

Things Are Not Always What They Seem*

By Paul T. Prange

In a book in my library there is a passage so exquisite that it has never failed to fire my imagination upon each rediscovery. The book is *Reversed Thunder* by Eugene H. Peterson. It is subtitled, *The Revelation of John & the Praying Imagination*. In a chapter called “The Last Word on Worship” Peterson says:

Christians worship with a conviction that they are in the presence of...the living God who rules, speaks and reveals, creates and redeems, orders and blesses. Outsiders, observing these acts of worship, see nothing like that. They see a few people singing unpopular songs, sometimes off-key, someone reading from an old book and making remarks that may or may not interest the listeners, and then eating and drinking small portions of bread and wine that are supposed to give nourishment to their eternal souls in the same way that beef and potatoes sustain their mortal flesh. Who is right? Is worship an actual meeting called to order at God’s initiative in which persons of faith are blessed by his presence and respond to his salvation? Or is it a pathetic, and sometimes desperate, charade in which people attempt to get God to pay attention to them and do something for them (1 Kings 18)? (p. 59)

“Who is right?” Peterson asks. Do the outsiders see the truth, or is something happening hidden from their eyes? I’ve known the answer to Peterson’s question ever since I read it for the first time, but it’s not because I am any more perceptive than his “outsiders.” On occasion I too have observed a few people in worship singing unpopular songs, sometimes off-key. On occasion I have been the one making remarks from the old, old Book and wondering as I looked at the listeners whether or not they were interested. Ever since I struggled into my mother’s lap and strained with my whole face to catch the smell on her lips after she returned from the altar, I have been aware of those small portions of bread and wine. I have not always been aware of their significance.

But I know today who is right, not because I am older, but because my Lord and yours, the source of all that is real and of reality itself, has told me. In his word the Lord has seen fit to provide us tantalizing glimpse after glimpse of the multifaceted reality behind the simple, somewhat unimpressive activities we see in worship. The idea of this keynote speech is to recall heavenly reality to your mind’s eye, so that as you continue in worship with its distracting earthly qualities, you will remember that things are not always what they seem.

Worship began for me before anyone knew my name. In that adoption agency, eight days after I was born, someone put water on a baby without parents, a baby with quite an uncertain future, and said the words, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” I doubt that an outsider would have observed any high drama. There were no sponsors or cameras of any sort. I doubt that they used one of those fancy, starched white linen napkins. They did sign a certificate; I’ve seen it. Then they whisked me off to—well, I don’t actually know where. But despite the shadowy vagueness of the earthly scene in my imagination, the heavenly reality of what happened there is clear.

Angels sang. The angels present in that room shouted, “Amen,” and broke into a perfect song of rejoicing that another sinner had been brought to repentance and faith. The earthly child may have felt only a bit of moisture on a very bald head, but the heavenly reality is that he was submerged, gasping, into water of death and blood, and then raised overhead, cleansed, to be placed as a trophy on a mantle where only holy things can be displayed.

That child crawled along the path of thousands who had been cleansed in the Sea before entering the Holy Place. Human beings had seen the Sea when it was a large cast metal bowl placed at the entrance of the Holy Place in the Temple in Jerusalem. There the priests of the Lord were cleansed before approaching with their sacrifices. By that washing of rebirth and renewal in the Sea, that child joined the priesthood of all believers and began his life of sacrifice and praise. By the time that small child joined the procession, the visible

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metal Sea in Jerusalem had been destroyed, replaced in Ezekiel's vision of the Temple with a rushing river of life springing from the place where once the Sea had stood.

As the child emerged from the river, he found himself cleansed and able to serve in the Holy Place. As he raised and focused his young eyes, he could make out the outlines of a magnificent throne. Seated there, looking down at the new child placed before him, was a Lamb, so powerful that simply by speaking he brought things into existence that never were. At that moment of worship, the child approached him. Foolishly, ignorant of the power and prestige of the ruler on his throne? No, the child approached confidently, for the child had become the ruler's son.

