

Chanting
In the Evangelical
Lutheran Church

by

The Reverend David L. Adler, Pastor
Bethlehem Ev. Lutheran Church
Palestine, Texas

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Our teens may not remember a time when our Divine Services did not include chanting. However, most of us can recall a time when fully chanted services were almost non-existent in Lutheran churches. As a boy, I never heard the Introit, Psalms and Collects chanted. Of course, we sang hymns and liturgical responses, but our Pastor spoke all of his parts. That’s probably true in the experience of the majority of Lutherans over age 40. So, it begs the question, why do Lutherans chant now?

The word “chant” is from the Latin *canto* – “I sing.” That leads me to another question: Why do we *sing* hymns ... why not *speak* them instead?

First of all, we sing because the Bible commands us to sing: “**Sing praises to the LORD, who sits enthroned in Zion! Tell among the peoples his deeds!**” (Psalm 9:11); “**Sing praises to the LORD, O you his saints, and give thanks to his holy name**” (Psalm 30:4).¹ The church of both Old and New Testaments has always had singing. The Psalms have musical directions because *they were meant to be sung*. (Get out your Webster’s Dictionary and lookup the word “Psalm.” You’ll see that it comes from a Greek word that means “to pluck a stringed instrument.” The original Hebrew word meant “praises.”)

The Psalms are the prayer book of the Holy Scriptures, and they are a treasured heritage in teaching the Church and the children of God how to pray. They were also inspired by the Lord to be chanted or sung among His people. For this reason, the Psalms may be described not only as a prayer book, but as a sacred hymnal. Thus, St. Paul teaches Christians to sing ... as he and Silas did in prison (Acts 16:25), and as Christ and His Apostles did on Maundy Thursday (St. Matthew 26:30). (“Introduction to the Liturgy”).

Secondly, we sing because it is what angels are described as doing, it is what the saints of old, described in the Bible, have always done. Great care must be taken in selecting church music so that it conforms to the Biblical text and so that the beauty of the music does not steal the glory from the text. Chanting is that form of music best suited for not covering up the text ... it does not impose any foreign emotion and lets the texts speak.

Scripture neither commands nor forbids the chanting of prayers, psalms, or other elements of the liturgy. Yet, there is certainly nothing unscriptural about chanting. Just the opposite. Consider St. Paul’s instruction in his Epistle to the Colossians: “**Let the word of Christ dwell**

¹ Therefore, if you are not currently singing in the Divine Service, you are encouraged to follow the text in the hymnal so that, at the very least, you are participating in “making a joyful noise” in your mind and spirit.

in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (Col. 3:16).

Singing Psalms, hymns and prayers has been done by Christians throughout the centuries. In the first centuries after the New Testament was written “Christians were not doing anything new when they sang psalms and hymns during the service, but were doing what believers had always done” (Beisel).

But what about chanting? What is its background? By the time of the 8TH century King Charlemagne decided that the churches in Gaul (now modern France) needed to be singing in worship as they did in Rome. So, he asked for manuscripts to be created to allow this music to be sung in his realm as well. This is the beginning of the spread of Gregorian Chant, named after Pope Gregory I.

Did Pope Gregory (d. 604) actually compose the chant which bears his name? Historians have difficulty making any concrete connection. We have existing medieval Chant manuscripts dating back to the 9TH century; making it the oldest written music. At some point, it was named after Gregory, perhaps because of his renowned love for music. With Gregory’s name and authority attached, this style of singing the Scriptures, essentially centered in the Church of Rome, spread throughout Europe.

Chanting was used especially in the Divine Service but was also used for the Daily Prayer Offices (e.g., Matins, Lauds, Vespers, Compline, etc.). This liturgical singing was mostly connected with the text of the Bible, especially the Psalms. So, chanting would have been associated with the church as a free flowing, melodious, and reverent style of music calling to mind the text of Scripture.

Originally these chant melodies were written for use with Latin. They were sung in unison (no harmonies) and without accompaniment. What characterizes chant most of all is its restrained nature. While being both joyful and fearful it is also moderate; ‘held back’ if you will. Chant is ordered and structured, preventing personal whims, and arbitrary expressions from smothering the text of Scripture.

But is it Lutheran? Again, remember that the Reformation was not a revolt against the Roman Catholic Church, it’s culture, and all the beneficial things that had come down from the Early Church to the medieval period. The Reformation was a *purification* ... a *purging* of that which was contrary to Holy Scripture and *preserving* that which was good and in accord with Scripture.

