The Löhe Alternative for Worship, Then and Now

THOMAS H. SCHATTAUER

The search for an alternative practice of worship characterizes the widespread ferment surrounding worship in congregations today. People desire to shape a practice of worship that will serve the church in a new missional context, however that is understood. What principles, patterns, and practices of worship will serve God’s mission in our own time and place? That is a crucial question, and the aim of this essay is to ask whether the alternative proposed by Wilhelm Löhe in his situation provides us with any help for working out an alternative practice of worship in our own.¹

The German Lutheran pastor Wilhelm Löhe was among those in the nineteenth century who worked to shape an alternative practice of worship. Unsatisfied by the customary forms of worship and their routine use, Löhe was convinced that the church needed a richer liturgical and sacramental life. Löhe was a serious student of the liturgy, both its history and contemporary practice. He studied carefully the Reformation heritage of worship (including nearly two hundred Lutheran church orders), the roots of worship in the early church, and both Eastern and

¹The use of the term “practice” is informed by the recent theological discussion about practices in Christian life, and specifically, congregational life. See, for example, James Nieman, “Attending Locally: Theology in Congregations,” International Journal of Practical Theology 6/2 (2002) 198–225. I am grateful for my colleague’s conversation at an early stage in the writing of this article.
Western liturgical traditions. He was familiar with the Roman Catholic Missal and the Anglican Book of Common Prayer as well as the official and unofficial liturgical books at use in his own church. He understood the liturgical practices of both city and rural congregations. All of this came to bear upon the alternative that he sought to shape for the worship of Lutheran congregations within the spheres of his influence, including his own parish and the Lutheran churches in Bavaria, the deaconess community that he founded, and the North American mission that he supported.

LÖHE’S SITUATION

Through his efforts to produce new orders of worship and to establish new patterns of worship in congregational life, Wilhelm Löhe worked to shape an alternative practice of worship for a church in need of reform and renewal. Löhe voiced two broad criticisms of the German Lutheranism that he knew primarily through the Bavarian state church. In Löhe’s view, the church languished in its captivity to the state and to the culture of the Enlightenment. Furthermore, the church lacked ways of responding to the urgent social and spiritual needs evident among the people he served and the large numbers of Germans immigrating to North America. The alternative ways of worship encouraged by Löhe were a significant element in his aim to reconstitute the church as a distinctive and responsive community in this situation.²

The Lutheran churches in the Roman Catholic kingdom of Bavaria were administered as a territorial or state church (Landeskirche). The fact that a Catholic king was thus the chief overseer (summus episcopus) of the Lutheran churches was one among many issues that confronted pastors such as Löhe who longed for a church with a clear confessional identity. In the first part of the nineteenth century, the state administration attempted to establish a union of Lutheran and Reformed churches in a single Protestant church. This was both a policy convenient to the state and in line with the Enlightenment tendency to blur historic confessional differences, as was already happening in the Prussian Union, where Lutheran and Reformed were forced into a united church. Löhe was resolute in his opposition to such an arrangement, most especially when it came to the sharing of Holy Communion across confessional lines (the doctrine of the real presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper was, in his view, church-dividing) and the formation of new liturgical orders.

Löhe also criticized the lax standards of faith and life that often prevailed in

²For an account of Löhe’s worship-centered ecclesiology, see David C. Ratke, Confession and Mission, Word and Sacrament: The Ecclesial Theology of Wilhelm Löhe (St. Louis: Concordia, 2001).
congregations. The state church was by definition broadly inclusive. The congregations were mixed in composition; they included those well formed in faith and those poorly formed, the truly repentant and the unregenerate. The disciplinary and penitential structures of church life had so withered in the religious climate of the Enlightenment that even serious disregard for matters of faith and life did not prevent parishioners’ participation at the Lord’s table. Moreover, the rationalistic spirit of the time contributed to deterioration in liturgical understanding and decline in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. Communally authoritative teaching and practice became vulnerable to the individual exercise of reason. In Löhe’s view, the church’s institutional captivity to the state and its cultural captivity to the Enlightenment threatened its distinctive life and witness.

