

Liturgy & Spiritual Awakening

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Liturgy and Spiritual Awakening

by Bo Giertz

Translator's Introduction

It is an ancient and treasured custom in the Church of Sweden that when a new bishop is elected in any diocese of the country, he writes a pastoral letter intended in the first place for the ministers of the diocese. This "Herdabrev" is usually a very personal word of encouragement and pastoral counseling which serves to introduce the new bishop to his pastors and people. Sometimes the letter is brief and can be contained in a few printed pages but frequently the letter is long enough so that it becomes a book of considerable size. Anyone who wants to make a study of the history of the Church of Sweden cannot neglect the study of these pastoral letters because in almost every instance they mirror and reflect the current state of religion and become the interpretation of the leadership of the Church of the message of the gospel for the contemporary scene. It is obvious that a man elevated to the office of bishop will take this assignment seriously and give to the writing of the pastoral letter his ablest skill. The document is intended to express the incumbent's best literary exposition of his aspirations in the fulfillment of the episcopal task of proclaiming the message and directing the activity of the Church.

Early in 1949 Pastor Bo Giertz was elected to the diocese of Gothenburg as bishop. Bishop Giertz was already known to all the church public of his country as well as to the wider public by a very large literary production, which has made him probably the outstanding writer of his time on religious questions. A series of historical novels, short stories, sermons, and monographs on various questions has issued from his pen. He is a young man whose gift of interpreting the life of the spirit is marked by uncommon brilliance and spiritual sensitivity. In his own religious development he comes out of a background of evangelical awakening and liberalism. But his spiritual pilgrimage has led him to an understanding and sympathetic appreciation of many of the currents of religious life in Swedish Lutheranism. He has a profound appreciation of the high-church liturgical movement as well as of low-church evangelicalism. If one should characterize the type of piety which is most congenial to his spirit, it would be as a broad evangelical orthodoxy that makes him congenial to the atmosphere of West Coast Lutheranism in Sweden.

The portion of the pastoral letter which is found in translation in this brochure is a section which deals with the place of liturgy and awakening in the life of faith. It deals with a religious question that is perennial in the church. And it is because the bishop reveals such a profound appreciation of the values of religious awakening and evangelical piety on the one hand, and of the time-honored values of liturgical worship on the other, that this section has been lifted out for translation. We in the American churches will do well to ponder the problem that the bishop discusses in these pages. It is toward an understanding both of liturgy and spiritual awakening that this document is herewith published.

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Lessons from the Past

If we wish to know what true Christianity means, how the church of Christ lives and works, and how a soul is saved, we must seek to understand three great heritages of the church. We must go back first to the days of the apostles, martyrs and church fathers; then we must ponder the message of the Reformers; and lastly, bring to remembrance the blessed spiritual leaders in the last century through whom God gave the church great awakenings from which all future generations may learn.

This is the threefold heritage of which we have been made stewards and which is to be made a living possession. It is ours to preserve and to pass on. We are to learn lessons from the past that are to be a vital force in the present. It is the risen and living Lord who wrought all this in the past. To hold fast the old heritage is to abide in Him. For then it is at the same time something new, renewed by the Resurrected Christ Himself. In the measure that we live by the resources which built the church in days of old, will Christ give us clear instruction for the way we must walk today.

This, then, is our program: to learn of the past that we may be prepared meet the coming day; to immerse ourselves so deeply in the great life stream of the church that we may be equipped to proclaim the Word of God in a new age, and to modern men and women, and to live His life in the manner which the new century in the history of the church demands.

(Closing paragraphs of the introductory portion of the Pastoral Letter in which the chapter on

"Liturgy and Spiritual Awakening" appears.)

Liturgy and Spiritual Awakening

The Word of God creates the church. Already in the days of the primitive church the Word of God gave to the life of the church those forms which have continued through the centuries. This includes both those forms which seem to be more or less improvised and spontaneous and those which appear fixed and unchangeable. It is true both of that side of the life of the church which we call awakening and that which we call liturgy. Both are the creation of the Word, and both belong to that heritage which we are called to preserve.

