Gordon W. Lathrop

New Pentecost or Joseph's Britches? Reflections on the History and Meaning of the Worship Ordo in the Megachurches[1]

Considerable media attention has recently been given to the phenomenon of the "megachurch,"[2] a name used for several large Christian congregations in the United States which are principally noted for their massively attended "seeker services." While the actual number of these congregations is relatively small,[3] the attention they have received and their subsequent influence in current discussions of "church" and of "worship" is very great. One commentator calls them "the next church," forecasting the developments he expects to see in American church life in the coming post-modern decades. Another widely respected observer of congregational life says that the Willow Creek congregation in suburban Chicago, arguably the most famous of the megachurches, is also "the most influential church in North America and perhaps the world."[4]

These congregations, sometimes called "full-service churches," do share many traits beyond their style of worship.[5] They make

Gordon W. Lathrop is the Charles A. Schieren Professor of Liturgy at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia.

[1] The following paper was delivered as a lecture at a meeting of the *Arbeitskreis der Materialstelle für Gottesdienst* of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Bavaria, held in Schloss Hirschberg, Germany, 22–24 June 1998.

[2] See, for example, the articles by Gustav Niebuhr in the *New York Times*, 16–18 April 1995, and Charles Trueheart, "Welcome to the Next Church," *Atlantic Monthly* 278:2 (August 1996) 37–58.

[3] For example, there are only two congregations associated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America included in the short list assembled by Trueheart: Community Church of Joy, Phoenix, Arizona, and Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, Burnsville, Minnesota.

[4] Lyle Schaller, quoted in G. A. Pritchard, *Willow Creek Seeker Services* (Grand Rapids: Baker 1996) 12.

[5] For the remarkably parallel histories and characteristics of two megachurches from the point of view of their principal leaders see Lynne and Bill

use of extensive networks of small groups and of volunteer activities, carefully designed to match the perceived needs of their participants. Indeed, phrases like "individual needs" and "personal fulfillment" function as major keys to all ministry. The ministers of these congregations are deeply interested in helping people find personally fulfilling lives and they make wide use of therapeutic models for individual success. The congregations have large, salaried staffs, although there is frequently one charismatic leader, at the center of this staff, who has first articulated the "vision." Megachurches have primarily appealed to upper-middle-class people of Euro-American background, though some of their methods are also beginning to be used in pentecostalist African-American circles.

These churches enthusiastically employ marketing research and marketing methods as tools for evangelism, for discovering and attracting their "target audiences." They have very loose ties or no connections at all to any American denomination, although, as we shall see, they have deep roots in the history of American revivalism and "evangelicalism." They make use of a relatively conservative revivalist theology, although they eschew as divisive and as unhelpful to evangelism the taking of those conservative public stands on controversial social issues — e.g., abortion or homosexuality — with which that theology would have been traditionally associated.[6] The megachurches are often engaged in forming their own marketing networks of congregations and ministries, each major congregation offering itself as a "teaching parish," providing programs, workshops and publications for ministers and leaders who are eager to emulate their success. And, in worship, they use the "weekend services" either to be entirely "church for the unchurched" or, at the very least, to be "seeker sensitive" in design. They make little or no use of the classic meaning of Sunday nor of the liturgical year, except as these may be already present in common cultural consciousness. They frequently also offer a mid-week service for "believers," a service that Willow Creek calls, for example, "New Community."

Hybels, *Rediscovering Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1995), and Walt Kallestad, *Entertainment Evangelism: Taking the Church Public* (Nashville: Abingdon 1996).

[6] Note the critique of this absence of social message in Pritchard, 261–65.

It is the shape and meaning of these services, both for "seekers" and for "believers," which will provide the focus for this article. The services themselves are, of course, the most obvious characteristic of the megachurches, although in considering them one does need to keep in mind all the other activities of these congregations. Even more, it is the seeker services and the worship services of the megachurches which have been viewed as most seriously modelling new and radical ideas for the worship practice of all congregations in North America, at least for all congregations that wish to survive and thrive. This paper will thus intentionally consider the worship of the megachurches as symbolic of this larger issue.