Such a church also seemed unable to respond effectively to changes in society that were generating human need. The Industrial Revolution disrupted long-standing ways of life and caused significant social dislocation. Löhe witnessed the effects in the needs of the people he knew and served—the poor, the sick, children, women, the elderly. Löhe had also heard reports of the needs of immigrants who sought a new and better life in North America. Among other things, they needed German teachers and pastors to serve their communities. And who would take on the task of evangelizing the Native American peoples that these Germans now encountered? Confronted by these social and spiritual needs, the state-sponsored church was not equipped or empowered to take action.

In this environment, congregations gathered for worship on Sunday mornings. The ways of worship in the parish church at Neuendettelsau prior to Löhe’s pastorate (1837–1872) were typical, especially of rural congregations in that period. The Sunday gathering was called “Sermon” (Predigt). It was a spare service, focused on a reading from an epistle or gospel and preaching. A hymn at the beginning and another after the Scripture reading were the principal means of congregational participation. The Lord’s Supper, when it was celebrated, was a separate order appended to the regular Sunday preaching service. Only the previously announced communicants remained and assembled at the altar for the sacrament; the rest of the congregation left after the blessing that concluded the preaching service. The celebration of the supper took place in two communion seasons, consisting of several occasions in the spring (including Palm Sunday and Good Friday) and again in the fall (including Reformation Sunday). Individual parishioners were encouraged to receive communion once each season. This pattern of seasonal communions had been established at Neuendettelsau early in the century.3

The pastor was the principal actor at worship. He recited all the prayers (including the Lord’s Prayer); he read from the Scriptures; he preached the sermon; he delivered the blessing. Apart from the hymns, the people participated silently. They were present to receive spiritual benefit: to hear God’s word proclaimed in Scripture and preaching, and twice a year to receive Christ’s bodily presence in the elements of bread and wine. The act of worship was clerically dominated and largely directed toward the individuals who gathered.

**Löhe’s Alternative**

In response to this situation, Löhe turned to the historic practice of the Eucharist as the way to reimagine Christian worship and from there to reimagine the church, its life and mission. From his study of the classic Lutheran church orders of the Reformation period, both Eastern and Western liturgical traditions, as well as early Christian sources, Löhe discovered the centrality of the Lord’s Supper. It was an accident of history that the supper had become for many Lutheran congregations an occasional service, often appended to preaching and celebrated for a few. The Lutheran reformers had desired an evangelical mass, not its elimination as the principal form of Christian worship. Löhe also discovered an accent in the Lord’s Supper that had become obscured since the Reformation, and indeed long before: the supper as *communio*, a communion with God in Christ and a communion of all who belonged to Christ. This communion concept of the sacrament was foundational for Löhe’s understanding of the church. It offered him a way to imagine the church as a distinctive community with a mission in and for the world. The church had its own life and mission. It was not an institutional arm of the state for the well-being of the citizenry; nor was it the religious dimension of society serving the spiritual needs of individuals. The church was a particular community, constituted in its worship around word and sacrament and oriented to mission.

It is important to note that Löhe’s liturgical interest was primarily ecclesiological and missional, not historical. A renewed practice of the Lord’s Supper at the center of Christian worship was not merely to do what Luther had intended or to follow the model of the early Christian community. It was, in the first place, to restore a piece of Christian identity that was significant for the church in its present circumstances. A core Christian practice—the Lord’s Supper—and its history provided Löhe with a way to reimagine the church as a missional community.

---

In 1842, Löhe summarized the results of his early liturgical studies in a way that indicates where he was headed:

The goal of the principal service of the church has always been the celebration of the Communion or Lord’s Supper. The observance of the Lord’s Supper was the core; the parts of the service before and after always stood in relation to it. This is the case in the Eastern churches, in the Roman Church, and also in the evangelical church. A principal service without the celebration of the Lord’s Supper was not considered complete; it looked like a column in ruins, like a flower stem without its crown.5