I was adopted by God before I was adopted by my parents. As an adopted child, I've made that connection to my baptism all my life. I know that upon the death of my parents, I will inherit something from them. It may not be a lot, and I have to share it equally with my two brothers and two sisters, but I'm getting something. I'm my parents' child. I know that upon the death of my Savior, I inherited spectacular riches from my Heavenly Father: forgiveness of sins, life and salvation, the Holy Spirit, his accompanying gifts of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. That's a lot, just for being a member of the family.

So I listen in worship for my family name, the name I got at my baptism: Father, Son, Holy Spirit. But I'm not just listening for myself. I'm listening for my brothers and sisters too. Because if you have that family name, and I have that same family name, we must be members of the same family. And that changes the way I think about you.

At the ringing of the bells for worship, it does not appear that friendly brothers and sisters, freshly bathed and toweled and powdered, are rushing into the warm, outstretched arms of a proud parent. Instead, when I look around in worship, I see people looking uncomfortable in unfamiliar clothes. I observe exasperated spouses and apprehensive parents, distracted children and teenagers searching desperately for a comfortable body position. As I watch people enter the sanctuary in my home congregation, I see different agendas and strange, uninformed opinions on ecclesiastical matters. As I watch students and faculty colleagues enter the chapel at my school, I see people struggling with so many personal concerns that it seems impossible for them ever to have the emotional energy to deal with the concerns of others. As I watched you enter this worship space, I saw many unfamiliar and distant faces.

But things are not always what they seem. Do you know what God saw here? A family reunion. You know how those are. People arrive at different times. Some are ridiculously punctual. Others are always late. Some arrive happily, others warily, worn down by travel, still others aggressively. But they all come. They come with their long histories of sin and reconciliation, their habits and quirks clearly labeled by those who know them. They come. And regardless of whether they have their long, bony fingers ready for pinching or their soft, chubby cheeks ready to be pinched, they know that eventually they're going to have to do what everyone does; they're going to have to find the patriarch, old Erdman in his wheelchair, and get down on their knees, and say very loudly, "I'm Vic's boy."

In worship we greet one another, arriving early or late, according to our personalities and histories. But we know that each of us is really there to find the patriarch, to focus on his cross, to get down on our knees, and to say very loudly, "By grace I'm a member of your family." And as we look around and see one another all in the same position, by grace a member of the family, we remember how it is in families: the long-lost are welcomed, the familiar are loved despite their imperfections, and all are encouraged. Let us not give up meeting together. Let us not give up encouraging one another. Let us be encouraged.

And then we eat. I suspect that eating is a part of most family reunions, regardless of what culture you grew up in. I have often wished to have been adopted into a Mexican or Italian or Greek family; I love that food so much. But I think I know why the Lord placed me into my extended white, Midwestern American family. Punctuality. I love eating on time. I get near 7:30 am, noon, or 5:00 pm, and I just need something to eat. I've had a little trouble adjusting in my cross-cultural marriage to a fine Scandinavian-American girl. That extended family just does not seem to care what time it is when they break out the lefse.

But I've noted that even in my wife's extended family, at our family reunion of worship we take our eating very seriously. Mindful of how the Scripture treats Holy Communion, particularly in 1 Corinthians 11, where one remaining hungry and another getting drunk are both condemned, we practice Holy Communion very formally. Punctuality isn't even a question; you certainly don't dawdle on your way to the front of the church. Our scriptural doctrine and practice of fellowship at the Lord's table elevates the seriousness of the situation even more in our minds.

Outsiders do not understand. My impression is that the average outsider sees how serious we are about the Lord's Supper and senses a false piety contrary to the casual American nature. They see how light we are about things outside of church, eager to puncture pomposity and mock the stuffed shirt. They see how mechanical we can be about our own attendance at worship, not even knowing whether it's a communion Sunday until we observe the elements on the altar. And then they see us get real serious at the moment the communion liturgy starts, putting on the "worship game face," and they wonder, "Is it just a show?" Their confusion can deepen when we have invited them so eagerly to the service but then have them remain seated when the usher invites our row to approach the altar.