THE SHAPE OF MEGACHURCH WORSHIP

At the Community Church of Joy in Phoenix, Arizona, five services are held each weekend, each with slightly different styles of music, but all with a very similar shape. The "order of service" of the Saturday evening "contemporary country" service may stand as representative for all five:

Call to worship, by the Band
Welcome
Opening Song
Special Feature
Gifts, while the Band sings
Message
Closing[7]

Several characteristics are to be noted. There is relatively little participation by the audience at this event. Here that audience sings an opening song, most usually an easily singable chorus, with a strong accent on praise and with the words in a printed leaflet passed out at the door. Other megachurches may use projection screens or large television monitors for any communally used lyrics. The music is largely in the hands of a "band." The "special feature" is most usually a drama, used to set a focus on the theme or problem of the day, a theme that will be dealt with in the message. A collection is received. The preaching is called

[7] Kallestad, 71.

"message" and the only scriptures read in the service are the few verses read at the beginning of this message as text, verses most usually chosen for their concrete help to practical living. No vestments are worn other than some articles of clothing which may accord with the musical style (thus, the preacher and the band may wear cowboy boots and western shirts at the "contemporary country" service) and no pulpit is used. The manner of preaching is often conversational. After the message, the service comes quickly to an end.

It is interesting to set this *ordo* next to the order of the "programming elements" of the weekend seeker services at Willow Creek:[8]

> Prelude of live music (jazz group, orchestra, or rock or country band)
> Congregational song and Greeting
> Vocal music performance
> Scripture, together with a short talk to focus the audience on the topic for the day
> Drama, further raising the day's questions, which will be answered by the preaching
> Announcements of opportunities at the church and reception of an offering
> the Message, taking about 30-40 minutes of the 60-or-70-minute-long service. The speaker concludes the service with a short prayer.

Here, too, several characteristics are to be noted. The room in which the service takes place is a large and gracious auditorium, devoid of religious symbols. No vestments are worn and no pulpit used. Audience participation is limited to the opening song and to the voluntary response to the invitation to greet some other person nearby. At the time of the collection, visitors are explicitly asked to give nothing: they are to be received as guests. The accents which guide the preparation and execution of the service are artistic excellence, studied informality, "flow," the avoidance

[8] Pritchard, 84–88. Cf. Steve Burdan, "Seekers' Service and Believers' Worship," in Robert E. Webber, ed., *The Complete Library of Christian Worship* 3 (Nashville: Star Song 1993) 200.

of any "dead time," and the creation of the whole as a "package," with all the other elements leading the audience toward the speaker's message.

It will be seen that these services have the same outline. What is done at Willow Creek, the pre-eminent church of the movement, is essentially what is done at Joy, the most widely known Lutheran megachurch. In both places, a flow of performed music and drama lead the audience to be ready for the message; then the service is quickly over.

In addition, the mid-week, New Community service of Willow Creek, follows an outline which can be seen as an intensification of the model followed on the weekend:

> Prelude
> Opening greeting
> Exaltation: the assembly sings a series of choruses
> "to create a worshipful atmosphere and to prepare for the message"[9]
> Announcements or "family concerns" of the New Community
> Offering of tithes
> Message, lasting 45 minutes, as extended Bible study
> Exaltation: more praise and worship songs
> and a brief concluding prayer.

Here, essentially the same shape is followed, but now with an accent on the believers' need to praise God, to give at least a tithe of their income, and to learn more of the content of the Bible. Communion is celebrated once a month in this service for believers. Though there is little evidence of public intercessory prayer, the church does teach the importance of private and small group prayer. The Willow Creek Church holds baptismal services at least twice a year for people who have "decided to receive Christ into their lives."[10]

Especially in its "seeker" form, this service is widely seen to be a revolutionary new form in Christianity. One of the ministers at Willow Creek writes, "Willow Creek has started its own tradition

[9] Burdan, 200.

