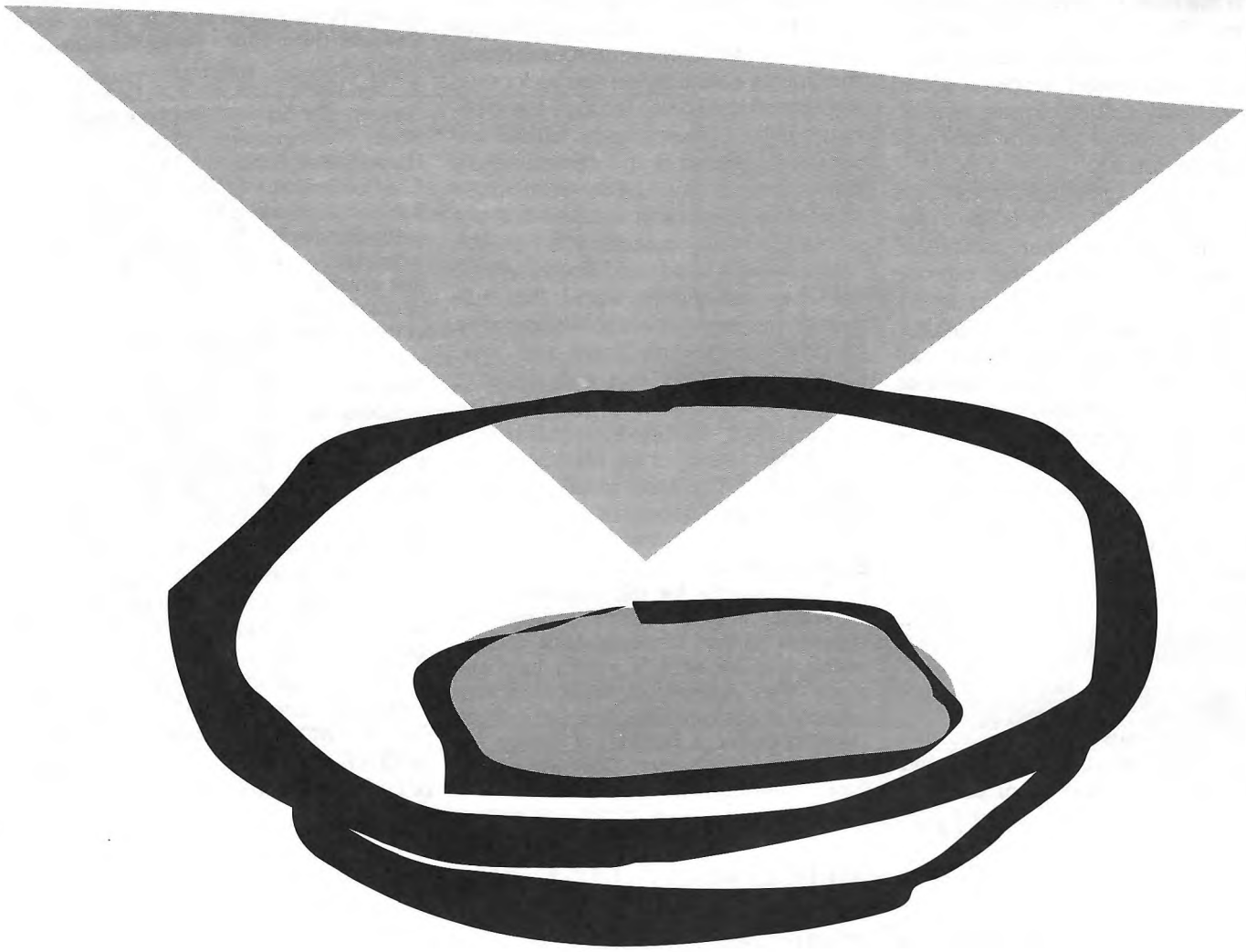
H. Paul Santmire



The Eclipse of the Offering?