Is chanting absolutely necessary for liturgical worship or is it somehow more pleasing to God than speaking? Not at all! 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. There are special occasions, high festivals, notable anniversaries—when chanting is almost indispensable. For the leader not to chant is to deprive the congregation of a liturgical experience that it is rightfully due.

Presently, at Bethlehem, from what the Elders and I have heard, there appear to be more people that like chanting than there are who dislike it. However, not *everyone* will like *everything* in *every* service. It’s true for me. I select hymns to be sung in worship that I don’t particularly like. I select them because they fit the theme of the day and because I know that many of my parishioners like them. I can pretty much guarantee that YOU will NOT like EVERYTHING in EVERY service EVERY week. But what you disliked, someone else loved and appreciated. That’s the way of things. We try to strike a balance. *LSB* helps us do that. Some services have more chanting, some less. We currently use five different settings on Sundays. Divine Service Setting Three has the most chanting. Divine Service Setting 1 and Matins have less. Divine Service Setting 4 and 5 have none (except for the Introit). Remember, it’s not about you or me. Our worship is about GOD and it is CORPORATE!

St. Augustine is credited in the saying: “He who sings prays twice.” Whether or not he actually said this, it is a fine reminder that our song is not just directed at us, it is directed toward God. When the church chants, we do so not only for our own edification ... we are also praising God: ***“Oh sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things! His right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him.”*** (Psalm 98:1)

In the Church, we have our own vocabulary, our own “language,” and our own way of expressing it. Liturgical Chant is a reverent means of communicating the Word of God clearly without inserting too much of our own personality or interpretation into the text. It seems right that a church that really wants the world to hear the Gospel would NOT opt to simply be another voice fading into pop culture but would rather want to sound a different note ... one that is distinct from that of the culture ... one that is other-worldly ... one that is heavenly.

Other benefits of chanting include:

- helping the Pastor and the congregation to slow down and recite Psalms in unison.
- making it easier on the Pastor's voice to project.
- aiding in the learning process ... Most of us learned the alphabet by singing it to "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." Consider song lyrics: it is easier to recall those lyrics when singing them than when just speaking them. So also with Holy Scripture. When set to music, it is easier to remember.

Someone once told me that services without chanting are preferred because "we are not Catholic" ... to which I responded, "Oh yes, we are." I meant that we *are* "catholic" (small c). Chanting is part of the worship history and tradition of the "one holy, catholic and apostolic church" ... it is *our* worship history and tradition! Lutherans have chanted throughout the majority of our history because chanting is the heritage of all western Christians. We should NOT think of it as something only for Roman Catholics. It is a timeless way to proclaim the Word of God. And today, when we chant, we are proclaiming to the world that we are not just adopting another latest-greatest-feel-good worldly fad as so much of our own church body has done in importing vapid "contemporary" music into worship. No, we proclaim and present an ancient truth in an ancient way.

If chanting is only for "Roman Catholics" why did the last two hymnals (Lutheran Worship, 1982 & Lutheran Service Book, 2006) include chanting? Because these hymnals envision the Divine Service being sung or chanted. "The musical parts for presiding minister, assisting ministers, and congregation are printed in full." (*Guide to Introducing Lutheran Worship* 26)

The corporate worship of Lutheran Christians has traditionally been sung. This is true not only of the congregation whose song was freed by the Reformation to take its rightful place in the liturgy, but it is equally true of the song of those who exercise particular roles of leadership in worship, namely, the presiding and assisting ministers.

Not only is the action of the liturgy given a more noble form when solemnized in song, the singing of the liturgy as it is shared by pastor, assisting ministers, and the congregation adds a beauty and intensity not possible in any other way, "enlarging and elevating the adoration of our giver God" (LW, p. 6). The singing of the liturgy by presiding and assisting ministers, as provided for in *Lutheran Worship* (1982), raises the doing of the liturgy to a plane beyond the overly personalistic and idiosyncratic—so common in much worship today—to that of truly corporate song. (Schalk 250.)