Löhe set out to repair that column, to restore the blossom to its stem. Beginning with his 1844 Agenda für christliche Gemeinden des lutherischen Bekenntnisses (Agenda for Christian Congregations of the Lutheran Confession), prepared for German immigrant communities in the American Midwest, Löhe’s published orders for the principal service of worship on Sunday and feast days consistently presented a service of word and meal.6 Löhe’s evangelical Mass followed the pattern of the Western liturgy as reformed by Luther and preserved in early Lutheran church orders. As pastor in the parish church at Neuendettelsau, he worked to establish a rich liturgical order. The parish records show that he proceeded cautiously but deliberately, with awareness that his goals were not likely to be fully attained. He knew not “to expect more of the time than it can bear, enjoy, and digest.”7

The first steps included the reintegration of the Lord’s Supper into the principal service and an increase in the frequency of its celebration. Löhe simply omitted the blessing at the conclusion of the preaching service, which had served as a dismissal for the noncommunicants, and insisted that everyone remain for the entire service. One can imagine the grumbling and resistance to such a change, especially in a cold and drafty church! Löhe also expanded the schedule of communion Sundays, eventually establishing a pattern of eucharistic celebration at the principal service every third Sunday as well as on major feast days. Individuals were encouraged to receive more often than the customary twice a year. The establishment of a separate chapel for the deaconess community provided Löhe a more receptive context for working out his liturgical alternative.

Löhe’s emphasis on the eucharistic center of the liturgical assembly has been criticized as a departure from a Lutheran theology of the word of God with its focus on Scripture and preaching. In fact, Scripture and preaching continued to have an essential place in Löhe’s understanding and practice of the principal service. Löhe himself was a highly regarded preacher, and he embraced fundamental Reformation convictions about God’s word and its proclamation. What Löhe did attempt to do was to set the reading of Scripture and the practice of preaching in its liturgi-
cal and sacramental context. He rightly understood, as did the Reformers in their own way, that the gospel is more than a message; it is also a community, whose life celebrates and bears witness to the message, however imperfectly. Toward the end of his life, Löhe termed his position “sacramental Lutheranism,” which for him signaled his movement away from a narrowly doctrinal faith to a faith constituted in the life-giving communion with God and the people of God at the eucharistic gathering: “The essential thing for me now is not so much the Lutheran doctrine of the Lord’s Supper, but sacramental life and the experience of the blessing of the sacrament that is possible only through partaking of it abundantly.”

For Löhe, the regular celebration of the Lord’s Supper as life-giving communio related to three further characteristics of his alternative vision for the church and its worship: (1) worship as a participatory act, (2) the exercise of discipline and the practice of forgiveness, and (3) the integral relation of worship to the church’s life and mission. Löhe worked diligently to encourage an act of worship in which there was significant participation by the congregation. Those gathered were not mere receivers of a message but active participants in the God-given communio of the church established in its worship. Löhe regarded the celebration of the Lord’s Supper itself as the principal means for engaging the congregation in the act of worship. He taught that the prayers of the liturgy, though spoken by the pastor, were in fact the common prayer of the assembly, and he instructed the congregation to add its “Amen.” Löhe encouraged a collection of gifts for the needs of others as a critical piece of congregational participation. He also promoted the congregational singing of liturgical songs and the common recitation of the creed. The congregation, not the pastor, was to be the principal actor in the liturgy, in contrast to the clerically dominated worship of the day.

Löhe was also concerned about the exercise of church discipline and the practice of confession and forgiveness in the congregation. The mixed composition of contemporary eucharistic gatherings, to his mind, reflected the laxity of a state church rather than the distinctive character of the Christian assembly. The mixture of Lutheran and Reformed communicants undermined the Lord’s Supper as a genuine communio in the Lord’s body and blood, which was served by adherence to Lutheran teaching about the real presence. The mixture of those grossly ignorant of the faith with the truly faithful, the morally unregenerate and unrepentant with the morally upstanding and repentant, also did damage to the authentic comm-

---

“Löhe worked diligently to encourage an act of worship in which there was significant participation by the congregation”

---

munio of sacramental life. Löhe’s response to this was the pastoral and communal exercise of church discipline through a procedure by which people personally announced their intention to be communicants at an upcoming celebration of the Lord’s Supper. In a restored practice of private confession and the general renewal of confessional practices in preparation for communion, Löhe emphasized the power of absolution and the forgiveness of God as the prelude to participation in the sacramental communio. The celebration of the Lord’s Supper presumed a disciplined community turned toward the mercy of God.