Both liturgy and awakening were found in the apostolic church. They are spoken of already at Pentecost. "Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and the rest of the apostles, Brethren, what shall we do?" That is awakening. "And day by day, continuing steadfastly with one accord in the temple" and "Now Peter and John were going up into the temple at the hour of prayer, being the ninth hour." That is liturgy.

Both liturgy and awakening have been with the church throughout her entire history. The manner in which they appear is of course very unlike. Awakening is like a flickering flame above a bed of coals. It gleams forth, spreads itself, rises toward heaven, and then seems to be gone again. Its connection with the ancient church seems to be broken by intervals of darkness. And yet the connection is there, because the Spirit is one and the same, even He who pricked the hearts on the day of Pentecost; and the Word, which lights the mysterious flame, is the same Word of power that once passed over the lips of the apostles.

The relation of liturgy to the apostolic age is obvious. It has flowed through the centuries like a ceaseless stream. It had its first deep sources in the synagogue. It is not only that a few words have remained in continuous use since that time, such as Amen, Hallelujah, and Hosanna, but the whole structural form of our order of worship shows clearly its relation to that worship which Jesus Himself shared in the synagogue at Nazareth and in which, as a grown man, he officiated when He was invited to read and interpret the Scriptures. To the ancient worship of the synagogue the apostolic church added the Holy Communion, that new creation which she received from the Saviour Himself and which is the center of all liturgy. As it is celebrated still, with the traditional chants, the Preface and the Sanctus, it is essentially a contribution of the first century.

The unbroken connection with apostolic times is also revealed in the external forms of the liturgy. The altar is today the only place in our modern life where, with unbroken tradition, the vestments are still used which were worn by people in that olden day. Within the walls of the church one can still hear musical settings that preserve something of the very tones of that hymn of praise which our Lord and His disciples sang when they ate the paschal meal. The church is the one

place in the modern world where one can still hear the best of medieval music and see the choicest treasures of medieval art as a living part of our culture. There is nothing in all the world today which embraces so much of an ancient culture or so many revered traditions as our chief liturgical service.

This is, of course, not the most essential consideration. The deepest significance of liturgy lies in the fact that it is a form which the Spirit Himself has created to preserve and deepen the life which He has awakened in the church.

Awakening is the fire that flames forth in dead souls. The fire burns in the breast when the sinner feels a pang in his conscience. He is gripped by an uneasiness that makes him ask, "What shall I do?" And the Spirit answers by enlightening the soul about the desperate character of sin and the boundless mercy of Christ.

Liturgy is the work of the same Spirit in preserving the flame which has been lighted. It is the means by which the awakened soul is bound together with the fellowship of the church. It is a pathway for walking in the light, a road that leads forward through the years, and the soul is ever anew called to join itself with that royal priesthood which worships before the altar of God with prayer and thanksgiving, with Communion, and with a quiet listening to the Word of the Lord.

Liturgy and awakening have often been made to stand in opposition to each other. It was not so in the primitive church and ought not to be so today. They are the work of the same Spirit, portions of the same heritage. They both have the right to exist and to fashion themselves according to their own uniqueness.

Awakening and liturgy speak each a different language, and they must do that. The instrument of awakening is the spoken Word, a word with prophetic authority, powerful to crush the hard rock of a soul and also appealing with all the inward warmth of the gospel. The language of awakening is often akin to everyday speech. God seeks the lost and condemned. The Word takes hold of him who is not at home in the House of God and probably not trained to understand the Biblical concepts. Therefore, the words of awakening do not employ such phrases as, for example, the Root of Jesse, or the Key of David. Rather do they speak to the children of the age in the language of the age about those things which have been forgotten but need to be heard again.