[10] On baptism as a sign of decision at Willow Creek and on resistance to any idea of "baptismal regeneration," see Pritchard, 181, 275.

sui generis that is not derived directly from any denominational or sectarian source."[11] And Walt Kallestad, the senior pastor at Community of Joy, calls his worship planning "coloring outside the lines," a search for whatever is *effective* with modern secular people, since no traditional form is required by the content of the gospel, and the "lines" of traditional, historic ritual are seen to make "no connections to any part of contemporary life."[12] Insofar as both congregations plan worship on Saturday night and Sunday morning which is entirely designed for and actually attended by non-believers, these assertions of novelty may be true. However, one scholar, an evangelical himself with a critically sympathetic opinion of Willow Creek, asserts that "the majority of Willow Creek weekend attenders are churched Larrys who have already made a commitment to Christ. They do not attend the weekday worship services. . . ."[13] The same scholar reports that more than half of the "converts" in the Willow Creek process are already baptized Roman Catholics. In any case, whether or not the idea of a Sunday service entirely for non-Christians and for seekers is to be regarded as a *novum* in Christianity, the shape of the service, its evangelistic intention, and its pairing with some other gathering (like the weeknight service) for the covenanted insiders — these characteristics are not new at all.

Bill Hybels, the senior minister at Willow Creek and the principal speaker at the weekend seeker services of that congregation, honestly acknowledges the pedigree of megachurch worship: ". . . our approach isn't very different from what Billy Graham has done with nearly universal blessing for the last several decades. . . . The event is held in a neutral setting, usually a stadium or a civic center. The music, stage design, terminology — everything that happens in the service — is planned with the nonbelieving person in mind. The program culminates with Graham giving a concise scriptural message that nonbelievers can understand. He then challenges them to receive Christ right then or, if they're not ready, to continue to investigate Christianity

[11] Steve Burdan, "The Seekers' Service/Believers' Worship Churches," in Webber, *Complete Library* 3, 94.

[12] Kallestad, 60

[13] Pritchard, 275. See also Pritchard, 204.

further. Our approach is similar. What may have caused some misunderstanding, though, is our contemporary approach. Because we began in the mid-seventies, while Graham started in an earlier era, and because we were trying to reach a different generation, we've used cutting-edge communication methods: contemporary Christian music, drama, multimedia, video, and dance. But we have harnessed those art forms in the same way that Graham has used soloists, choirs, and testimonies."[14]

The seeker service is thus conceived as an evangelistic revival, explicitly following the shape of a revival service but using up-to-date rhetorical means (e.g., "studied informality")[15] and current technology to present an accessible interpretation of Christianity and to lead a person toward the classic revival goal: the decision to "accept Christ."

THE HISTORY OF THIS SHAPE

The source of the shape and intention of the seeker service, however, is older than the Billy Graham revival. It is also older than the work of Robert Schuller at what could be called the first megachurch, the "Crystal Cathedral" in California, a church which had a strong influence on the development of both Willow Creek and the Community of Joy.[16] And it is older than the patterns used by the youth music groups in which both Hybels and Kallestad had their formative ministerial beginnings.[17] The shape of the worship of the megachurch has its roots rather in the patterns behind Billy Graham revivals, Crystal Cathedral services and evangelistic song-fests for young people: the "camp meeting" of the nineteenth-century American frontier.

The camp meetings themselves had prior models on which they built. Scottish and Scotch-Irish Presbyterians of eighteenth-century North Carolina, Virginia and Maryland and then, as Europeans migrated further west, of Kentucky and Ohio, remembered

[14] Hybels, 174.

[15] One should think also of the "practiced spontaneity" of the great nineteenth-century revival preachers of America. See R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press 1994) 50.

[16] Kallestad, 42, 78–79, 123–26; Pritchard, 49–55.