Finally, Löhe’s liturgical goal to restore, reform, and renew practices of worship, most especially the Lord’s Supper, stood in relation to his comprehensive concern for the church in its life and mission. The unresponsiveness of the church to spiritual, physical, and social needs among those near at hand and those far off in lands across the sea was at its root a liturgical problem. The means of grace—word and sacrament in the midst of the gathered congregation—celebrated richly are the means by which God fashions a community of faith and life witnessing to the power of God at work in the world.9 The Lord’s Supper was, in Löhe’s words, “not only the exit and entrance point for all church life but also for the entire Christian life...It holds the center that guides the congregation and individual souls.”10 The liturgy, centered in the eucharist, is finally about life, the life of the church, the life of individual Christians. “The church has put together according to holy orders...services of various kinds and esteems them to be understood by all the faithful as the highest harmony of earthly life and not only to be sung and spoken but to be lived.”11 The connection that Löhe draws between liturgy and life—the life of the Christian community and the lives of individual Christians—is the starting point for a missional understanding of worship and the church. So it is that the story of Löhe’s liturgical work cannot be told apart from the story of the deaconess community he founded and its service of human need; nor can it be told apart from the story of the mission school he founded and its efforts among German immigrants and eventually beyond. Service and mission were, for Löhe, part of the unfolding life of the distinctive and responsive communio in Christ constituted in sacramental worship.

Eucharistic center, participation, discipline and forgiveness, the integration of worship, service, and mission—these are the essential building blocks for the alternative future that Löhe imagined for the church. And it resulted from Löhe’s studious reflection and dedicated pastoral work on a historic Christian practice—the Lord’s Supper—in relation to the context of contemporary church life.

10Löhe, “Gutachten in Sachen der Abendmahlgemeinschaft: Vor einigen Freunden gelesen” (1863), in GW 5/2:891.
THE LÖHE ALTERNATIVE IN THE CURRENT FERMENT ABOUT WORSHIP

Is there any help from Löhe as we search for an alternative practice of worship to serve God’s mission in our own time? I would like to suggest an answer to that question in three parts. First, the witness of Löhe’s liturgical work presents two critical questions about the context in which worship takes place. Second, it locates a source to fund the process of reimagining Christian worship and the church that worships. Third, it offers a set of building blocks that may prove useful in the construction of an alternative future for contemporary worshiping communities. What follows are some things we can glean from our look at the Löhe alternative that may assist us as we engage the current ferment about worship.

Context

Löhe’s liturgical work took place in the particular context of a state church and in a cultural environment influenced by the Enlightenment. Löhe sought to resist what he regarded as the institutional and cultural captivity of the church by focusing on the things that made the church a distinctive community, including its historic practice of worship and especially the Lord’s Supper. The question for us is this: Are there current forms of institutional and cultural captivity that undermine the character of the church as a distinctive community and its worship as a distinctive practice? We cannot escape our particular institutional and cultural context, but it is essential nonetheless to be the church and to worship in a way that witnesses clearly to God’s mission in and for the world. The focus on God’s mission will move us beyond the mere maintenance of conventional practices of worship; it will also prevent us from turning our worship into a mirror of cultural practices and values.12

Löhe was concerned that the church be a community responsive to human need. Through his work as a pastor, his efforts with the North American mission, and his establishment of a deaconess community, Löhe responded to needs that confronted him. The question for us is this: What are the human needs—spiritual, physical, and social—that cry out for the church’s response today? Let me suggest three possibilities: (1) the deep longing among many for spiritual grounding in their lives and for relationship in community; (2) the presence of poor, hungry, and sick people, both near and far, in contrast to the general affluence of our society; and (3) the degradation of the environment and the depletion of the earth’s resources. These are not issues for the church alone, but neither were the problems of emigra-

12For a worship-centered, missional theology of the congregation, see Craig L. Nessan, Beyond Maintenance to Mission: A Theology of the Congregation (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999).
tion or the care of persons with mental and physical disabilities in Löhe’s day. If we follow Löhe’s example our response to these and other needs will unfold from the church as a worshiping community and in relation to its witness to God’s purposes.