What does the Offering signify? Can we really "offer" anything to God in our worship? While some are raising serious concerns about how to speak of the giving of gifts, the author raises an equally important concern about the Offering and the role of Christian "formation."

A funny thing happened on the way to worship in the 21st century. We lost the Offering.

Or so it appears. A recent church-wide publication by the ELCA's Division for Congregational Ministries, *Getting Ready for Worship in the Twenty-first Century,* omits mention of "the Offering" as part of the fundamental ordo of the church's liturgy. The study booklet takes it for granted that "the shape of worship" is fourfold: Gathering, Word, Meal, Sending.[1] What happened to the Offering?

This is a fair question, because the ELCA study booklet is representative, in this respect, of an increasingly prominent liturgical trend in the ELCA: to down-play or even permanently to excise the Offering in our worship as a liturgical moment with its own integrity.

This trend needs to be discussed publicly, I believe, and not simply be allowed to shape the liturgical praxis of the church by default, however theologically informed and ecclesially responsible its advocates might be.

Never mind for now the implications of this trend for the stewardship practices of our congregations. Never

mind that generations of Lutherans have been taught to "offer their lives to God in response to His Grace, by giving of their time, their talents, and their treasures." Never mind the "Pledge Sundays" and the weekly liturgical act of carrying forward the "offering plates" to dedicate the gifts of the people at the altar of God. Maybe many, perhaps all, of these practices should have been suspect all along. Or maybe not.

I am much more concerned with a deeper theological issue: building up the body of Christ in these times.

Need for Integrity

The theological motives of those who seek to diminish the importance of the Offering are, as those motives are typically given written expression, surely praiseworthy[2] Their main concern is what can be called evangelical integrity.

It all hearkens back to a fundamental distinction of classical Reformation pedagogy: the difference between sacrament and sacrifice. God is the giver, and humans have nothing to offer of any merit to God. The only acceptable sacrifice or offering, according to the gospel, is a broken and contrite heart. We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, apart from the works of the law. That is the gospel that is the heart of evangelical worship.

To protect this gospel, an eminent—and in this respect, representative—Lutheran liturgical scholar, Gordon Lathrop, finds himself driven to raise serious questions about "the ceremonial bringing of money, of the plates full of what we routinely call 'the offering'...."[3] People long to be in touch with God, Lathrop observes, to give something to God. But, in light of the gospel, the money "can never be 'given to God.'"

Rather, and this is the resounding—and also praiseworthy—claim of those who make this argument: the money should be given to the poor, not to God. Evangelical integrity, in their view, must lead directly to missional responsibility as the context for understanding the meaning of offering.

This is how Lathrop describes the matter, here also with reference to the practice of "offering" the bread and the wine: "We bring money and bread and wine. Sometimes in a brilliant recovery of the old connection, we also bring food for the parish food pantry or for the local homeless program. None of it is 'offering.' All of it should go to our neighbor. None of this solves the world-hunger problem or even the local need. It only bears witness to the gift of God and to the truth of the world and to our acknowledgment of our insertion in the widespread, aching need. We can only call these gifts 'offering' metaphorically, using the wrong word and thereby destroying all offerings."[4]

Lathrop then draws some implications for liturgical practice, among them these. The offertory prayer could be dropped. "The collection"—no longer "the offering"—might well be placed at the very end of the service, after the Word and the Sacrament, on the way to the people's service in the world. Further, all of "the collection" might well be given away, say, to Lutheran World Relief, to the local poor, or to other efforts on behalf of the poor elsewhere. Concomitantly, the old idea of "church dues" might be reintroduced to allow members to address "local institutional costs and for synodical and churchwide mission needs."[5]

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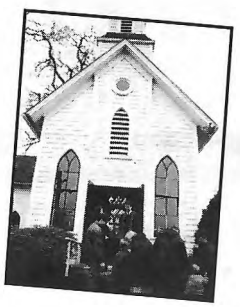

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The offering of money is thus seen to function as a kind of bridge to the life of service in the world, which is already, it would seem, essentially a part of that service in the world. The basic ordo of the liturgy is, then, fourfold, as the ELCA study booklet declared: Gathering, Word, Meal, Sending. The Offering, at least as we have known it from *The Lutheran Book of Worship* and as it has been routinely enacted by congregations throughout the ELCA for some time, has been eclipsed.