In introducing his *Formulae Missae*² of 1523, Luther wrote:

It is not now nor ever has been our intention to abolish the liturgical service of God completely, but rather to purify the one that is now in use from the wretched accretions which corrupt it and to point out an evangelical use. ... Later, when chanting began, the Psalms were changed into the introit; the Angelic Hymn *Gloria in Excelsis: et in terra pax*, the graduals, the alleluias, the Nicene Creed, the Sanctus, the Agnus Dei, and the *communio*³ were added. All of these are unobjectionable, especially the ones that are sung *de tempore*⁴ or on Sundays. For these days by themselves testify to ancient purity, the canon excepted. (*Luther's Works* 20-21)

I stated above that chanting was used in the Daily Prayer Offices. About these Luther wrote:

Now that they are free from the useless, bothersome babbling of the Seven Hours,⁵ it would be fine if every morning, noon, and evening they would read, instead, at least a page or two from the Catechism, the Prayer Book, the New Testament, or something else from the Bible and would pray the Lord's Prayer for themselves and their parishioners. (*The Book of Concord* 358)

Luther was opposed to the burden and obligation that made the performance of these seven daily prayer services to be a necessary work, earning merit before God. He was NOT opposed to the music, however. Luther used and promoted Gregorian Chant and viewed it as exceptionally suitable and appropriate for Christian Worship. He freed Christians to make use of this music, and to chant the psalms and other Scripture as a sacrifice of praise to God. Luther saw this as part of the excellent heritage that came from the medieval Church ... a heritage to be retained.

In the 16TH century, after the Reformation, if you worshiped in a Lutheran Church that still used Latin you would have heard chanting. Even in Germany, Latin was still the universal language and was often used in metropolitan areas, especially those that had schools and universities. People understood Latin and it continued in use in the Lutheran Church, as did Gregorian chant. To this they combined hymns and portions of the service in German ... bringing the new to the old. Then chant based on the Gregorian style was composed in German.

² The Order of Service for Wittenburg

³ A chant sung during the distribution of the Lord's Supper.

⁴ Propers for Sundays and festivals, distinguished from *de sanctis*, a term that refers to the calendar of saints.

⁵ the canonical hours, daily prayers prescribed by the medieval Breviary.

Chanting continued in the church through the 17TH and 18TH centuries. In the 18TH century two influences did much to rid the church of chanting: pietism and rationalism. Pietism was an anti-church movement based on individual piety. Rationalism was an anti-religious movement subjecting all revelation to reason. Both of these influences also invaded Lutheran circles. Thankfully their influence was temporary.

Pietism produced an unbalanced type of Christianity which overemphasized personal experience and life and conduct. By its strong opposition to “worldly pleasures” it encouraged a new type of asceticism that led to legalism and severe criticism of the “Un-awakened.” If personal Christianity was all-important, then the objective means of grace became less and less important. The historic liturgy of the church gave way to expressions of individual ideas and emotions.⁶ Pietism with its intensely personal limitations neither understood nor long used what remained of the rich and polished forms of the church’s historical liturgical system.

Pietism, lacking intellectual strength, quickly played out its part—to be replaced by Rationalism or the “Enlightenment.” At least Pietism could be recognized as Christian. The Enlightenment moved beyond what it considered the “superstition” of Christianity. The ideal of happiness was substituted for the divine plan of redemption. Practical interests rather than doctrines or high spirituality were stressed in the pulpits. Scripture was minimized and the miracles explained by natural causes. Within the sphere of worship, Rationalism was wholly destructive. The service was mutilated beyond recognition. The church building became a mere place of assembly, the pulpit a lecture platform from which the minister gave moral instruction. The Sacrament of the Altar was reduced to an empty form and was no longer celebrated every Sunday and Holy Day but observed in Reformed fashion four times a year. (*Guide to Introducing Lutheran Worship* 14-15)

How did chanting come to Lutherans in America?

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. (Beisel)

presiding and assisting ministers to neglect their respective roles in the singing of the liturgy is to abandon the traditional practice of the Lutheran Church, often replacing it with an approach that is highly individualistic, overly personal, and inappropriately informal, and thereby depriving congregations of the ennobling experience of a sung liturgy that is rightfully theirs. (Schalk 250).

Chanting is musical speaking on one or more tones. It is not solo singing. Clear articulation and maintaining a fluid pace are more important than tonal quality. Syllables are not to be run together, but are sung evenly, flowing along smoothly with normal accents. Those who chant should *never* consider this a virtuoso solo. Likewise, one should *never* use vibrato when chanting, to do so draws attention to the one chanting instead of the Biblical text. I cringe when I hear a cantor chant with a forced and dramatic basso profundo as though performing in the Barber of Seville.

A helpful point of comparison may be vestments. ... The purpose of vestments is to cover the person so that we do not focus on the individual but upon the means of grace (Gospel and Sacraments) and the office that person holds. What is worn in addition to the alb or the cassock/surplice indicates the office the person holds by virtue of call, ordination or consecration. Another purpose of vestments is to adorn the liturgist and assistants to indicate the reverence, joy, and holiness of the Divine Service. This brings us back to chant in the liturgy of the church.

