

## Taize: Good for Confessional Lutheran Worship?

By Paul S. Meitner

---

*Rev. Meitner is currently the pastor of Mount Olive Lutheran Church in Iron Mountain, Michigan. He is also a 2002 graduate of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.*

---

For the last 20 years, there has been a growing movement in portions of the Wisconsin Synod toward more liturgical forms worship. The days of black Geneva gowns, Luther preaching robes, and pages 5 and 15 of the Lutheran Hymnal have been replaced with cassocks and surplices, albs, chanted psalms, and reverent ritual.

From the liturgical flavor of the tri-annual Conference on Music, Worship, and the Arts to the occasional rites in *Christian Worship: Occasional Services*, the WELS liturgical renewal is everywhere. Even in a small Upper Michigan parish like Mt. Olive, it is not uncommon to find rituals like *Farewell to Alleluia* and the use of a Christ candle.

As a whole, the movement has produced much good in the WELS. Unlike the Liturgical Movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which abandoned the confessional basis, this liturgical movement is grounded in its confession. Our birthright of confessional orthodoxy has not been sold for a bowl of liturgical pottage. The key for this liturgical renewal is a clear proclamation of Christ crucified flowing from a means of grace theology.

At the forefront of this movement, however, there seems to be a great deal of support and encouragement for a form of liturgical worship known as Taize. Proponents of this liturgical style have cited the popularity of this form of worship on college campuses and with young people. It has been used at WELS youth rallies, worship conventions, and has been the center of discussion for more than one issue of *Worship the Lord*.

How widespread and popular Taize will become in WELS circles remains to be seen.

What is surprising, however, is how zealously it has been promoted. Taize, in its history and theology, is rooted in the liturgical and ecumenical movements of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since both these movements have wreaked havoc among confessional Lutherans, it is surprising how greatly Taize, a child of these movements, has been championed.

This begs the question: Is this form of worship suitable for confessional Lutheran worship? Does its form work against our theology? And finally, can Taize be sanitized and utilized for confessional Lutheran worship?

### A Brief History of Taize

The history of Taize begins in France with the Swiss Lutheran, Roger Schultz, and Max Thurian, a Reformed pastor. Originally intended to help Jewish refugees fleeing from the Holocaust of Nazi Germany, the Taize community gradually turned into an ecumenical place of prayer and religious life, cutting across doctrinal and denominational lines.<sup>i</sup>

To this end, the Taize community, influenced by the liturgical movement and the existentialism of post-war Europe, developed their own unique form of worship. The best words to describe Taize worship are “disciplined freedom.”<sup>ii</sup> The idea is based on repetitive simplicity: simple music, simple texts played over and over. The repetition, with no firm beginning and no firm end, allows the individual worshiper to at one time be an integral part of the community while at the same time being individually connected to God.

The worship is meant to avoid doctrinal differences. Taize, through its liturgical shape, seeks to establish an ecumenical form of worship that emphasizes the common goals of the Christian community over questions of dogma.<sup>iii</sup> Under the careful guidance of Brother Roger, the small French community has impacted the worship life and ideals of Catholic, Lutheran, and Protestant alike.

Taize's approach to worship found official recognition in Catholicism with the New Mass of 1969 and the Lima Liturgy of 1982.<sup>iv</sup> It has also found a home in most Protestant denominations, specifically in campus ministries. It is also noted that this writer, while visiting Central Michigan University in 2005, saw Taize services advertised in three campus ministry houses: Roman Catholic, United Methodist, and Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

### The Theology of Taize

As already alluded, Taize's theology is unionistic. It is also universalistic. The goal of the worship is for the worshiper to feel the transcendence of God as we work toward the common goals. With such a program, Taize assimilates that which all denominations can agree upon. In other words, distinctive denominational confessions are cast by the wayside.

There will be nothing in the liturgy that distinctly announces, for instance, the vicarious atonement of Christ, the Real Presence in the Lord's Supper, original and actual sin, the nature of Christ, the Trinity, and so on. What is left is something that no denomination can say is against its confession and yet lacks anything that would promote the distinctness of its confession.

Take for instance the doctrine of Holy Scripture. A clear statement that the Word of God is the Bible, the sole rule and norm for our Christian life, will not be found in the Taize community, because such issues are irrelevant to it. What you believe about the

nature of Scripture (a question of denominational doctrine, in their view) is not as important.

Rather, Scripture, whatever your view, is the common property of all. It should be used to unite in Christian harmony and not divide by doctrinal loyalty. This accounts for the emphasis on *simple* texts. Simple texts, texts that inspire and unite, repeated over and over again bring us into communion with God and unity with each other.