Missing Link: Formation

What those who would downplay or omit the Offering provide for us is thus a twofold movement: evangelical integrity and missional responsibility. The problem, however, is getting from one to the other. The missing link is liturgical formation, building up the body of Christ.

The way from evangelical integrity to missional responsibility necessarily runs through the liturgical practice of offering. Otherwise the likelihood of getting from evangelical integrity to missional responsibility will be seriously diminished in practice.

Consider first the theological function of the liturgy, from a phenomenological perspective: the role of ritual in human experience more generally.

Some years ago, the depth psychologist, Erik Erikson, discussed the stages of human growth, psychologically considered, with respect to ritualization. Erikson argued, persuasively, that ritual is the mechanism of the human maturization process.

An infant learns what Erikson called "basic trust," for example, the first and most fundamental stage of the maturization process, through ritualized interactions with the parents: when, for example, the parent who enters the infant's room each morning smiles at the infant, and the infant smiles in return. Apart from this kind of ritual process, according to Erikson, the infant does not learn basic trust and his or her psychological functioning is impaired thereafter.

Analogously, we can think of the liturgy as the modality of identity-formation of the church: the ritual that builds up the body of Christ.[6] By "going through the motions" of encountering God's grace and then responding to that grace, members of the body of Christ, individually and communally, learn what it means to live by grace alone, through faith alone, apart from the works of the law.

In this respect, we can view the liturgy as the essential mechanism by which the church is given and receives the love of God in Christ Jesus. Luther surely took this assumption for granted when he observed that "God will not deal with us except through His external Word and Sacrament."[7] Grace as we know it is not grace, for Luther, apart from the means of grace, which is to assume that God's giving is known to us only in the context of human action in worship.

Liturgy is thus the premiere

Rather than inventing reasons to play down or omit the Offering, we should be exploring ways to heighten its importance for our people.

process for receiving the benefits of Christ and, in that reception, for learning and practicing the life of "faith active in love." Liturgy is the school of faith, where, as in every other respect, you learn best by doing.

Hence, as the infant who is authentically loved by his or her parents learns to trust "life" through a process of ritualized actions, and as that trust then equips him or her to enter into trusting relationships with others beyond the parental circle, so the people of faith, "addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord" (Ephesians 5:19) find their lives transformed, and thereby "grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love." (Ephesians 4:15ff.)

Another way to express the same phenomenological truth is to consider the claims of "character ethics" in the current theological discussion.[8] If Christian ethics is fundamentally a process of discipleship, a matter of the faithful learning the habits of self-giving love, liturgical praxis is surely the primary milieu for Christian character formation. For it is first and foremost here, in this "the work of the people" (*leiturgia*), that one learns, by doing, to live by grace alone, through faith alone, apart from the works of the law.

Going through the motions of the life of grace in worship thus builds up the habits of gracious living among the faithful and so builds up the whole life of the body of Christ. All of this is a necessary precondition for the witness and service of the people of God in the world. Without the habits of faith active in love built up in the worshipping *koinonia*, the people are ill-equipped or not equipped at all for the life of faith active in love in the world, for the *kerygma* and the *diakonia*.

These phenomenological observations then lead us fittingly to a deeper theological truth: the dialogical character of our relationship with God, especially as that comes to expression in corporate worship. Grace "works" preveniently, surely. God's Word goes forth and it does not come back empty. Grace works by working (hence, the continuing validity of the still disputed Latin expression, *ex opere operato*).