In many ways chant serves as a “vestment” for the voice. Chant, as a kind of combination between singing and speaking, serves to de-emphasize the idiosyncrasies of the person conducting the liturgy or assisting and helps to emphasize the mystical and sacramental unity and communion between Christ and His Bride, the Church. In this way also, chant serves as a kind of vocal “uniform” like the basic liturgical vestments or even the clerical shirt and collar. Theologically speaking, personality doesn’t then matter much from one pastor to another so long as the Gospel is preached purely and the sacraments are administered according to Christ’s institution (Acts 2:42; Augsburg Confession VII). Chant helps convey this uniformity in office and the transparochial nature of the church’s ministerium. This means that it points to the continuity of the church beyond simply our own local congregation and beyond the moment and century that we live in now. (Frahm)

⁶ Like so much of “contemporary worship” today.

Chanting communicates the Biblical “text at the higher level of intensity suggested by song” (Pfatteicher and Messerli 89). Chanting adds immensely to the spirit of the service. Chant allows the text of Scripture be the master. In particular the Psalm tones are quite simple, yet carry the text of Scripture without importing a foreign emotion. Chant is reserved and holds back from being too exuberant and by doing so it allows God’s Word to dominate.

Chanting is an elevated form of speech, which honors the words and makes them more distinct and easier to hear. In its purest forms, the music of chanting follows the natural flow and rhythm of the text, rather than imposing itself upon the words. Its purpose is simply to carry the words, not to embellish them. This is part of what distinguished chanting from singing. Chanting does, however, help to set Divine Words apart from the routine chatter of everyday speaking. (“Introduction to the Liturgy”)

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. (Petersen 4)

... Chant helps to emphasize that the Divine Service is heaven coming down to earth in the means of Christ’s grace (Revelation 4,5; Isaiah 6:1-7; Acts 2:42; I Corinthians 11; Luke 22:27). It communicates the divine mystery of this transaction of the means of grace and faith. (Frahm)

Because we are in the presence of Christ, every action is elevated to a higher and more beautiful level. Poetry, especially when it is sung or chanted is the way in which we elevate speech above the common or mundane. (This is why people sing love songs, for instance.) What is sung is not ordinary or simply for amusement. (*Frequently Asked Questions*. www.gloriachristi.org/id49.html)

It is of no surprise, then, that Luther not only encouraged the use of chanting but also provided direction as to how it might serve the Word of God.

In Luther’s view, those who were to lead in the public worship of the church needed to be well-trained in music to meet those responsibilities. “Before a youth is ordained into the ministry, he should practice music in school.” He was especially scornful of those “who want to be theologians when they cannot even sing.” For

However, there were a few Lutherans who rejected such intolerance, like Dr. C.F.W. Walther, the first President of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Walther defended Lutheran Pastors against any criticism of chanting. Walther said chanting no more makes one a Roman Catholic than does reading the Epistle or the Gospel in the Church. He wrote:

Whenever the Divine Service once again follows the old Evangelical-Lutheran agendas (or church books) it seems that many raise a great cry that it is “Roman Catholic:” “Roman Catholic” when the pastor chants “The Lord be with you” and the congregation responds by chanting “and with thy spirit;” “Roman Catholic” when the pastor chants the collect and the blessing and the people respond with a chanted “Amen.” Prove to me that this chanting is contrary to the Word of God, then I, too, will call it “Roman Catholic” and have nothing more to do with it. However, you cannot prove this to me. 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. ... Those who cry out should remember that the Roman Catholic Church possesses every beautiful song of the old orthodox Church. The chants and antiphons and responses were brought into the church long before the false teachings of Rome crept in. This Christian Church since the beginning, even in the Old Testament, has derived great joy from chanting. ... For more than 1,700 years orthodox Christians have participated joyfully in the Divine Service. Should we, today, carry on by saying that such joyful participation is ‘Roman Catholic?’ God forbid! Therefore, as we continue to hold and to restore our wonderful Divine Services in places where they have been forgotten, let us boldly confess that our worship forms do not unite us with modern sects or with the Church of Rome; rather, they join us to the one, holy Christian Church that is as old as the world and is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. (Walther 163)

Chanting reemerged in Lutheran Worship 36 years ago, in part, because *LW* (Lutheran Worship, 1982) returned us to our historic roots. It is amazing what one learns when actually becoming a student of history rather than assessing everything through the lens of one’s own limited experience. When I became such a student of Worship and Liturgy over 35 years ago I discovered that, with few exceptions, Lutherans have *always* chanted ... and have done so since the Reformation. Martin Luther not only recommended chanting but also composed chants.