It is entirely different with liturgy. Its instrument is also the Word, but it is drawn out of deeper wellsprings. Liturgy speaks wisdom among those who are full grown." It uses all the richness of the Scriptures, all the meaningful symbols and prefigurements of Christ in the Old Testament. It prays the prayers of the Psalter anew, it listens to the prophecies and finds in them the deepest mysteries of the gospel. It loves exactly those hidden things that only slowly unfold themselves and that constantly give the mind something new to ponder. just because liturgy constantly turns back to the same holy forms, it dares to make use of the hidden wisdom of the Scriptures. Therefore it also loves that music which beneath an obvious simplicity hides unfathomable

depths of humble worship and joyful lodging. It loves to lift its soul to God in the haunting music of the Kyrie or the reverent joy of the Preface. In all this it is very unlike the mood of awakening.

Probably we could express the difference between the two by saying that awakening is like the fire of the Lord which fell upon the water-drenched altar of Elijah. It is the incalculable, sovereign invasion of God, which reveals His power among the heathen. Liturgy, on the other hand, is that fire which burns upon the altar in the temple and about which the Scriptures proclaim that it must never be extinguished. Awakening is lightning from above that ignites a new fire. Liturgy is the flame of the Lord already burning among us, lighting and warming the faithful.

It is important for us that both awakening and liturgy be given their proper and pristine Christian place in the life of the congregation. Awakening is always needed, not only because the church must always be a missionary church and reach out after those that are on the outside, but also because there is always the need for awakening even among the most faithful members of the church. The church has exactly as many sinners as she has members. The old Adam in each one of us is prone to fall asleep, to make the Christian life a dead routine, to use liturgical form to cloak his self-complacency and impenitence. It is not difficult to fashion a form of religion that suits the ego and allows the old Adam within to become sovereign again. One may go regularly to church and Holy Communion. One may cherish beautiful church music and lovely sanctuaries. One may be honestly convinced that one possesses the correct doctrine and loves the pure preaching of the Word. And at the same time one may be thoroughly obsessed by self-love, complacent with one's self, satisfied with one's own pious accomplishments and totally indifferent to the troubles and burdens of one's fellow men, which are so apparent before one's very eyes. The Holy Spirit always needs to awaken slumbering souls, stir up the dust, push the old Adam against the wall, and blow a new breath of life into the dead bones. Awakening is never superfluous, as long as we are in the flesh.

Liturgy is just as needful. There can be no normal church life without liturgy. Sacraments need form, the order of worship must have some definite pattern. It is possible to live for a short time on improvisations and on forms that are constantly changing and being made over. One may use only free prayers and yet create a new ritual for every worship situation. But the possibilities are soon exhausted. One will have to repeat, and with that the making of rituals is in full swing. In circles where people seek to live without any forms new forms are nevertheless constantly taking shape. Favorite songs are used again and again with monotonous regularity, certain prayer expressions are constantly repeated, traditions take form and traditional yearly ceremonies are served. But it would not be wrong to say that the new forms that grow up in this way are usually less attractive and more profane than the ancient liturgy. They contain less of God's Word, they pray and speak without Scriptural direction, they are not so much concerned about expressing the whole content of Scripture, but are satisfied with one thing or another that seems to be especially attractive or popular. The new liturgy that grows in this manner is poorer, less Biblical, and less nourishing to the soul than the discarded ancient order.

Revival and liturgy, therefore, have each their given place in the church. They must go hand in

hand. This does not prevent liturgy from sometimes becoming an enemy of awakening, just as awakening can be a foe of liturgy. Here is a tension that has been painfully apparent in the whole history of the church.

Awakening can actually be the most deadly enemy of liturgy. Liturgy has also other enemies, chief of which is that dull passivity which wants to hear and enjoy a service of worship instead of taking part in it. A full church is not the same as a congregation. Where hands are no longer folded and heads not bowed in prayer, where the voices, whether rough and untutored or well trained, no longer join in the singing, there is no longer a true worship. Liturgy is always an active thing. Sluggish, dead passivity is always its enemy.

