

Chanting: Why Does Pastor “Sing” So Much

by the Rev. Paul L. Beisel for HigherThings.org (mod.)

While often absent from services during much of the twentieth century, the past couple of decades have ushered in a great resurgence in the historic practice of chanting in Lutheran congregations. While many teenage readers may not remember a time before chanted services, others who are unfamiliar with the practice might wonder why.

One likely reason for the return to chanting among us is the realization that chanting no more makes one a *Roman Catholic* than does reading the Epistle or the Gospel in the Church. When Protestant Christianity made its way into the New World, it did not leave its anti-Catholic sentiments behind. Following the lead of their Puritanical neighbors, many of our Lutheran ancestors who came to North America utterly rejected anything that resembled a Catholic service, including chanting.

Happily, there were a few Lutherans who escaped this prejudice, like C.F.W. Walther, the first president of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Walther refused to let criticism of chanting by Lutheran pastors stand, writing in *Der Lutheraner* (pre-cursor to the *Lutheran Witness*): “If you insist upon calling every element in the Divine Service “Romish” that has been used by the Roman Catholic Church, it must follow that the reading of the Epistle and Gospel is also “Romish”; Indeed, it is mischief to sing or preach in church, for the Roman Church has done this also...”

Lutherans who are opposed to chanting might be surprised to hear that several of the chants used in our services today were composed by Luther himself. Like many theologians and pastors before him, Luther understood the gift that God had given in music, echoing the long-held belief that “*next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise.*” If your pastor chants the Words of Institution during the Communion service, you can thank not Rome, but *Luther*.

The common practice of Luther’s day was for the Words of Christ to be said inaudibly by the priest, and Luther believed that the whole church should hear those words. And what better way to make them heard than to set them to music? So it was Luther who

arranged the chant that is commonly used for Christ’s words instituting the Sacrament of the Altar. Not only did Luther compose chants for the Words of Institution, he did so also for the Epistle and Gospel readings, and allowed for the Creed to be sung as well in his *Deutsche Messe* (German Mass). No one can say that Luther was opposed to chanting.

Is chanting absolutely necessary for a valid celebration of the Lord’s Supper, or is it somehow more pleasing to God than speaking? Not at all! There is a time and a place for both in Christian worship. Whether you chant or speak God’s Word or prayers to God, what matters above all is faith. Chanting does not make one any more of a Christian than anyone else, or any less of one for that matter. There are, however, several advantages to chanting that pastors and congregations are beginning once again to acknowledge. Some of these are explained by Rev. David Petersen in the *Liturgy and Hymns* booklet for a 2003 *Higher Things* Conference: “Chanting is meant to make the words more distinct and easier to hear. It also lends beauty to the service. It helps to set Divine Words apart from everyday, secular words and ceremonies. The music is deliberately simple. It is intended to carry the words, not to interpret them. That is part of what distinguished chanting from singing” (p. 4).

Furthermore, chanting helps the congregation slow down and recite Psalms in unison, rather than having three or four people at the end of the psalm while the rest are still in the middle. Chanting also tends to be easier on the pastor’s voice, and makes it easier for one to project. Chanting also aids in the learning process. Think of all the song lyrics you know. I’ll bet it is easier to recall those lyrics when you sing them than when you just try to speak them. It is the same with Holy Scripture. Set it to music, and suddenly you just made it that much easier to remember it!

Inevitably you will have this experience at some point in your life: you bring a friend to church and after the service he or she says to you, “Why did your pastor sing everything? Isn’t that what Catholics do?” To which you can respond: “Yes. So is reading the Epistle and Gospel, singing, preaching, and praying.” And then, if you really want to sound intelligent, you can say in the words attributed to St. Augustine: “He who sings prays twice.” Happy chanting!