But grace also works personally, in terms of I and Thou. The Word is an address that is intrinsically ordered by God to elicit a human response (Karl Barth and Emil Brunner liked to speak in terms of *Wort und Antwort*). The Word is not an impersonal force, which objectifies the hearer as if he or she were an "It," like a hammer hitting a nail, like a drill sergeant barking out an order, or even like a pharmacist dispensing a prescription (hence, to envision the Eucharist, as some of the church fathers did, as the "medicine of immortality" is metaphorically problematic).

Thus Jesus's characteristic mode of communication was parabolic, a kind of teaching that was projected in order to elicit a personal response. And while his self proclamation was powerful, as the Johannine "I am" sayings indicate, that self proclamation always remained dialogical, as the *textus classicus* of the Petrine confession also indicates.

Jesus asks Peter who people say that he is for a reason. He wants a response from Peter: "(A)nd who do

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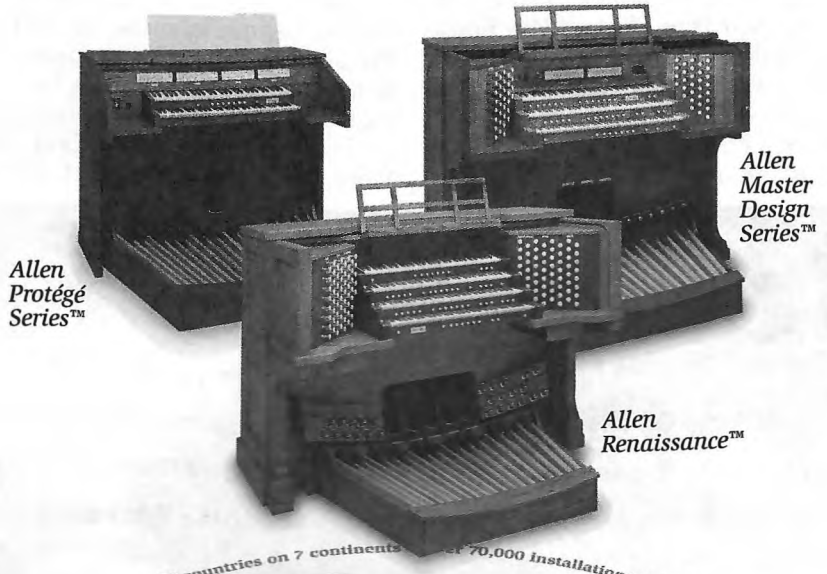

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you say that I am?" (Matt. 16:15) Jesus, we may say, evidently wants Peter to entrust his, Peter's, life to Jesus. Jesus is asking Peter to offer himself unreservedly to him as the Messiah—or, in Pauline terms, to present his body "as a living sacrifice" to God, through Christ, which is to be his "spiritual worship" (Romans 12:1).

It is fitting, therefore, that this dialogical relationship to God should be given ritual expression in the church's liturgy. This is precisely what the fivefold ordo taken for granted by the *Lutheran Book of Worship*–Gathering, Word, Offering, Meal, and Sending–makes possible.

Having gathered together in confession and praise, having heard the Word and, in the power of the Holy Spirit, having been granted by that Word "the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation" (Luther), the people then respond, joyfully and exuberantly, by offering their lives to God with praise and thanksgiving. "What sacrifices, then, are we to offer?," Luther asks. This is his answer: "Ourselves, and all that we have, with constant prayer...."[9]

Since, moreover, the people of God are embodied creatures, they as a matter of course present their bodies as a living sacrifice in the ritual of offering. Given the particularities and the mundane textures of embodied human existence, this means, in practice, many possible external actions that give concrete expression to the inner offering of the contrite and joyful heart, such as: offerings of voice, offerings of musical instruments, offerings of money, offerings of pledges for the mission of the church, offerings of food for the poor, offerings of bread and wine.[10]

All of these offerings of the people, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, are intended, in one way or another, to say:

Take my life, that I may be
Consecrated Lord, to thee;
Take my moments and my days;
Let them flow in ceaseless praise.[11]

There is thus a compelling theological appropriateness for including the act of offering in the ordo of the liturgy: so that the people may have meaningful ritual time to respond to the prevenient grace of God in his Word, personally, with heart and soul and mind, in body and soul, by word and deed.