Awakening can be a still more dangerous enemy. Worldliness usually knows at least that it is not more spiritual than liturgy. But the awakening that is an enemy of liturgy claims to be exactly that worship in spirit and in truth which the Father is seeking. It condemns and despises liturgy. Sometimes this may be a proper correction in prophetic spirit. If, for example, the officiant picks his nails during the Gradual hymn and turns the pages of the service book to find the General Prayer while he is kneeling at the altar after the sermon, then it is perfectly proper to speak about dead works, from which one must be converted to a right service of the one true God. But it is not thereby true that this right service consists in laying aside the vestments, in giving up the singing of the Preface in order to offer free prayers instead, and in singing the latest tunes from popular music in parish visitation. In the same way there are times when it is quite proper to quote the angry words of the Lord in the Book of Amos, "Take thou away from me the noise of thy songs; for I will not hear thy viols; but let justice roll down as waters and righteousness as a mighty stream," if, for example, the organist reads the Sunday paper in the organ loft, or the members of the choir vanish just before the sermon, or the members of the board go to their club to play poker immediately after a lovely vesper service. There is such a thing as dead liturgy—or, more correctly stated, dead hearts—that allows all the treasures of worship to pass one by without effect, or that understands how to make use of the atmosphere of the moment while at the same time avoiding everything that might possibly lead to conversion. There is also an improper and false manner of performing a rich and beautiful liturgy, that makes it heavy and dragging, unnatural, marked by carelessness, or by a desire to let one's own personality shine. It is then not the liturgy that is at fault. And it is not a fault that can be righted by forsaking the good Word of God in the liturgy, which instead should be taken to heart. It is certainly true that it is better to pray a spontaneous prayer with meaning, however poorly formed it may be, than to pray the most wonderful liturgical prayer with a dead heart. It is also true that it is better to sing songs set to vulgar dance music, with the heart turned to Jesus, than pious chorals, with one's thoughts on the Sunday dinner or the latest parish gossip. But that is not to say that a cheap dance melody in and of itself is better fitted to express the Christian ' mood than a good, old choral melody of the church.

Awakening is wrong, therefore, when it rejects liturgy. There is often a goodly portion of self-righteousness and egocentricity in that judgment. The old Adam is an unequalled opportunist. When a man is seriously awakened, it is not very long until the old Adam makes every attempt to

exploit the new situation. Naturally it has to be done with pious sentences and with a constant urging that it is for the glory of God. But even in this sham piety the old nature within will re-establish its rule. The works of the flesh begin again, not indeed in the form of "rioting, drunkenness, and loose living"—then they would be immediately recognized—but perhaps as "jealousy, strife, and contentiousness." The reasoning is very simple: since one's own awakening came in this or that manner, then that must be the proper way. The "*only* right way," adds the Old Adam to himself. Since on that occasion there was no reading of the Gospel, no Collect prayer, and no singing of the Kyrie, then such things cannot be means to salvation. The old Adam may probably add, "Besides, there is a warmer and lovelier feeling in the heart when one can pray one's own prayer, give a testimony, or sing the new songs." The conclusion of it all the old Adam does not state aloud. He only states that it is very easy to feel at home in the new clothes. If one may but hear one's own voice, talk a little about oneself, help to choose the hymns and feel soothed by their sweet melodies, which would fit well in any operetta, one can easily tolerate being called a Christian. And as added spice one can have the joy of poking fun at those who insist on liturgy and at the minister in the parish and those narrow-minded, form-bound people who claim that one ought to attend the Sunday worship service regularly.