It might be contrary to our casual American nature to treat the Eucharist with dignity. Perhaps those who could comment best are the "outsiders" in our own families, those middle school students who are soon to be confirmed. I remember being embarrassed as an 8th grader by distracting thoughts as I was preparing to take communion. Imagine my surprise when some of my distractions were put into print in John Louis Anderson's *Scandinavian Humor & Other Myths*:

Certified Worry #19 – How should I look when I'm waiting to go up to the rail?

#48 – What if the minister wants to ask me more catechism questions before he gives me communion?

#22 – Where should I look when I'm walking back to my seat? Should I smile at, or even acknowledge someone who catches my eye?

#44 – What if I can't find my seat right away, and have to look around a long time and everybody stops singing to watch me?

#17 – How long should I stay silent after taking communion? Is staying silent too long a tip-off to my parents that I've done something I'm really guilty about? (pp 92-95)

Maybe you adults are more mature than that. Even the congenitally serious among us might be able to agree with this observation of one of John Updike's characters: "The shared chalice versus the disposable paper cuplet: how many hours of my professional life have been chewed to bitter shreds (the apocalyptic antisepticist among the deacons versus the holisticer-than-thou hold-outs for the big Grail) by this liturgical debate" (from *A Month of Sundays*).

Amid this clutter of human distraction and confusion, what does the Lord see? He sees that things are not always what they seem. Individual souls made casual by the pace and material comfort of American life approach the altar and are focused by the Holy Spirit on a single event in history, the Lord's death for our salvation. Their distracted thoughts and mixed motivations are cleansed by the very blood on their palates. In Christ the Lord views them as perfectly mature, perfectly focused, and consistent in their sacramental piety.

We ought not let our proper application of the Scripture's doctrine of closed communion distract us from what is really going on. In this time and in this place I see believers who are correctly unable to commune together because of false doctrine in their various public confessions. Unbound by time and place, the Lord sees all of his believers approaching the altar in an unbroken stream from his own disciples to the present. He sees forgiveness in Christ bestowed in the simplest way upon generation after generation whose hearts he has turned to be his own. Through the ages, regardless of nation and race, tribe and language, the invisible church is visible to him; he sees the fellowship we have with believers in other denominations, the fellowship we are unable to celebrate this side of eternity. He sees that at the Lord's Supper. Martin Luther says, "To receive this sacrament in bread and wine, then, is nothing else than to receive a sure sign of this fellowship and incorporation with Christ and all saints" (*Luther's Works*, Volume 45, p. 51).

And, as Pastor Harold Senkbeil reminds us in *Dying to Live*, the sacrament of the altar takes us in God's eyes all the way back to the Passover, along the road of the faithful to the cross, through our own era, and all the way to the wedding feast to come in celebration of the heavenly Bridegroom (p. 91-111). "Lord, when your glory I shall see," we sing, "And taste your kingdom's pleasure, Your blood my royal robe shall be, My joy beyond all measure! When I appear before your throne, Your righteousness shall be my crown; With these I need not hide me. And there, in garments richly wrought, As your own bride I shall be brought To stand in joy beside you" (CW 219).

This long view is helpful as we prepare for worship. Recently a colleague told me an account you will probably find familiar. It seems that a mother had a son with some keyboard ability. Eager to encourage his participation in the life of the congregation, the mother suggested to her pastor that the son play for worship. Also eager for greater participation, the pastor gave the high school student the hymn numbers and liturgical selections about a month ahead of time. The boy practiced the music. He put an equal amount of time into practicing controlling his fear. The month passed. The fear did not. The morning arrived. From the organ keyboard, the boy struggled through the service. Some measures of some hymns were sung *a capella* by the congregation. At the end of the service, the mother cried. The son fled. And the pastor wondered, short-term, whether he had done the right thing.

We do not always know whether we have done the right thing in preparation for worship. But in this area the Lord's long view is helpful. Where we see a mother teetering precariously between pride and embarrassment, in Christ the Lord sees a faithful believer who has struggled daily to raise a Christian child. In Christ she has done a perfect job. Where we see a teenager who did not overcome his fear, in Christ the Lord sees a servant who has taken modest gifts and used them to his glory. In Christ he has done a perfect job. In the long view, the Lord sees twenty Christian grandchildren who will have considered the outcome of the way of life of their grandfather, that struggling organist, grandchildren who will imitate his faith and pass on the gospel to another generation.