[17] Kallestad, 23, 60–61; Hybels, 23–42.

the powerful and emotionally moving "communion meetings" of lowland Scotland and of Ulster, and re-enacted them in the new land. These were several day meetings of preaching and teaching and examination which culminated in the admission to the Lord's Supper of those who had been issued a token by the presiding ministers. Some scholars have argued that the power of these events essentially came to replace the old and beloved pageantry of the Mass in the piety of the Scottish farmer, and was intended to do so.[18] In any case, the preaching, examination and commitment to new life did replace the medieval contrition, confession and penance which had formerly been used to "fence the table" and which, in many cases, had come to overshadow the communion itself as the central source and pattern for the Christian life.

In the new country, the "communion season" or the "sacrament meeting" of Scottish Presbyterians was now inserted within that eighteenth-century history of revival or "awakening" that had already shaken much of Calvinist America. And the communion meeting was able to provide a massive attraction amidst the loneliness and colorlessness of the American frontier.

In August, 1801, at Cane Ridge, Kentucky, a sacrament meeting was called — and widely advertized — that soon drew thousands of people and became the symbolic beginning of what is called the "Second Great Awakening." After a few days of preparation, the communion service itself was finally held in the meeting house, and to it only a small proportion of the total attendance, the token-bearers, was finally admitted. But that service came to be dwarfed by the tent-preaching, the outdoor crowds of strangers which no one screened,[19] the extensive campsites, the entertainments, and the spiritual seizures and displays which surrounded it. Indeed, the "preparation" went on for days after the communion service was over, that service no longer being the goal of the event.

Many subsequent sacrament meetings on the frontier came to be marked by the same displays and the same growing marginalization of the sacrament itself. These gatherings were fun and, for many, emotionally fulfilling. Although orthodox Calvinists often

[18] Paul K. Conkin, *Cane Ridge: America's Pentecost* (Madison: University of Wisconsin 1990) 18, 105.

[19] Moore, 47.

did not know what to make of these events and came to distrust them, more optimistic preachers revelled in the possibilities such crowds gave for "revival preaching" and for conversions. Several new American denominations were born in these events, all of them marked by a desire to recover "New Testament Christianity" and all of them characterized by a kind of "edited" Calvinism. In order to believe in the importance of revival preaching, these Christians needed to dismiss predestination and "limited atonement" (the idea that Christ died only for the elect) and embrace instead the importance of the human free will. Indeed, in revival meetings the accent came to fall on the human decision, on the desire to receive Christ, and on the consequent reformed moral life. Baptism was still practiced, but largely as an indication of commitment on the part of those who had so decided. And the communion was still practiced, but, just as in the middle ages, now made very much less important than the new forms of the process of contrition and penance.

In many ways, however, it was no *denomination* which proceeded from the Second Great Awakening, but a wide-spread, trans-denominational, American movement called "evangelicalism." Evangelicals were (and are) Christians that "required, and made central, an arduous, crisis-like conversion, and that, subsequent to this climactic experience, emphasized a warm, spiritual, affectionate form of religion."[20] In its optimistic erosion of orthodox Calvinism, in its accent on individual spiritual journey and individual decision rather communal sacrament, and in its pragmatic interest in whatever could encourage that decision, this movement could be regarded as a quintessential version of the American religion.[21]

This movement expressed itself especially in the most pervasive and influential form of Christian worship known in America, the form James F. White calls "frontier worship."[22] In the earliest camp meetings, two parallel processes had existed side-by-side.[23]

[20] Conkin, 164.

[21] See especially, Harold Bloom, *The American Religion* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1992) 59–75.

[22] James F. White, *Protestant Worship: Traditions in Transition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox 1989) 171–91.

[23] Conkin, 168.