It is of course the coarsest form. But close to it is another kind of distaste for liturgy, humanly understandable but no more valid. There are people who find it difficult to feel at home in the liturgical forms. All liturgy demands the submerging of self. The individual shall become a part of a praying congregation. One must become so much a part of a fellowship with others that one can pray the same words as they, follow along in the rhythm of the worship, the Confession of Sins, and the praise, and feel the same joy and penitence as the others. Every Christian must be able to do that. He is a member of the body of Christ. He does not live to please himself, but as a part of an organism. He who will not subordinate himself in such fellowship is no Christian, because one cannot be a Christian by one's self. He who does not love his brother, whom he has seen in the church and at the Communion table, even so much that he can pray, sing, rejoice, and tremble together with him, must not imagine that he can love the God whom he has not seen, or that he can worship Him in spirit and in truth at home in his own chamber. And yet it is clear that there are forms for reverent worship which are very natural to some people, so that they immediately feel at home in them, while other people find it hard to become accustomed to them. The church must therefore be generous, open-minded, and tolerant. She must be able to give her children what they need most and what they can most readily receive, provided of course that she truly gives them the Word of God and real fellowship with God. It is self-evident, of course, that she must have a form for common worship, a place where all can meet together. That place is the Sunday order of worship. Here the church may rightly demand that all shall be present. Everyone should be able so far to conform that he enters into this fellowship as a praying and serving participant who not only demands that he receive something, but in the first place wants to make his contribution to the common worship. When people in the name of revival take up arms against the order of worship itself, they are violating the Christian fellowship. Often this is done in the name of liberty. But the freedom that is desired will mean a lack of freedom for the greater number of people. It will mean that certain pet interests shall characterize that which should be the common possession of all. One demands the right to celebrate worship

according to one's own pattern. Denied this, one does not feel at home and may leave the fellowship. It is just here that the unchristian character of this attitude is seen, and it is here that every churchly movement must stand the test. When revival piety in the church is unwilling to live in the framework of the liturgy in the common service of worship, it has placed itself outside the fellowship of the church and can no longer be counted as a living movement of the church of Christ.

But outside the common worship service there must be freedom. It should not be required that all the worship and edification of the church be of uniform character. There must be full freedom also for all those forms of worship which truly serve for edification, they may be services of prayer, inner circles of fellowship, liturgical orders of devotion, and many another type of worship. It should be demanded, however, both of oneself and others, that these occasional worship patterns to which one may be attracted shall never displace or be a substitute for the great fellowship of the Sunday common service.

If liturgy has reason sometimes to complain that there is misunderstanding on the part of awakening, awakening can with equal reason say that the friends of liturgy have often failed to show it respect, or even tolerance. It is therefore proper to say a word about liturgy as a chief enemy of awakening.

Awakening, too, has a number of enemies, but hardly any that can be as dangerous as a false liturgy. Liturgy can, if it wants to do itself a disservice, become an almost impregnable armor for the old Adam. What can the Holy Spirit do with a person who goes to Communion more faithfully than anyone else in the congregation, who for an hour a day prays beautiful prayers from the Psalter or from the classic prayer books of Christendom, who reads a devotional from the Compline each evening, and bows in silent meditation after each communion, but who through all these exercises only becomes more and more convinced that he is a better kind of a person; a person, indeed, who while he seems to think that he is thus laying up an impressive reserve of merit, is at the same time careless about his daily duties and studies, neglectful of his stewardship and the nurture of his children, speaks ill of those who think differently, and loves no one except himself and his holy ceremonies? All the promptings of the Holy Spirit are usually unavailing on such an individual, as long as he moves only in his own habit patterns. The Spirit must come upon such a person as a strong wind, break down all his pious pretensions, and show him that he is a proud, self-centered, self-contained, and loveless sinner, who does not deserve anything better than to be cast away from the presence of the Lord. To do this the Holy Spirit may sometimes use a book or a human destiny that ruthlessly lays bare the religion of pious make-believe. At times the Spirit employs some sudden change in fortune that puts the homemade saint in a terrifying situation where nothing is left of his halo. But the most common method is the preaching of the Word of God, the prophetic message, in the Spirit of awakening. It is very characteristic of a false liturgy that it does not like the prophetic word, which comes as a stroke of lightning and does not respect any self-made pious rules of the game. A false liturgy would rather clip the wings of the Word of God. It loves to make the sermon itself a portion of liturgy framed in liturgical formulations and Psalm verses and spoken with disciplined carefulness