On the other hand, much would be lost if this act of offering were to be downplayed or removed from the liturgy. The people would be cheated of the full opportunity that the Offering gives them to respond personally to the Divine Word.

Correspondingly, the proclamation of the Word itself, apart from an ensuing and integrally related act of offering, would tend to be self-contained. It would be in danger of becoming a monologue, a collection of heteronomous edicts, or, no better, perhaps a moralizing homily or a sentimentalizing autobiographical testimony–none of which personally engage the hearer with the gospel. The dialogical character of the proclaimed Word might be seriously weakened.

I am much more concerned about the deeper theological issue: building up the the Body of Christ in these times.

The Link to Mission

But there is also more of import here than this compelling theological appropriateness. There is, I believe, a contextual missional necessity. How are the people of God to be servants of God in the world, if they have not already learned how to offer their lives to God without reservation in the liturgy? How are the people to exercise a good moral character in the world if they have not already practiced it in worship? How are the people going to be able to demonstrate the dance of faith active in love in public, if they have not first practiced the steps of that dance among themselves? Questions like these are especially important for Lutherans in this post-Christendom era.

As Ernst Troeltsch pointed out many years ago, Luther had enormous confidence in the power of the Word to effect what it promised in the life of the people of God. In Troeltsch's view, Luther was convinced that that was the mission of the church: you preached the Word and then, as it were, you went

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home. This thought was given classic expression by Luther when he said (words attributed to him by Roland Bainton): "as I drink my Wittenberg beer, the Gospel runs its course."

Troeltsch traced some of the traditional Lutheran problematic with social ethics to this singular reliance on the proclaimed Word as the agency of mission. The Lutheran ethos, thus construed, inculcated passivity, Troeltsch believed. Being a Lutheran Christian in that sense meant mainly sitting around or standing around and listening, not acting.

Be that as it may, Luther and his earliest followers were, in practice, able to think of the preached Word in those terms, with some legitimacy, because they were surrounded by and supported by the powers of Christendom. The head of the family taught the catechism. The head of the state saw to it that the church and its schools and its diaconal activities were supported. Christian formation was undergirded, in some fashion, by the whole social order.

This clearly is no longer the case for us.[12] All of our ELCA congregations, whether they know it or not, are now mission congregations. The church can no longer depend on the social order for any significant kind of Christian formation. Hence, in our day, the liturgical action of the Offering takes on a kind of importance that it never really had to have for Luther.

This is not to suggest that our congregations do not also require a whole range of discipling ministries, beyond liturgical praxis. But it is critical, especially for those congregations whose members self-consciously define themselves as communities gathered around the Word and sacraments, to be able to provide a meaningful liturgical moment for the people. This will provide a means to practice what it means to offer their lives to God in response to his gracious Word.

Through this, the people might learn the habits of discipleship when they gather, in order to be better prepared to be disciples when they are sent forth by God into the world. As the modality of the church's identity-formation, the liturgy in general and the Offering in particular must play—in these post-Christendom times—a commanding role in building up the body of Christ.

Rather than inventing reasons to play down or to omit the Offering, therefore, we should be exploring ways to heighten its importance for our people! Yes, to heighten its importance with evangelical integrity and for the sake of missional responsibility: so as to be able to avoid the crass self-serving stewardship practices that have crept into some of our congregations' liturgies over the years, under the rubric of the Offering, but surely not to allow the Offering to be eclipsed. On the contrary, what the church needs in our time is a new day for the Offering.