Communion was there for the traditionalists, the old Christians. It was regulated, of course, by the then widespread interpretation of Paul's strictures in 1 Corinthians 11, taken to mean that an arduous preparation must precede the sacrament. But for everyone else, the crowds around the meeting house who would never come inside but who were themselves struggling to "break through to comfort,"[24] there were the new techniques of revival. Those techniques were quickly seen to be *song and display* which then led to *preaching* which then led to *conversions.* This emerging *ordo* could be regarded as a new American version of the old Calvinist dependence on the medieval *prone,* the service of popular preaching and exhortation to penance — rather than the too inaccesible *Mass* — as the source for the shape of worship.[25]

But it remained for the greatest revival preacher of the nineteenth century, Charles Grandison Finney, to systematize this form and, in a famous essay of 1835, to endow it with the name "new measures,"[26] urging the use of rousing and emotional song and practical but moving preaching, among other things, to bring the sinner to conversion. For Finney, God had established no particular system or form of worship: "When Jesus Christ was on earth, laboring among his disciples, he had nothing to do with forms or measures. And when the apostles preached afterwards . . . their commission was, 'Go and preach the gospel, and disciple all nations.' It did not prescribe any forms. It did not admit any. No person can pretend to get any set of forms or particular directions as to measures, out of this commission. Do it — the best way you can — ask wisdom from God — use the faculties he has given you — seek the direction of the Holy Ghost — go forward and do it. This was their commission. And their object was to make known the gospel in the *most effectual* way, to make the truth stand out strikingly, so as to obtain the attention and secure the obedience of the greatest number possible. No person can find any *form* of doing this laid down in the Bible."[27]

[24] Ibid.

[25] Eberhard Weismann, "Der Predigtgottesdienst und die verwandten Formen," in *Leiturgia* 3 (Kassel: Stauda 1956) 19ff.

[26] Charles Grandison Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion,* William G. McLoughlin, ed., (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1960) 250.

[27] Finney, 251.

But Finney could recommend a form that worked in the present time, and that form looked like the pattern of revival preaching. It is no surprise, given his critique of historic forms,[28] that he himself would not see any background to his "new measures" in sacrament meetings or the medieval prone or the patterns of confession and penance. The resultant *ordo,* so widely found in America and in places influenced by America, from that time until this, was threefold:

A song service or praise service or
"preliminaries," gauged to prepare for
the preaching
A sermon
And a "harvest" of the converts.[29]

NEW PENTECOST OR JOSEPH'S BRITCHES?

This is a pattern we have already seen. The megachurches are massive, contemporary expressions of evangelicalism. It is not only that the seeker services stand in the tradition of the camp meeting, its crowds and its entertainments, but also its opportunities for conversion or for preaching outside anything that looks like a traditional "meeting house" or church.[30] It is not only that, like the camp meetings — and like many other evangelicals, with their Wednesday night prayer meetings, down through American history — the megachurches also have special Bible study and sacrament meetings for the believers at other times, with baptisms also as demonstrations of prior decisions. It is not only that the arguments of the leaders sound astonishingly like the arguments of Finney himself. It is also that the megachurches have inherited a modern version of the frontier worship shape, itself the product of "edited" American Calvinism.[31]

Of course, on first glance, it seems like the third part of the frontier *ordo* is missing in the megachurches. But, in fact, this lack

[28] Cf. White, 177.

[29] Ibid.

[30] For this point, see pages 22–23 of the unpublished paper of Thomas H. Schattauer, "Liturgical Reform and Renewal: the Experience of the Lutheran Churches of North America," read at the *Tagung* of *Arbeitskreis der Materialstelle für Gottesdienst,* held in Trier, 16–19 July 1995.

[31] On the Willow Creek editing of Calvinism, see Pritchard, 46–47.