_Source_

Where will we find the patterns and practices of worship for this distinctive, responsive, missional church community? Löhe shaped his alternative vision for the church and its worship by reflecting on a historic Christian practice, the Lord’s Supper, and bringing it to bear upon present circumstances and in relation to contemporary experience. This dual movement—retrieval of historic practice, on the one hand, and updating for current use, on the other—characterizes the way that Löhe proceeded to reimagine the church and its worship. In this he was a precursor of what is now called the liturgical movement. Distinctive Christian identity and missional community in contrast to merely conventional Christianity are, in this approach, the result of working out the present shape of core Christian practices, which carry with them deep biblical, historical, and theological resonance.

In the contemporary ferment surrounding the practice of worship, there are several other proposals for how to shape an alternative to conventional ways of worship and, by implication, conventional ways of being church. Each of these approaches appeals to and draws upon a different source as the way to stimulate the reimagination of the church and its worship. A very brief survey, little more than a list, is all that will be possible here. The contemporary worship movement looks to contemporary culture in order to construct an alternative practice of worship. The approach is pragmatic as it adapts powerful and effective methods from our consumer and entertainment culture to communicate the message of the gospel. The various liberation perspectives look to the experience of the marginalized—the poor, oppressed racial and ethnic groups, women, and even the earth itself—in order to reconstruct the practice of worship to serve the purpose of God’s justice. Pentecostal and neo-pentecostal churches look toward the free and spontaneous manifestations of the Holy Spirit, including speaking in tongues and the gift of healing, to shape an alternative practice of worship. Emerging postmodern approaches are eclectic in the sources used to provide the impulse toward an alternative. Contemporary culture, historic practices, and open innovation all have a place, but they are aimed in one direction: to sustain a relational community that in its worship integrates the personal and the communal.

In this contemporary mix, the alternative practice of worship shaped by Löhe (and carried on through the liturgical movement) witnesses to the indispensability of historic Christian practice. This is the starting point for any alternative that seriously engages the question as to what constitutes the distinctive identity of the Christian community—its faith, its life, its mission. From that starting point, the urgent concerns of the other contemporary efforts toward an alternative practice of worship—for the relation to culture, for justice, for the promptings of the Spirit, for the person in community—can and need to be addressed.
Building Blocks

Finally, the essential building blocks of Löhe’s alternative vision remain foundational to any construction of worship in the contemporary church: the eucharistic center of the assembly; the active participation of those who gather; the exercise of discipline and the practice of forgiveness; and the integration of worship, service, and mission. In each case, these materials will need to be adapted to circumstances and perspectives not envisioned by Löhe if they are to shape a lively alternative to conventional worship and, with it, conventional ways of being church.

“the communion established at the supper is not a closed circle but an opening to God’s purpose for the entire world”

Eucharistic Center. The recovery of the eucharistic center of the worshiping assembly has been a fundamental aim of liturgical renewal in Western Christianity since the nineteenth century. Wolfhart Pannenberg has claimed that “the rediscovery of the Eucharist may be the most important event in Christian spirituality of our time.” That rediscovery has allowed the practice of the supper to emerge from a narrowly individualistic and penitential piety that has long obscured its larger meanings. The more recent emphasis on the supper as communal celebration, however, can itself become trivial, inward looking, and self-serving. Löhe’s focus on the supper as communio, the place where we are constituted in Christ as a people in communion with God and with one another, deserves fuller exploration in our understanding and practice. The new turn in this communion concept looks like this: The communion established at the supper is not a closed circle but an opening to God’s purpose for the entire world. In the cosmic scope and eschatological trajectory of God’s mission, the assembly gathered for worship finds itself deeply connected to the world’s longing and a sign of the world’s hope. More than a rule encouraged by Christian history and enforced by experts, the recovery of the eucharistic center must be understood and practiced in its connection to the communio that God, through the Spirit, creates in Christ and to the missio that is God’s own purpose for the world.

