The Church in Act:
Lutheran Liturgical Theology in Ecumenical Conversation


In this volume Max Johnson has pulled together ten lectures/essays from a nearly thirty-year period. His previous collection of essays, Worship: Rites, Feasts, and Reflections (Pastoral Press, 2004) had primarily an ecumenical thrust and addressed an ecumenical readership. This collection reflects, as he writes, "my Lutheran-based liturgical conversation with others." These words are carefully chosen.

Not only has Max Johnson taught liturgics in Roman Catholic institutions for more than twenty years, but the original venues of these lectures are primarily ecumenical settings. Only three of the ten originated as lectures given in Lutheran institutions. I note this because it is clear that Max Johnson wants to address his fellow Lutheran believers in this collection, and I believe that his fellow Lutheran believers need to hear what he has to say. Perhaps he purposely chose Fortress Press as the publishers of these essays. Quite frankly, if one is not teaching at a Lutheran seminary, or publishing in a Lutheran press, and getting around to pastors' conferences, it's hard to become known among Lutherans, and Max Johnson should be better known among pastors. He is, after all, one of our ablest liturgical scholars. On the other hand, since he is not employed by the Church at one of its seminaries, he is free to speak plainly without worrying about possible repercussions. (I know whereof I speak!)

Professor Johnson's main text, and the basis for talking about Lutheranism in ecumenical gatherings and talking to Lutherans about their confessional basis, is Augsburg Confession, article VII, which states that the "one holy Christian church" is "the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel." Max argues, as others of us have, that this is a liturgical definition of the church. The essays in this collection address issues regarding the Word and the sacraments, including that they are "non-negotiable" and that there is an office
of the ministry of Word and sacrament ordained to preach the Word and administer the sacraments.

The ten essays treat us to these issues: a critical look at the Lutheran (and other) adaptation of the rite of Christian initiation of adults; the possibility of developing a baptismal and eucharistic epiclesis from the writings of Luther himself; a general critique of Lutheran (and other) sacramental practice in the light of *Augustana* 7 and the Catholic Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy; a proposal for Lutheran eucharistic reservation on the basis of an *usus* rooted in *actio*—an intention for further distribution; a proposal for “normative” ELCA worship on the basis of the official statement, *The Use of the Means of Grace*; a review of the Revised Common Lectionary in the light of Fritz West’s insight that the Roman Catholic Lectionary for the Mass was intended to be a eucharistic lectionary and the potential Christian-Jewish problems in the relationship between the Old Testament reading and the gospel; a proposal for Lutheran liturgy to incorporate more Mariological elements in the light of Luther’s view of Mary as the best model of faithful obedience to the Word; incorporation of Our Lady of Guadalupe devotions where congregations are affected by the changing Latino/Hispanic landscape of American Christianity; a proposal that *Augustana* 7’s *satis est* (“it is enough”) should be a catalyst for pursuing visible Christian unity; and what to do now in ecumenical liturgical work in the light of breakdown of common English texts caused by the third edition of the *Missale Romanum* of Pope Paul VI. (Johnson finds cause for optimism on the basis that the Mass itself has not been changed). All these issues will generate discussion among Johnson’s fellow Lutherans.

To make sure that the reader “gets” the coherence of these seemingly random essays thrown together in this book, Johnson summarizes them in a conclusion. But in one important instance he goes beyond what was presented in the chapters to deal with the debate over the open table in the ELCA. I wish Johnson had actually written a whole new essay to deal more extensively with this very important and divisive issue. My experience is that more is needed to engage those who advocate “radical hospitality” than appealing to tradition or even the sacramental economy. It is not just that for these advocates experience trumps tradition. They are intent on doing what they think Jesus would have done. They see Jesus’ feeding of the multitudes as an example of eucharistic
hospitality. They invite everyone to share in the bread and wine that God provides "whether you are baptized or not." They have a view of "grace for all" that tolerates no conditions, no rules, no distinctions. For them the welcome to the table can be the first stage of Christian initiation (evangelism), not only the concluding stage (incorporation). Max Johnson's big artillery is needed in this debate. And this book deserves the widest possible circulation and discussion.

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