is only apparent. Hybels himself often ends his sermon, at the end of the seeker service, with a direct call for decision, even calling for some physical sign, like the raising of hands, to demonstrate that the decision has been made.[32] Even without this gesture, however, one must recall the deep commitment of these evangelicals to a modern, persuasive rhetoric, without the so-easily-suspected high pressure of older revivalists, and full of "safety" for the nonbeliever to meet the "unsafe Christ." And one must remember that these services are situated within a network of processes and procedures to bring the convert into the New Community. At Willow Creek, a seven-step strategy is followed which leads from seeker-service attendance to the New Community service to participation in a small group to volunteering and tithing.[33] At Joy, the talk is of a "circle of fulfillment" which leads a convert from membership to maturity to ministry and mission, written covenants of commitment and agreement being signed by the convert at each new stage.[34] Just as contemporary music and drama have replaced the old song-service and contemporary, accessible rhetoric has replaced the old sermon, so the small group and the network of volunteers has replaced the old "harvest of converts." But the frontier worship pattern, and its underlying rationale, are still firmly in place. The point is to win individuals through to "comfort," to use the old rhetoric, or to "wholeness," to use the new, by their decision for Christ.

Since, in evangelicalism, the whole purpose of the church is to bring individuals to such a decision, the believers also gather for a service which has the same shape. The repetition of this shape serves the purpose of returning the believer to that pattern wherein he or she was saved (or brought to wholeness), reinforcing its centrality. But now the pattern is also used to enable the believer to sing out praise to the majesty of God and to learn more about the content of the Bible.

The revitalized use of this frontier pattern in the megachurches and in other congregations influenced by them has been recently discussed in North America as if it were an important new liturgi

[32] Pritchard, 183; cf. 179ff.
[33] Hybels, 169–81; Pritchard, 23–26.
[34] Kallestad, 107–18.

cal movement[35] or a new reformation[36] or, even, like Cane Ridge itself, a new Pentecost. One virtue of situating the movement within its American history may be a certain tempering of these claims. But more important help would come from our allowing this history to reintroduce a good and widespread discussion of the old and apparently still unresolved issue which is at the center of the disagreement between the megachurches and classic, ecumenical Christianity: the question of *means*, or what Finney called "measures." Is the church centered on individuals and their processes of decision-making? Or is it centered on — indeed, created by — certain concrete and communal means which God has given, which bear witness to and give the grace of God, and in which God is present? That is the question.

It will not do to answer that the megachurches have sacraments. So did the camp meetings. But the sacraments can be so fenced or so individualized or so transformed into signs of human decision that they yield the ecclesial center of attention to the processes of decision-making, just like medieval penance overwhelmed the communal and sacramental center for which it was originally intended as preparation. Then, from the classic Christian point of view, if decision making is the central matter, the meeting will not really be around God, no matter how orthodox or trinitarian a theology may be in the mind of the "speaker." For the Triune God comes to expression in a Spirit-gathered assembly which is immersed in the utterly central and utterly indispensable signs of the crucified and risen Christ—in word, table and bath, side-by-side — and so is brought before the face and into the grace and life of the eternal God. From this understanding, Paul's greeting — "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Cor 13:13) — has a concrete liturgical form, in spite of what Charles Finney asserted and many American Christians came to believe. Indeed, it is interesting that in his paraphrase of the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19-20 (quoted above), Finney leaves both baptism and the triune name unmentioned, while he is eager to invite his readers to whatever *works*.

[35] David S. Luecke, *The Other Story of Lutherans at Worship* (Tempe: Fellowship Ministries 1995) 6–22.

[36] Thus, Robert Schuller.

It is probably true that the dominant religion of America, to this day, is a kind of "edited" Calvinism, and that Calvinism had to be so edited in order to exist in volunteerist America. And it is probably true that many residents of America, including Roman Catholics and Lutherans, have felt drawn to elements of this tradition in order to feel at home in the land, finding some correspondence between their own traditions of pietism or penance and the American revivalist traditions. Indeed, it is among the pietist strains of American Lutheranism that the frontier pattern of worship has had its greatest success.[37] These pietists have frequently forgotten their own formerly fierce commitment to the "means of grace," or, perhaps, have found that their own fierce fencing of the sacrament led to its being fenced out of ordinary life and away from regular worship patterns. In any case, it is certainly true that the evangelical version of the American religious heritage has currently come to a new visiblility and centrality in American church life and on the American political scene.[38]