Participation. A participating assembly has been another hallmark of contemporary liturgical renewal, in contrast to a clerically dominated act of worship directed at a largely passive assembly. Löhe moved the worship of his day from a pastoral monologue to a dialogue between pastor and congregation. The new turn in regard to participation looks like this: No longer a simple dialogue, the act of worship will be a coordination of many gifts and ministries, the pastor as presiding

minister exercising an essential but distinct and limited role. And furthermore, the full and rich interaction of sounding bodies, not talking heads, will be the principal medium of participation at worship.  

Discipline and Forgiveness. The exercise of discipline has not been a widespread concern among those involved in the contemporary renewal of the church and its worship. Löhe employed practices of discipline in his effort to sustain a community with confessional integrity and moral definition. There is a challenge in that witness for us. What we believe and the way we live should bear upon how we are gathered for worship. The new turn in matters of discipline looks like this: There are new disciplines to learn. The practice of ecumenical (and even interfaith) listening, which opens us to the possibility of “mutual affirmation and admonition,” is one. Another is the practice of generous welcome to all—the sinner, the poor and the outcast, the harmed and the hurting, the stranger—indeed, all. These are genuine disciplines, and they will help to shape a community at worship that has both “a strong center and an open door.” And all of this will be sustained by practices of forgiveness and new practices of healing, both grounded in baptism, that turn us again and again to the mercy of God.

Worship, Service, and Mission. The integration of these dimensions of church life is essential in the search for an alternative practice of worship that will serve God’s mission. Acts of mercy and justice, large and small, the search for peace and well-being in every arena of life, the word of witness to Christ and to God’s life-giving purpose for the world—these things extend the communio graciously given at worship and the missio enacted there into the actualities of life in the world. Without a lively interaction with matters of diakonia (service) and martyria (witness), Christian leitourgia (worship) narrows its concern to the church, to its institutional life, and to the spiritual benefits received by individuals. It also tends to give uncritical support to the given structures of social and political life. Löhe’s liturgical work sought to strengthen the internal communion of the church so that its life could unfold in service and mission. The new turn in these matters looks like this: Instead of distinguishing the internal life of the church from its external activity (worship inside, then service and mission outside—inside and out), the very life of communion given at worship is itself seen to be the shape of God’s all-encompassing, outward movement toward the world and for

---


its life (inside out).\textsuperscript{17} The assembly gathered to the eucharistic center of its life with God is, in that same movement, turned toward the world. The communion in Christ given at worship is also the mission of God enacted there; and the mission of God enacted at worship is the communion of all things in Christ, which is God’s ultimate purpose. Such a perspective gives even greater force to the connection that the Löhe alternative makes between liturgy and life. Eucharistic communion is indeed something “not only to be sung and spoken but lived” as part of God’s mission unfolding in the world.

THOMAS H. SCHATTAUER is associate professor of liturgics and dean of the chapel at Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa. He is contributing editor of Inside Out: Worship in an Age of Mission (1999) and president-elect of the North American Academy of Liturgy.

From the Legendary Lone Hunter on the North beach ye are getting near, 9 paces East-by-North East and shovel here. From the first line, it becomes evident that you need to head to a location named Devil’s Ridge. You can get there by going to the Plunder outpost and then head east from there. Approach the island from the southwest direction. You’re looking for a rock with a picture of a red sun drawn on it since the riddle mentions Sunstone. To do this, climb up to reach the top of the island and then head northeast from here. You’ll find the painting of night sky along with the stars and moon on a stonewall near a wooden crane. After this, another clue pops up on the parchment. Go back to the shore of the island and look for a ladder to climb up. Full of ambition on Friday evening, Ellen bought an array of new cleaning supplies and some implements such as dusters, a new broom and even a mop. Content with just sweeping before, Ellen had now decided the floors needed a good wash. The same would go for the windows. No longer would the spotty glass have to be covered up by curtains. But referring to him as a “lone wolf” deceptively conceals a breeding ground of extreme-right terror. The alleged perpetrator in Christchurch, who was initially described as a lone wolf only a few hours after the terrorist attack on two mosques, deeply worshipped Breivik. Watch video 02:34. Share. One of us - a tale of an extremist loser. Send Facebook Twitter google+ Whatsapp Tumblr linkedin stumble Digg reddit Newsvine. Permalink https://p.dw.com/p/2uL83. One of us - a tale of an extremist loser.