To complete this goal, the simple texts of Scripture are united to Taize's special style of music. They allow one to get into the rite at his or her own pace and to contemplate the reality of God. The goal is unity, and it should not surprise any student of history that music plays a central role in achieving this. Taize's music, in fact, has been the chief export of the community's theology, finding its way into numerous hymnals and worship supplements. It also continues to be a top seller of GIA Publications, with an entire section of their music catalog devoted to the music of Taize.

### A Confessional Problem

In a 1959 essay entitled *Liturgy and Confession*, Herman Sasse made the following comment regarding the consequences of a liturgy that empties itself of its dogmatic content:

*Where the movement [High Church Movement, Liturgical Movement] was in danger of departing from the church's doctrine, the authorities reminded it that the old saying "lex orandi, lex credendi" has validity only if it has validity in reverse, "lex credendi, lex orandi." The liturgy defines doctrine only if doctrine defines the liturgy.<sup>v</sup>*

WELS Lutherans know what it is to be Lutheran. Our stress on Christian education, whether at the "in-parish" Bible studies and traditional worship, parochial grade schools, high schools, and colleges, has had the effect that we know who we are, what we believe, and why we believe it.

The problem with Taize, in both its historical roots and theological convictions, is that it seeks to break down confessional convictions. Taize sees doctrine as a straitjacket that restrains the believer from joining with his brother in common worship and common work.<sup>vi</sup> It instead invites the worshiper to contemplate inwardly with his brother so they can find God together.

This is the well-worn path of mysticism. Mystic, contemplative worship takes the eyes off of God's proclamation and puts it on one's own feelings and thoughts. Whenever that happens, there is going to be a loss of focus on the fact that Christ was crucified, the proclamation of the Word of God, and the Sacraments.

Where mysticism is promoted, confessional consciousness wanes. No longer are the means of grace, or the means by which God has promised to communicate himself to us, center stage. Instead, we attempt to find the Lord through personal contemplation. With this as the guiding principle of liturgical shape, then the pattern of worship will be to induce a contemplative mood.

This leads us back to the description of Taize worship as "disciplined freedom." Taize, through its use of simple texts, simple music, and simple repetition, is designed to break free from the confines of denominational dogma to a fuller, more resplendent, and meaningful knowledge of God. The only problem then is that God is hidden. We only find him where and when he reveals himself to us, and this is only done through the means of grace.

There is a further confessional problem with Taize. This is that it is being used across confessional lines. As noted above, Taize has been embraced by Catholic, Lutheran, and Protestant alike. This common form of worship, if adopted, will inevitably lead the parishioner to the conclusion: If we worship the same, how different can we be? Then worship will be working directly against our distinct confession. Common worship has

been a historical path to merger and loss of doctrine.

### Taize for the WELS?

There are two principles that Lutherans have historically used to judge matters of liturgical usage. The first is the abuse does not disallow the use (*abusus non tollit usus*). The second is there is no adiaphora in the cause of confession (*non adiaphora in casu confessionem*). How does Taize fare with these two principles?

Does the abuse of this form of liturgy, to ecumenical and mystic ends, mean it cannot be used? The reply would have to be "no." Historically, Lutherans have had the evangelical sense to keep that which was good and useful in worship, deleting only those rites and rituals that obscured the Gospel. The historic liturgy, singing, and hymnody were very useful to this end once they were cleansed of the abuses and false theology.

Can Taize be used also? If it were used on a limited basis and within the confines of Lutheran principles of worship it would be acceptable. For instance, a simple setting of a psalm in the style of Taize for a children's or small parish choir would be acceptable. At the same time, some of the Taize rites might also be used with the following considerations: lose the unending repetition, and give the texts doctrinal distinctions.

Why not do a service completely in the style of Taize? Again, even if the most Lutheran of us presides, even if the most Lutheran of sermons is preached and most Lutheran of hymns is sung, we cannot forget that imbedded in the style and music is a definite worship ideal that works against our theology and confuses the worshiper.

Take for instance the following example. In the program notes for the 2005 Conference on Music, Worship, and the Arts, one will find this brief explanation for an evening service in the style of Taize:

*The music of Taize, though simple and repetitive, has the ambiance of transcendence. These factors—Bible texts and simple music—seem to be the appeal of Taize, for they allow the worshipper an undistracted opportunity to contemplate and meditate on the realities of God’s revealed love.<sup>vii</sup>*

This language is uncomfortably confusing for the Lutheran worshiper. First of all, as long as a sinful nature cleaves to the Christian and Satan is prowling around, there is no such a thing as an “undistracted opportunity to contemplate on the realities of God’s revealed love.” How many pastors can say the Lord’s Prayer in the silence of their office and not be distracted? Lutherans believe, teach, and confess that the “ambiance of transcendence” is solely the work of the Holy Spirit “*where and when it pleases him*” through the means he has left us (Augsburg Confession V).<sup>viii</sup>

Or consider these phrases from the November 2005 edition of *Worship the Lord* newsletter. While the author makes a number of very good suggestions, there are a number of phrases that are troubling: “*Worship is best when worshippers are unified by ritual actions,*” and later, “*...good ritual reflects the nature of God as both immanent and transcendent.*”<sup>ix</sup> Again, this seems to cloud the Lutheran view of worship. Lutheran worship is best neither when we are all united by ritual action (a Taize fundamental), or when it leads us to reflect the immanent and transcendent nature of God (another Taize fundamental).