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.” (Beisel)

It is uniquely “Lutheran” whenever I chant the Words of Institution during the Service of the Sacrament. You can thank *Luther*, not Rome. The practice of Luther’s day was for the *Verba* (Words of Institution) to be said *sotto voce* (inaudibly) by the priest. Luther believed they should be heard. Setting the words to music is unsurpassed in serving that purpose. Luther arranged the chant that is used for Christ’s words of Institution in our Divine Service Setting 3. Luther also composed chants for the Epistle and Gospel readings. Luther was hardly opposed to chanting.

Again, let us remember that just because something was NOT done for a brief period during the 20TH century, we dare not conclude that this is the traditional Lutheran practice for the centuries preceding. For example, historically and traditionally Lutherans ONLY used a Chalice for the blood of Christ in the Eucharist. Individual cups were never seen. We got that idea from the Reformed churches who did not use wine. Lutherans in America “borrowed” this from the Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians and Congregationalists because we intentionally (unfortunately) wanted to look more “Reformed” and less “Catholic”. Does that mean that receiving the Holy Blood of Christ in anything other than a chalice is wrong? No, but it is not traditionally “Lutheran.”

It is also important to note that when *TLH* appeared in 1941, our Pastors stopped chanting primarily because the music for the “Pastor’s chant was not included with The Lutheran Hymnal but put into a supplementary volume of Music of the Liturgy” (Frahm). This inconvenience led to the inadvertent loss of chanting for over four decades. Even still, pull out your old *TLH* and take notice of all the printed directions which say “*Then the Minister shall say or chant.*” This validates the claim that *TLH* intended that Pastors chant as they had previously done in the German hymnals.

With the publication of both *LW* and *LSB* our traditional liturgical dialog has been resurrected, and congregations have grown more and more accustomed to the practice (though some still see things like chanting, and making the sign of the cross, as “Catholic” and therefore unwelcome, if not *verboten*, for Lutherans).

Lutheran Service Book (2006) has continued and in many ways expanded what was begun in *Lutheran Worship*, providing chants for

the pastor, chant tones for the Psalms and for the prayers in the Divine Service and Daily Prayer Offices. (Beisel)

Now it is not uncommon, especially here at Bethlehem, for us to chant the Introids and Psalms, and to hear the Pastor chant not only his parts of the service, but also the Collects, the Verse and in some services even more of the Liturgy of the Sacrament (e.g., the Lord’s Prayer and Words of Institution).

If you grew up in the ALC (American Lutheran Church) or the LCA (Lutheran Church in America) [now both part of the very liberal ELCA after the 1988 merger] you likely used the *SBH* (Service Book and Hymnal, 1958). I find it interesting that this hymnal DID include the Pastor’s music for chanting in two different settings. How or why chanting disappeared from these church bodies before the publication of their *LBW* (Lutheran Book of Worship, 1978) is beyond my knowledge, since I grew up in the LC-MS.

Simple stated, what you may SAY is “traditionally Lutheran” may be more about your isolated experiences than what Lutherans have actually been doing in worship for centuries. Do we decide what is or what is not Lutheran based on what we personally like or dislike ... or how we feel? No. So, to have an emotional reaction against chanting and declare it “Roman Catholic” represents an uninformed opinion.⁷ Consider the following:

Liturgical chant has a long history from the time of the founding of the Missouri Synod and other synods in North America, to the time of Luther in Germany and Scandinavia, on back to the early church and indeed into the worship of the Old Testament believers in the Messiah. It is nothing new and it is not uniquely Roman Catholic at all. Among Christians one not only finds chant among Roman Catholics but also Anglicans (Episcopalians), Eastern Orthodox, more liturgical Presbyterians, and many Lutherans. Historically speaking, it is representative of the majority of worshipping Christians throughout the centuries. As is clear from Martin Luther, his liturgical reforms sought only to revise what was in error and leave intact and cleansed what good gifts were passed on in the church’s tradition that were unproblematic (i.e., if it isn’t broke, don’t fix it!). Both of the Divine Service orders produced by Martin Luther featured chant prominently (Formula Missae and the Deutsche Messe⁸). (Frahm)

⁷ As an aside, why have I never heard anyone complain, “That’s too Baptist”?

⁸ 1523 and 1526 respectively