in a language removed from all concretion and all specific and accusing actuality. It loves to speak the ancient truths in an esthetic and decorative way but never gives the proper name to the everyday conflicts in which the face of the old Adam is clearly identified. This false liturgy can enter into a strange alliance with that which once was awakening. It accepts the ancient pulpit language and the time honored words. But they have lost their point, and they are so far removed from everyday sins that an unrepentant heart can listen to them with great satisfaction. But if one day in the impressive hour of worship a word is spoken with the ancient power of awakening and pierces to the heart of things to reveal the true state, or if outside of the service one is confronted with a question or a personal word that shows how seriously the concern for salvation can burn in a soul, then a dead churchliness is moved to indignation and has a hundred objections to the genuine impulses of the Spirit.

Liturgy without awakening is probably the most dangerous of all church programs. It is possible to enrich and beautify the worship service, to add vestments and choirs, to plan lovely vespers, and even to arrange for more frequent communions, without a single person in earnestness asking himself, "How shall I, a sinner, be saved?" Since by nature all of us are veritable Pharisees and are so sure that we can be saved by our own good deeds, a liturgical renewal without a corresponding awakening of the conscience can mean nothing more than that a given number of people have begun to fulfill a certain number of pious exercises in the conviction that they are now making further deposits in the savings bank of heavenly merit. With such a renewal the devil himself will be very well satisfied. Certainly he will be concerned when a man begins to seek the Lord's Supper or comes within hearing distance of the Word of God. But as long as there is preaching of such a kind that it does not awaken a sleeping sinner, and as long as the system only creates self-satisfied work-righteousness among Christians, so long Satan himself could be, officially, a church Christian. To be sure, the system has some risks for him. One does not know when a little word from the Epistle lesson or a line from a hymn will fall in good ground. The prince of darkness is not, therefore, really satisfied with any form of churchliness or ritualism. He would rather subscribe to that kind of spirituality which says that it is only a worthless habit and a dead routine to go to church and to come to the Lord's Supper.

Awakening needs liturgy. An awakening that shall have lasting value must nurture a devotional life that will live on through many a long year and that will become a heritage to be passed on from generation to generation. A sound awakening should therefore move in the direction of leading people into a regular worship life and a faithful use of the sacrament of Communion, showing them how to celebrate the common worship in a proper way and to use aright the churchly books of devotion. It is absolutely necessary that our young people, beginning at the time of confirmation, should learn to understand the service of worship at the altar, to find their way in the hymnal and lectionary, and to be able to participate in the kind of worship which is used in the local church. It is a good thing for the pastor to preach on the main themes of the catechism, but he could also with real value to the life of the soul preach occasionally upon the great words of worship, for example, the threefold Holy, the Kyrie, the Gloria in Excelsis, "The Lord be with you," and "Behold the Lamb of God," to mention a few of the chief ones.

Awakening, or revival, can also serve liturgy. When men are awakened, there is a new life in the old forms of devotion. There is new seriousness in the confession of sins, and new joy and power in the hymns of praise. Ancient, beautiful custom becomes more than custom. It becomes an expression for the life which is born again, the same life which once created the custom and which now fills it with new warmth and inwardness.

The need for awakening will one day cease. It belongs to this world, where men still sleep the sleep of death. When Christ has awakened His own on the last great day, there will no longer be any need for awakening. It will be just as obsolete and unnecessary as hospitals and the agencies of social service. But liturgy will remain. What the Scriptures permit us to imagine concerning the ineffable splendor which will then begin includes a picture of a heavenly liturgy, a holy service before the throne of God, with hymns of praise and thanksgiving making music like the sound of great waters, with golden chalices full of incense, and throngs falling down in worship before the God who is the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

Liturgy in the church is a foretaste of the eternal song of praise, an earthly expression of that which is the content of eternity and the basic melody of creation, a never ending thanksgiving to the Creator and Father of all things. Within its earthly poverty liturgy contains something of the beauty of the heavenly, the blessed sense of the nearness of the Eternal, and the joy of being privileged to sacrifice everything in order to be one with Christ.