Where we see a pastor who may not have been wise in worship planning, in Christ the Lord sees a man with an opportunity to put love above excellence. This is my command to you: love one another. Go ahead and pursue excellence. But do not pass faithful mediocrity by on the other side as you hurry off in your professionalism to prepare for worship. If you plan to the last detail, if you play exquisitely, if you sing in perfect harmony, but have not love, you are only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. Love is patient. It always protects.

And Christian love is not possible without saving faith. My dear, dear, music-loving, Christian friends, the local civic choral society puts on beautiful concerts. They do justice to the Mass in b minor, and their rendition of the requiem brings tears to your eyes. But without faith it is impossible to please God. When it comes to the unbelieving members of the society, things are not what they seem. The Word of the Lord is on their lips, but their hearts are far from him. And so their throats are like open graves. Are you familiar with the smell of large carcasses rotting? Can you picture the flies and the decaying flesh bugs? Singing to the Lord without faith is a spiritual bad breath, a stench in the nostrils of the living God.

The Hebrew text of the Old Testament has an expression about God that is usually translated as "slow to anger." In the color of the original language it is "slow to flare his nostrils." As the Lord looks over humankind, those in whom he has breathed the breath of life, he takes his own deep breath and detects a scent. According to the book of Revelation, it is the sweet smell of incense that he detects, golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of his saints (5:8).

Yes, in the middle of all that bad breath of unbelief, the Lord rejoices in the minty-fresh breath of those whose mouths have been cleansed by the gospel. As those on whom Jesus has breathed and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit," we call impenitent singers to repentance. We offer them the sweet-smelling breath freshener called forgiveness. We remember that the text of the sacred music they sing, the Word of God, does not return to him empty, but accomplishes the purpose of breathing into lifeless bodies, dem dry bones, the sweet-smelling breath of life. Some unbelieving professional musicians may even sing the texts of Christ only out of selfish, cut-throat

ambition. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this we rejoice. Our throats shout the hope that fills us. Faith, hope and love.

I love music. One of the great evidences of God's grace in my life is that he caused me to be adopted into a family that loves music. I also love language and words. Another great evidence of God's grace in my life is that he allowed me to be trained in a ministerial education system that values language.

I have not always been sure, however, that these two great loves of my life, music and language, have a terrific relationship of their own. I hear questions like these: With all of the controversy about styles of music, wouldn't it better to get along with just the bare Word in worship? Or if the Word of God is so powerful in and of itself, how come even music with barely understandable syllables can move people so much more deeply? Where does the power of a good hymn reside; in the text, in the melody, or in some mystical harmonic fusion of the two?

Martin Luther appears to have considered the same questions. "I am not satisfied with someone who despises music," he said, "as all fanatics do; for music is an endowment and a gift of God, not a gift of men. It also drives away the devil and makes people cheerful...I place music next to theology and give it the highest praise. And we see how David and all saints put their pious thoughts into verse, rhyme, and songs, because music reigns in times of peace...He who knows music has a good nature. Necessity demands that music be kept in the schools. A schoolmaster must know how to sing; otherwise I do not look at him. And before a youth is ordained into the ministry, he should practice music in school."

This expression of Luther, "Music is an outstanding gift of God and next to theology," used to explain the relationship between music and the Word of God well enough for me. But a more recent meditation on Colossians 3:16--"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God"—has led me to a conclusion about the purpose of God in joining music and his sacred Word so closely in worship. God lets his Word be coupled to so powerful a force as music because both of them speak to the whole person God has created: intellect, emotion and will. Just like music, and with music, the Word of God is intended for every part of us—not just for our minds, but also for our emotions; not just for our public lives, but also for the desires of our inmost, private being. The Word of God is for every part of us, and God wants music to play a role in taking it there.