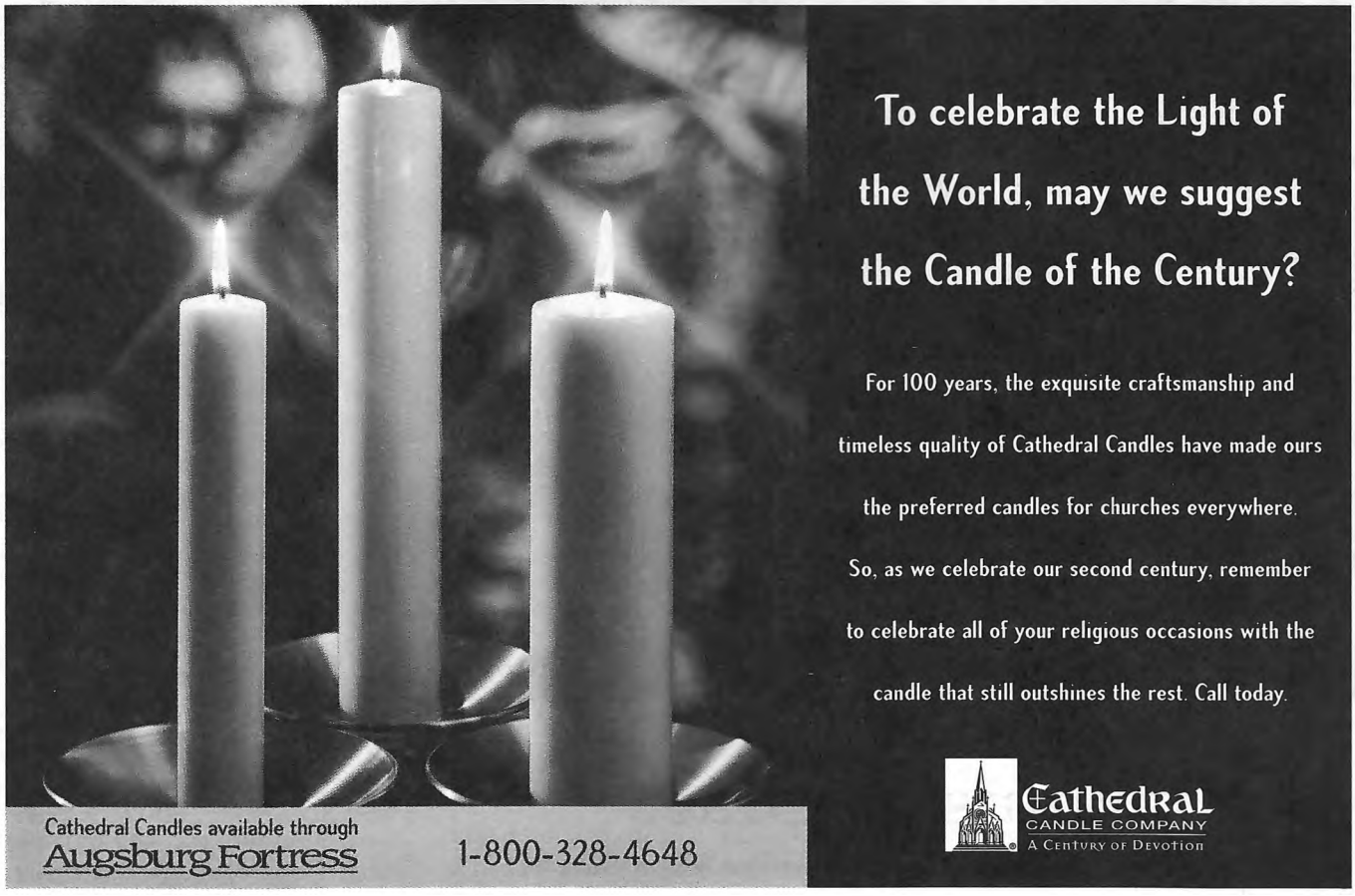
Endnotes

1. *Getting Ready for Worship in the Twenty-first Century: the Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture,* ed. Karen M. Ward (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, n.d.).