Rather Lutheran worship is best when the Word of God is proclaimed in truth and purity. For a Lutheran, good worship is not defined by the ambiance of the externals or the unified action of the congregation in ritual. These are only important inasmuch as the ritual proclaims the Gospel clearly, and the congregation recognizes the proclamation.<sup>x</sup> The proclamation of Word and sacrament around the hospitable bed of a shut-in is just as glorious as full Easter festival worship, in the eyes of a Lutheran.

Can the fundamental doctrines of Lutheranism come through in Taize style?

While the Taize service is moving, emotional, and liturgical, the theology behind Taize denies means of grace theology. One must legitimately ask, “Can we use forms created with bad theology and not expect bad theology?” False teaching can easily infiltrate our doctrine through uncritical acceptance of all things liturgical.

That leaves the second principle: There are no adiaphora in the cause of confession. With such widespread usage of Taize among Catholic, liberal Lutheran, and Protestant, is this a time to adopt such a form of worship? The Adiaphoristic controversy following the death of Luther is a case in point. To Melancthon, there was no great leap to adopt Roman liturgy and ritual since these were “adiaphora.” But Flacius was right to point out that when the Gospel is at stake there are no adiaphora.

If the confessional consciousness of a parish is at stake, such a rite would be working against sound preaching and teaching of the parish. This is never more evident among campus ministry. If it is the case that Taize is being used by Catholic, Protestant, and Lutheran campus houses alike, it is a form that will be confusing, to say the least. The same can be applied to individual parish situations.

### **A Better Road**

It is not the viewpoint of this author that Taize, on the one extreme, be legalistically banned, or to the other extreme, be used with uncritical abandon. Some of the music and rites can be used properly. Other portions of Taize must be recognized for their false theology. Depending on the usage and understanding, Taize can either add some healthy variety or open a Pandora’s box of problems.

But there is a bigger issue looming. Why is so much time spent promoting worship that is “contemplative” with an “ambiance of transcendence,” whether it is Taize or some other form? There seems to be an attempt to renew liturgical appreciation through the use

of emotional rituals and new liturgical shape. Bruce Backer, longtime professor of music at MLC, writes,

*But let us be on full alert! This approach does not work in worship or in the life of faith, call it what you will. Worship techniques in and of themselves do not constitute the foundations of worship. Variety will not solve lethargic worship, nor will modern English, nor will old English; neither will new liturgies nor old liturgies; neither new hymns nor old hymns: faster hymn playing or slower hymn playing. The idea that there is any kind of lasting solution to problems in worship in these techniques is a grand delusion that we must fight with all our strength. Techniques, programs, machinery, methods will never enliven faith. Let the call to repentance be heard among us. Let the soothing oil of the Gospel of forgiveness be poured into the wounds of sin. And a generation will arise before us who will present their lives to God as a living sacrifice. And they will go to the house of the Lord willingly to bear the Word and to answer with prayer, thanks and praise: Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever.<sup>xi</sup>*

The Lutheran Church is a teaching church. Its goal is to preach the Gospel, administer the sacraments, and to teach everything that the Lord has commanded. The proclamation of law and gospel is the earmark of the Lutheran church, evident in pulpit, pew, classroom, bedside, and hearth. Therefore, the function of its liturgy and music is to proclaim the truths of Scripture and to tear down the old Adam and build up the new in rite and song. The path it has chosen to accomplish this goal, in the area of public worship, has been didactic hymnody united to a teaching liturgy. Take for instance the following observation:

*...With the appearance of Luther's liturgical reforms there began a steady stream of books—the **Etlich Christlich Lieder** (published in Nuremberg, 1524), **Enchiridion Geistliche Gesenge** (Leipzig, 1529), **Geistliche Lieder** (Wittenberg, 1533), **Geystliche Lieder** (Leipzig, 1545).<sup>xii</sup>*

What is interesting is that side by side with the beauties of the Christian liturgies that Luther retained was the growth and use of didactic hymnody. Hymns like *A Mighty Fortress; Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word; If God Had Not Been On Our Side; Good Christians One and All Rejoice*; and many others, sang the beauties of God's revealed truth as well as the distinct scriptural doctrines of original sin, vicarious atonement of Christ, and the Real Presence of the Lord's Supper into the hearts of the parishioner and pastor, erudite or simple, old and young, rich and poor.