The Word of God in music helps us to see that things are not always what they seem. What bothers you the most about our church? The next time you are tempted to criticize an area of your congregation's work or your synod's work, try to do it after singing Martin Rinkart's "Now Thank We All Our God." No, wait, first you have to hear the background of the hymn. Have you ever heard the recording of the expert on hymnology, Erik Routley (*Christian Hymns, an Introduction to their Story*, Princeton: Prestige Publications, 1980, 6 audiocassettes), telling this story? It seems that Rinkart was a pastor in Germany during the Thirty Years War. In the last years of the war his little city was captured by armies on three different occasions. At one point Pastor Rinkart was the negotiator for the city with one of the armies. Then plague overtook the area. Rinkart lost his wife and some of his children and performed funerals for thousands of members of his congregation. Now listen to his hymn:

Now thank we all our God With hearts and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things has done, In whom his world rejoices,
Who from our mother's arms Has blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love And still is ours today.

Oh, may this bounteous God Through all our life be near us
With ever-joyful hearts And blessed peace to cheer us
And keep us in his grace And guide us when perplexed
And free us from all ills In this world and the next. (CW 610)

When music takes the Word of God directly to our attitudes, the Holy Spirit causes us to abandon our pettiness, removing our hearts of stone and replacing them with warm, beating hearts of thankfulness.

Let all things now living A song of thanksgiving
To God our Creator triumphantly raise,
Who fashioned and made us, Protected and stayed us
Who still guides us on to the end of our days.
God's banners are o'er us; His light goes before us
A pillar of fire shining forth in the night,
Till shadows have vanished And darkness is banished,
As forward we travel from light into light. (CW 260)

We raise our songs of thanksgiving even in difficult circumstances, even when we aren't feeling our best. Anyone living a conscious life of faith knows that sin is constantly getting in the way. It's hard to feel good about ourselves. It's hard to feel forgiven. But God knows our hearts even better than we do. His reality intrudes on any pity party our selfish nature can get going. God knows just what we need. We need his promises, set to music.

When I despair in the face of sin and death, he leads me to sing,

I know that my Redeemer lives;
What comfort this sweet sentence gives!
He lives, he lives, who once was dead;
He lives, my ever-living Head! (CW152)

When you feel like you cannot go on, you hear this refrain:

And he will raise you up on eagles' wings,
Bear you on the breath of dawn,
Make you to shine like the sun,
And hold you in the palm of his hand. (CW 440)

When no one else seems to love me, I still know that

I am Jesus' little lamb;
Ever glad at heart I am,
For my shepherd gently guides me,
Knows my needs and well provides me
Loves me ev'ry day the same,
Even calls me by my name. (CW 432)

The content of the hymn stanzas brings us to the most important part of worship. It's not the music. It's not the preparation. It's not the fellowship. What is it? The single most important aspect of worship is the gospel. The gospel!

"Of course the gospel is important," you fine Lutherans admit. "We all know that, it's basic, so let's get past it." No, let's linger on it, and savor it.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. All are justified freely by God's grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting anyone's sins against them. All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins. I forgive you all your sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Do you thrill to those words? For a variety of reasons, all of them involving sin, we are tempted to pass these words by in favor of exalted rhetoric. We want to be thrilled and inspired. But without releasing the preacher from his responsibility of presenting the gospel in fresh, textual language each time we are in worship, we thrill to the plain and simple words of the gospel when we see God's point of view.

Sometimes we see no results when the Word of God, law and gospel is spoken. But things are not always what they seem. We see nothing, words disappearing in the wind. God sees the Holy Spirit blowing like

the wind wherever he pleases. We see a message that does not seem to be getting through. God sees a rider on a white horse, with all of the tension of impending war, setting out to conquer the earth. We see limited action even after consistent scriptural presentation. God sees a fire more powerful and dangerous than what burned out of control recently on the Apache reservation, leaving thousands of acres of forest devastated. God sees a hammer that breaks into small pieces even the solid mountain rock that survived the fire in Apacheland below the black branches of the trees that took a hundred years to grow. We may see indifference to the Word; God sees painful, incurable sores of guilt on the hearts of those who refuse to repent. We see the penitent still struggling with feelings of guilt; God sees their heart of hearts healed in the balm of Gilead.