But responsible leaders of the churches in our day need to pay attention to more than the media estimations of trends in church life. The media, for example, may well never give much space to the remarkably strong movement among some *other* American evangelicals for a new recovery of the centrality of the holy communion as the principal service of every Sunday.[39] It is as if Cane Ridge were being revisited and the token-system reconsidered. That idea — that recalling and re-working of the heritage of Cane Ridge, that focussing of the crowds and the welcome emotions around the sacrament itself — has important possibilities in Calvinist America! But Calvinism, in whatever altered form, has always had those voices which called it to the sacramental vision of John Calvin and to its own rightful place in catholic Christianity. The nineteenth-century work of John Williamson Nevin,[40] perhaps the wisest voice to be raised in opposition to Finney and

[37] Luecke, 89–90.

[38] Frank C. Senn, "'Worship Alive': An Analysis and Critique of 'Alternative Worship Services'," *Worship* 69:3 (May 1995) 203.

[39] Randolph Sly, "Convergence Worship," in Webber, *Complete Library* 3, 196–99.

[40] See Charles Yrigoyen and George Bricker, eds., *Catholic and Reformed: Selected Theological Writings of John Williamson Nevin* (Pittsburgh: Pickwick 1978).

the "new measures," has had its brilliant fruition in the excellent American Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship* of 1993.

But for Lutherans the central question of *means* is inescapable. Lutherans conceive of the church as formed around the means of grace and impossible without them. Lutherans conceive of faith as enabled by, nourished by and responding to the means of grace. Lutherans suspect that an overaccent on "my decision" and "my new life" only leads to despair or mutual suspicion or works-righteousness.[41] Lutherans believe in the direct, local accessibility of the grace of God in the proclaimed and sung word, in the celebrated supper, in the announcement of absolution, and in that bath which forms a community around the economy of these concrete means. And Lutherans inherit a pattern of shaping the central service of worship around the *Mass* made accessible, not around the *prone* and not around the patterns of *penance*. It may be unfair to compare the attractions of the camp meeting or of entertainment evangelism to the relics of the middle ages and to the indulgence trade. But the comparison is not entirely inaccurate. Relics did draw crowds to wildly popular, advertized phenomena, and they did then place the negotiation for indulgences, a negotiation which an individual could make, taking the place of that other private negotiation of penance, at the center of the religious stage. Martin Luther, in his last sermon, three days before his death in 1546, preaching at Eisleben on Matthew 11:25-30, gave Lutherans a set of words which ought not be forgotten. Lutherans should be willing to share these words with their ecumenical partners in the conversation on "measures":[42] "In times past we would have run to the ends of the world if we had known of a place where we could have heard God speak. But now that we hear this every day in sermons . . . we do not see this happening. You hear at home in your house, father amd mother and children sing and speak it; the preacher speaks it in the parish

[41] It is interesting to note that active insiders at Willow Creek sometimes come to doubt whether other insiders have been appropriately saved or made the correct, saving decision. One staff member is quoted as saying, "I don't think Bill Hybels really understands that there are as many unsaved people — who think they're saved — around here as there are." Pritchard, 278.

[42] *Luthers Werke* 51 (Weimar: 1914) 193; translation altered from *Luther's Works* 51 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg 1959) 390–91.

church — you ought to lift up your hands and rejoice that we have been given the honor of hearing God speak to us through the Word. Oh, people say, what is that? After all, there is preaching every day, often many times every day, so that we soon grow weary of it. What do we get out of it? All right, go ahead, dear brother, if you don't want God to speak to you every day at home in your house and in your parish church, then be clever and look for something else: in Trier is our Lord God's coat, in Aachen are Joseph's britches and our blessed Lady's chemise; go there and squander your money, buy indulgence and the pope's second-hand junk; these are valuable things! You have to go far for these things and spend a lot of money; leave house and home empty. But aren't we stupid and crazy, yes, blinded and possessed by the devil? There sits that decoy duck in Rome with his bag of tricks, luring to himself the whole world with its money and goods, and all the while anybody can go to baptism, the sacrament, and the preaching-desk! How highly honored and richly blessed we are to know that God speaks with us and feeds us with the Word, gives us baptism, the keys [absolution], and all the rest! But these barbarous, godless people say: What, baptism? sacrament? God's Word? — Joseph's britches, that's what does it!"

