says sharply, "What is that to you? Follow me." The number of people who lose sleep at night over what somebody else is doing suggests to me that it comes from a kind of anxious, controlling thing that says in the end—but what surely can't be the case—that we know best for all circumstances. We won't do those glorious adventures, which sometimes will be misadventures and mistakes, and have an expanding ministry and new encounters with the culture if there's always some anxious church person you've got to report back to and get the permission of before you can do anything. I think we have in our tradition far more than we know a freedom for diversity in form and style, particularly when we look back to Luther himself, whether that's diversity within a congregation or some neighboring congregations that are able to meet needs in a somewhat different way, or the diversity that is there from region to region. People come to California sometimes, and they're thrown because it's not the way it is in Minnesota. I wish it were more different, frankly, than the way it is in Minnesota. We've just got a different past. And too often, in the West, we've built museums of Midwestern Christianity, museums of Midwestern Lutheranism, and it's one of the reasons the church is supremely uninteresting to a younger generation.

But most important of all the freedoms, it seems to me, and the one that really calms our anxieties, is the freedom that comes under the theology of the cross, when we begin to laugh at our own notions that we could possibly measure our success. Our society is so convinced that you can count it up, that you really can rate how folks are doing. And though we know better than that from a faith perspective, we live so much in that world from day to day that it infects us, too. Many who are simply pandering to others are going around as if they were on the cutting edge of the kingdom of God, when you'd be hard pressed not to be doing a dramatically successful thing in a community where so many Lutherans are moving in. And many who are doing faithful ministry feel awful about

themselves, because they've bought the world's standards for what really counts, because they haven't really taken this thing that's so powerful in our own heritage. You know this, folks. The theology of the cross doesn't have to do with gloom and doom about atonement. It has to do with this confidence that if God was in Christ, if the cross is the central thing, then all Earth's bets about what the standards are, by which things are being evaluated, are just turned upside down. And we have to wait to be surprised by God, including to be surprised by what God has to say about our own faltering efforts and our own struggles in the places where we do our own ministry.

So you see, with these freedoms, I think we're not badly positioned to go on with exactly the kind of thing you were doing and that other conferences are doing, that our various offices are working on within our denominational structures. I'm cautiously hopeful that the renewal of worship might be one of the ways in which, in the years to come, the public posture of Lutheranism regains some of its positive context. I hope people would say, "You know, when you go to a Lutheran church, you don't know exactly what you're going to get, but you know it's going to be high quality. You know the Word will be preached with some real preparation, and that the sacraments will be administered, there will be liturgy—it may be very formal or very informal—but there will be a structure that is deep and powerful, that the Church will be manifest." I hope all of those things that are such a positive incarnation of Christianity in this culture will be available.

Third Movement of the Sonata: Law

But there two very dialectically related ways in which this might not work, and they have to do with the fact that you and I turn out to be the bearers of this particular vision. And I want to include you, because these are problems for me, and I'm going to bet these are going to be similar problems for some of you. For some it will be more the first, and for others it will be more the second. But this is the tricky road on the path of renewing worship in faithfulness and freedom. One danger I've already teased about a little bit, and that is the enormous need for control that many of us who work in this field have, many of us who are liturgical leaders. Now let me confess sins right at the beginning—and I mean this. I went to seminary in part because I wanted to choose the hymns. I was so very unhappy with "Holy, Holy, Holy" every Sunday morning in Fremont, Ohio, and I was determined we could do it differently. (It's

actually now a pleasure every once in a while to sing that. I went through years when I'd so overdosed, but I've come again to see what a great hymn of the church catholic it is.) I don't think I'm pointing fingers at you that I don't want to point at myself, but the truth is that a lot of us are interested in the ministry for mixed motives. That wouldn't be anything new in church history, but we could really falter in our desire to take this thing public, to take it in the missional direction, if the bottom line is what we want and not what God wants. You know the joke about the difference between a liturgist and a terrorist. It should all give us pause. You can negotiate with a terrorist. What I'm asking, if it fits, is that each of us practice a hermeneutical suspicion on ourselves. Say, "Is the particular stance I'm taking on this issue one that comes from the apostolic commission that I have, or is it one that comes from a little, anxious, wounded person inside me that hasn't quite yet seen how broad and deep and wide is the mercy of God and the forms in which God can be praised and worshiped?" That's one kind of problem, but then there's one on the other side, too, isn't there? It's what I call the danger of pandering.

A lot of us who are in leadership in the church—and here it's broader than just the folks who are interested in liturgy—are the kinds of folks who have always been good at making people happy. James E. Dittes, in a study of male clergy two generations ago, talked about the pattern of the little adult, the person who as a child is already so good at smoothing things over and making everybody feel good. What does it mean to do that—to smooth things over—in a society that is as filled with anger and bitterness and disappointment and division as ours is? Often it means the death of any risk-taking and any experimentation, because the bottom line strategy to keep folks happy seems to be "Don't do anything differently." And for some of us the danger is not that we are so set in our minds we won't consider anything else, but the danger is that we are so attentive to what certain other people think that when we hear those critical voices or when we hear our old professors or when we hear our bishops or the most anxious of our own congregations, then we lack what Luther had in spades. We lack his courage to study the situation and go ahead and make the changes in an informed way that brought along as many people as possible but that didn't assume you could be all things to all people or make everybody happy all the time.

I remember Diane, who, with her husband, was one the three people who voted "no" to call me when I was serving a parish in suburban Boston in the 1970s. All the people who voted "no" were quite open about it, but the people who voted "yes" were very quiet about it. (The third was the

parish secretary, by the way, and that's a story that could keep us here all morning if I got started on that.) But Diane and her husband were very concerned whether I was going to be what they had in mind, and it turned out they were Baptists who had been kind of corralled into the Lutheran church by my very assertive predecessor. They really weren't very happy there. The crisis came in late November about eight months after my arrival in 1972, when Diane backed me into a corner and said, "I suppose we're going to have that thing, Advent, this year?" And I said, "Yeah, I guess. I mean, it's what Lutherans do." And she said, "You know, I can't stand it. Every Sunday is the Lord's day." I said, "Yes, I know you think that; we've had this conversation before." She said, "I don't want it." And she went on to say, "They love you so much you wouldn't have to do it." And I said, "I hope not. I really hope not." I hope that, if I had done something like that, there would have been a great hue and cry. I mean, yes, it's true, it's not in the end that we'll stand before our Maker and answer questions about how we kept Advent. But within the traditions of the churches that have emerged, this congregation was not a place where everybody could finally be happy. It was nice to have a really clear issue early on, so that I had some practice on this when some of the more ambiguous demands came up a little later.

That's the path I think we are called to walk at this point. I think we are called to try to keep our own authoritarianism in check, our own control needs in check, so that we can really enter into some of the exciting possibilities that are before us. At the same time, we are called to try not to feel we must personally take upon ourselves the sins and pains and anger of the world, and be able in what we do to the praise of God to make all the broken humans we deal with happy. I'm cheering for you, and I hope you're praying for me as we work to avoid these pitfalls. I thought I'd end with a benediction from Luther in a treatise written to the Livonians in 1525:

Receive this, my sincere exhortation kindly, dear friends, and do your part to follow it as well as you can. This will prove needful and good for you, and be to the honor and praise of God, who called you to his light. And may our Lord, Jesus Christ, who has done his work in you, increase the same with grace, and fulfill it to the day of his glorious coming, so that you, together with us, may go meet him with joy and remain with him forever. Amen. Pray for us. At Wittenberg on the Saturday after Trinity, 1525 (*A Christian Exhortation to the Livonians Concerning Public Worship and Concord*, LW 53:50).