How important is the gospel? Without it we have no worship. With it we have all that we need.

Why the liturgy then? If the gospel is truly all that we need, perhaps we can live with that constantly repeated, but—page 15 this morning again? Don't you know that the definition of frustration is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results? Educators used to say *repetitio est mater studiorum*, "repetition is the mother of studies." Now educators know that the key to learning is novelty, don't they?

Using the liturgy for corporate worship may seem to be old-fashioned or ethnocentric. But things are not always what they seem.

There is a letter circulating among us in the last few months that touches on the connection between the liturgy and the gospel. Here it is in part:

The value of the Christian liturgy and of classic Lutheran hymnody has always been its content. Where the liturgy and Lutheran hymns are, "Nobody leaves [worship] without knowing Jesus a little bit better." The liturgy is not only about cognitive outcomes, of course. For the sake of touching the human emotions (and to bring fitting offerings to God) Christians have always adorned with music and art the truths imbedded in the liturgy. But what makes the liturgy valuable is not the music and the art. Indeed the music and the art of the liturgy can and must change, for people change. The heart of the Christian liturgy is its content—what it testifies about Christ in its prayers, songs, texts, calendar, and meal. The liturgy allows the Church to put into place that which the Holy Spirit uses—indeed, the only thing the Holy Spirit uses—to convert and enlighten unbelievers and to strengthen and empower believers.

There are voices in the church today that insist they can proclaim Christ without using the liturgy [in worship]. As an observant churchman [in a recent *Forward in Christ* article], Pastor [Wayne] Mueller understands that good intentions do not always translate into good actions. From his view of both the historical and the contemporary church he can observe that the loss of the Christian liturgy has invariably (not inevitably, but invariably) led the Lutheran Church away from a focus on Christ. There is a reason that confessional Lutherans, past and present, have emphasized the liturgy, and the reason is not that they are anti-growth, anti-youth, or hopeless Germanophiles. From Luther to Walther to Mueller, confessional Lutherans have retained the liturgy because its content safeguards gospel proclamation. We can give up Elizabethan language, Anglican chant music, and Renaissance hymn tunes if we must (and in some cases we must and we ought!), but the Lutheran church abandons the liturgy at its peril (James Tiefel, letter, 2/27/02).

More than one Christian church body has preserved the liturgy but abandoned the gospel. Some of those today teach very clearly that good works are necessary for salvation. But because they have preserved the liturgy and the gospel imbedded there, because the Word of God has been spoken in the lectionary and the sacraments have been administered according to their institution by Christ, through the centuries you will find believers in those churches. We call them Christian.

We must not rely on the liturgy to preserve the gospel. The Lord himself preserves the gospel in each generation by the faithful application of his Word. The Lord supplies his Church with public ministers of that gospel. And those Christian ministers, together with the believers in their care, use the liturgy because it brings us the gospel. It brings us Christ.

Yes, using the liturgy well takes some effort. But at the end of worship, don't we want to be able to say, "My feet is tired, but my soul is rested"?

I don't know what you see every week in your congregation at the end of worship. Wonderful things have happened there. Believers have received the precious promises of the living Lord in Word and sacrament.

As a family they have striven to give God their best, in joyful response to his love. In worship they have had the glimpse, the promise, the foretaste of the festal joy. It seems like there is nothing more they could ask for. But things are not always what they seem. The best is yet to come. Today I lift up my eyes and see you saints. Some day I will also see the angels.

Lord, let at last Thine angels come,
To Abram's bosom bear me home,
That I may die unfearing;
And in its narrow chamber keep
My body safe in peaceful sleep
Until Thy reappearing.
And then from death awaken me
That these mine eyes with joy may see
O Son of God, Thy glorious face,
My Savior and my Fount of grace.
Lord Jesus Christ,
My prayer attend, my prayer attend,
And I will praise Thee without end. (*TLH 429*)