"Joseph's britches will do it!" Helped by this wonderful old humor, we must constantly be asking whether it is the enormously attractive, theatrically powerful presence of Joseph's britches — and our own individual religious negotiations somewhere near Joseph's britches — that we are setting out at the heart of our liturgies. Or whether the center is genuinely found in word, sacrament, baptism and keys.

But this is not to plead for the *status quo*. For many of us — in post Vatican II Roman Catholic parishes and 1979 Prayerbook parishes, as well as in Lutheran or Presbyterian or evangelical congregations — the local parish church could do far more to make sure that word and sacrament are genuinely and accessibly and vigorously at the heart of the meeting. And the mega-churches can teach us all many things: the awareness that numerous people today have no understanding at all for the traditions and conventions of Christianity; the honesty that Christianity is genuinely in a marketplace of cultural products; the courage to welcome emotions into the assembly of the people of God; the

openness to the stranger. These traits are all virtues. And those virtues and the sincerity of their proponents, not to mention our common faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ, invite Christians into a continuing dialogue about these issues.

Christians newly fascinated by the worship of the megachurch or other, similarly shaped "alternative worship," might be asked: Do you really think that Finney was right about Jesus and the apostles, let alone the history of the church? Why do you let yourselves still be determined by these nineteenth-century decisions? Is it not true that Jesus and the early church used baptism and the supper and the scriptures, not just whatever worked? Where are the scriptures in your meetings, let alone baptism and the supper? How might your gatherings welcome the stranger and the emotions of the regular attender to be gathered not around the Self but around these concrete gifts of Jesus Christ? How might you revisit Cane Ridge, be done with the new version of the system of penance and open up the meeting house and its communion service to everybody? And how might you honor the work of God in baptism — including the baptism of many of those "unchurched" people who are drawn to your seeker services — and not make baptism simply a sign of the decision of the Self? In the marketplace of American culture, a marketplace remarkably drawn to such odd phenomena as symbolism and chant, how might you set out the bread of grace rather than the stone of the Self?

But there are questions for those of us who love the classic, ecumenical patterns of Christian worship as well: Have you fenced the supper as if it were your own, misreading Paul and forgetting that the "body of Christ" which is to be discerned is the body of the excluded ones? Have you opened your doors at the same time that you have worked on the centrality of the means of grace? Have you worked on the centrality of the means of grace at the same time that you have opened your doors? And have you, too, let your congregations — the very people being gathered and formed by the Holy Spirit — be simply audiences, listening to the performers, unengaged in praying for the needs of others, unengaged in song? Have you served that people, loved them, helped them to be the assembly of God bearing witness, as assembly, in the world?

In these discussions, several old questions will be highlighted again: What is preaching for? How does one *lead* in an assembly gathered in the life of the triune God? Now that we know that we have been misreading 1 Corinthians 11 — and, perhaps, misreading also the history of *disciplina arcani* — what actual consequences will that knowledge have for church life? Could the meal of Jesus Christ function for some people as a first encounter with the gospel, a way into the economy of Christian life? And how do we make sure that whatever "way in" we practice is personal and loving, but also focussed around God and grace and community and service, not the Self?

For all parties to this discussion, the classic *ordo* of the accessible Mass — word next to table, scripture next to scripture next to preaching leading to communal prayer leading to the table leading to sending to the poor — and the classic *catechumenate* — personal stories and emotions gathered around the story of the communal scriptures as a way into the water, into the community and into the community's mission — offer genuine help. We can encourage each other in their recovery and their use. We can welcome, and not fear, genuine diversity in their use. We can discuss and disagree about what it means to exercise them in a market culture.

But one thing is quite clear. Say it directly, simply: Joseph's britches will not do it.