And this growth and use of hymn with historic liturgy grew and flourished for nearly 200 years after the death of Luther. Names like Nicolai, Gerhardt, Speratus, Eber, Decius, Heerman, Kingo, and Broson went hand in hand with the liturgical Lutheran giants like Schutze, Praetorius, Telemann, and Bach. Hymnody wed the historic service to the contemporary times, always working hand in hand to teach the people the clear confession of the Lutheran church as well as an appreciation for the holy Christian church throughout the ages.

Only with the onset of pietism, and subsequently rationalism, did this wedding become strained. J.P. Koehler laments the decline of the congregational hymn during the 18<sup>th</sup> century and notes that with the confessional revival of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century came also the revival of congregational hymnody.<sup>xiii</sup> Memorable is Koehler's statement regarding church music, "No church music can possibly come forth where the feeling for the congregational hymn is lacking."<sup>xiv</sup>

In summary, the blessings of Lutheran liturgical worship are evident. We in the WELS are happy to see a revival and appreciation for the historic liturgy and liturgical rites. However, before we rush off to the latest, hippest, liturgical innovation as a way to make liturgical worship more meaningful, let's explore our own heritage. Perhaps a closer study of our own history will "prime the pump" of Lutheran liturgical

consciousness and give impetus for a new flowering of hymnody in our midst.<sup>xv</sup>

The WELS is well-poised for this path. The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw many great hymn writers born in the WELS. Some of the “new” hymns that have sung their way into the heart of parishioners have been *Not unto Us* (392), *Thy Strong Word* (280), *Down from the Mount of Glory* (97), *To Jordan’s River Came Our Lord* (89)—all by WELS hymnists. Then there are the musical compositions and contributions from names like Engel, Backer, Albrecht, Eggert, and many more. What a heritage to build upon!

This path, marrying contemporary didactic hymnody to the historical liturgy, has served Lutherans well of ages past and can serve the WELS as its appreciation for the liturgical worship grows. It keeps the eyes of the worshiper where they belong: on Christ, on the means of grace, while still allowing them to voice that confession in their own words in their own time. This is a path worthy of contemplation.

---

## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Chadwick, Owen. *A History of Christianity*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995.

<sup>ii</sup> Taylor, John. “The Future of Christianity.” *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity*. Ed. John McManners. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

<sup>iii</sup> Marzolf, Dennis. “Recent Movements in Liturgical Renewal or Don’t Just Sit there, Do Something!” WELS National Conference on Worship, Music, and the Arts. Gustavus Adolphus College. St. Peter, 19 July 2005.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> Sasse, Hermann. “Liturgy and Confession: A brotherly warning against the high church danger.” *The Lonely Way: Selected Letters and Essays, Volume II (1941-1976)*. Saint Louis:

---

Concordia Publishing House, 2002, pp. 299-315.

<sup>vi</sup> Taylor, John. “The Future of Christianity.” *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity*. Ed. John McManners. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

<sup>vii</sup> *Handbook: National Conference on Worship, Music, and the Arts*. St. Peter, 2005.

<sup>viii</sup> *Concordia Triglotta*. Milwaukee: NPH, 1917.

<sup>ix</sup> Schulz, James. “Planning Reverent Relevant Worship.” *Worship the Lord*. Nov. 2005.

<sup>x</sup> Case in point: genuflecting. All good Catholics genuflect upon entering church. But how many of them genuflect in humble repentance and thanksgiving for the forgiveness that is theirs in Christ, recalling their baptism as opposed to those who do it out of superstitious piety or mindless tradition?

<sup>xi</sup> Backer, Bruce. “Foundations of Worship.” Minnesota District Pastor’s Conference. Lake City, MN.  
<http://www.wls.wels.net/library/Essays/Aut hors/B/BackerFoundations/BackerFoundati ons.htm>

<sup>xii</sup> Wilson-Dickson, Andrew. *The Story of Christian Music*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishing, 1992.

<sup>xiii</sup> Koehler, J. P. “The decline of the congregational hymn in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.” *The Wauwatosa Theology, Volume III*. Ed. Curtis Jahn. Milwaukee: NPH, 1997.

<sup>xiv</sup> Ibid, p. 478.

<sup>xv</sup> Marzolf, Dennis. “Reflections on the 38<sup>th</sup> Annual Reformation Lectures.” Bethany Reformation Lectures. Bethany Lutheran College. Mankato, 28 October 2005.