2. For an introduction to this discussion, see the three lead articles in the fall 1996 issue of *dialog* (vol. 35, no. 4): Paul Rorem, "The End of All Offertory Processions," pp. 247-250; Carter Lindberg, "Luther's Concept of Offering," pp. 251-257; Gordon W. Lathrop, "Transforming Offering: A Response to Carter Lindberg and Paul Rorem," pp. 258-262.

3. Lathrop, *op.cit.*, p. 259.

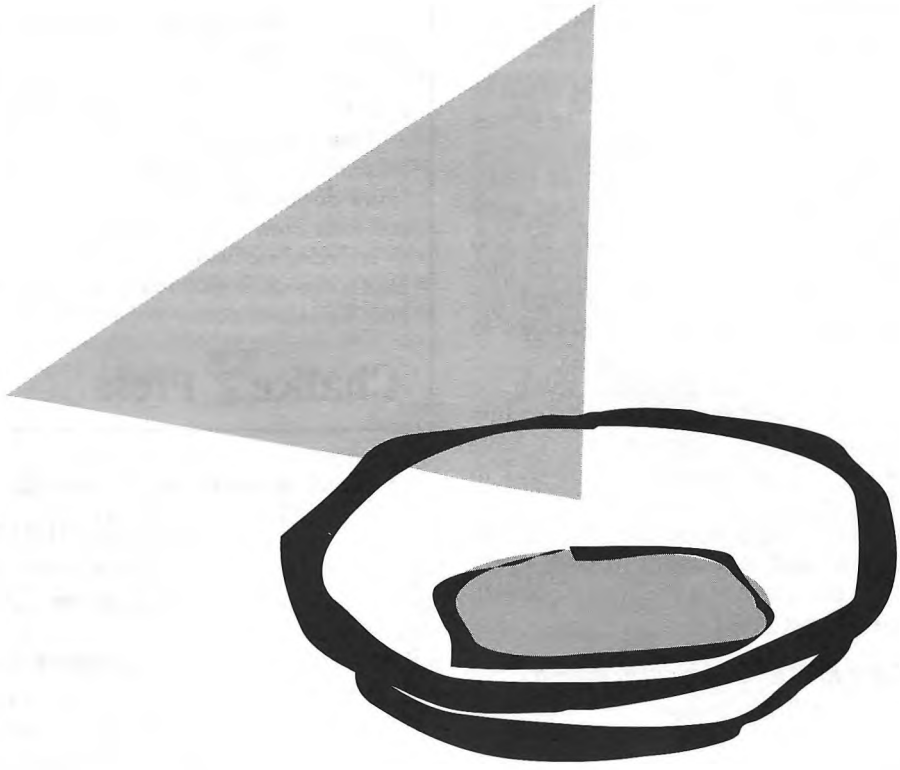
(Continued on pg. 38)



Offering

(Continued from p. 27)

4. *Ibid.*, p. 260.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 262.
6. See further: Philip H. Pfatteicher, *The School of the Church: Worship and Christian Formation* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1995)
7. Cited by Carl A. Volz, "Holy Communion in the Lutheran Confessions," *Word and World*, Winter 1997 (XVII: 1), p. 10.
8. See Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989).
9. Quoted by Carter Lindberg, "Luther's Concept of Offering," p. 63.
10. Robert Jenson has stressed the importance of the people making their offering(s) (*Visible Words: The Interpretation and Practice of Christian Sacraments* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978], p. 116]).
11. From the hymn, "Take My Life that I May Be," *Lutheran Book of Worship*, 406.
12. This frequently drawn conclusion is outlined succinctly by Loren B. Mead, *The Once and Future Church: Reinventing the Congregation for a New Mission Frontier* (Washington, D.C.: the Alban Institute, 1991).



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