

The Use of Testimonies in the Divine Service

John W Kleinig, 2000

1. The origin of this practice

So-called testimonies are a common feature in the services of some evangelical churches. While this practice may have originated in Pietist circles so that it could be determined whether a person had really been converted, testimonies became popular in the revival movements of the last century as an evangelistic device. In these testimonies people who had made a decision for Christ told the story of their conversion to encourage others, too, to commit themselves to him. At best they confessed how **Christ** had graciously saved them and reclaimed them for himself. At worst they told how **they** had changed as a result of their decision for Christ. In either case they focused on their decision for Christ as the proof of their salvation rather than on the objective word of God. Their assurance of salvation rested on that decision.

The Pentecostal movement seems to have extended the use of testimonies. In these circles people who speak in tongues are encouraged to tell their story. These testimonies not only prove that these people are Spirit-filled but also encourage others to seek the gift of tongues by the laying on of hands from another Spirit-filled person. They help to distinguish those who are Spirit-filled publicly from those who are not yet said to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Since testimonies are used in evangelical and Pentecostal churches, they are associated with their theology and promote their spirituality. If we approve the use of testimonies in our Lutheran services, we therefore need to take care that we do appear thereby to sanction and promote the theology and spirituality that comes from these churches.

2. The use of testimonies in worship according to the Scriptures

When the sacred Scriptures speak about testifying and testimonies, they use these terms legally and forensically. Just as witnesses can give true testimony or false testimony in a court of law, so people can testify truly or falsely about the words, deeds and character of God. All testimonies about God must therefore be true.

The testimony of the Israelites to the Lord was not based merely on their historical experience of God, for this was often ambiguous and confusing, but on God's 'testimony' (*'eduth*) to them in his word which interpreted their experience and showed them how God was graciously at work with them. Their testimony to each other about God served to perform a number of very clear functions in worship. This is evident in the psalms. In their national laments they bore witness to their experience of trouble and to their faith in his goodness (eg Ps 79), just as they testified to God's goodness and mercy to them in their national psalms of thanksgiving and praise (eg Ps 107). Their national witness was matched by their personal, liturgical testimony to God's grace. So they bore witness to their troubles in their laments (eg 88) as well as to God's deliverance of them in their psalms of thanksgiving (eg 30). They spoke about their personal experience of guilt from sin (eg 32) and well as their personal experience of his providence (eg 23). But they spoke in general, inclusive terms that

connected their story with the story of all God's people. The Israelites therefore bore witness to their God and his personal involvement in their prayers and praises.

In the New Testament the accent falls on the testimony to God the Father and Jesus the Son to each other. This is matched by the testimony of the apostles to risen Lord Jesus (Luke 24:48; John 15:27; Acts 1:8,27; 2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39). Their testimony to Jesus, first vocally and then scripturally, is an essential part of the divine service (see Acts 2:42). All other speaking in the divine service depends on it and must be consistent with it (Rev 19:10). No other human testimonies can supplant the reading of the Scriptures and the sermon as the authoritative exposition of them.

3. The possible use of testimonies in Lutheran worship

- a. As a general rule testimonies should be used in minor services rather than the eucharist, for if they are used in the eucharist, some other more important elements will most likely have to be excluded or else the service will last too long.
- b. Any testimony must not replace or appear to replace the sermon as the authoritative exposition of God's word. In fact it must be seen to be governed by God's word and be ritually subordinate to it.
- c. If any testimonies are to be valid and helpful, the people who give them must not promote themselves but Christ and his grace. They should not burden the conscience of their hearers by making demands of them, and nor should they set themselves up as models of Christian rectitude.
- d. The presiding pastor must approve of the testimony and sanction its contents. If any testimony promotes false teaching or is unpastoral in its implications, he must carefully and gently correct what has been said.
- e. The location of the testimony in the divine service indicates its function and status. It is therefore important to agree on the context and purpose of the testimony.
- f. Testimonies may be used in the following places for the following purposes.
 - The story of a person's trials or troubles before the prayer of the church so that the congregation will pray for that person.
 - The story of answered prayer before the collect or the prayer of the church to encourage people to pray.
 - The story of the Lord's help, such as in a case of healing, or deliverance, as from an accident, or blessing, as with the birth of a child, before a prayer of thanksgiving in the prayer of the church.
 - The story of a person's experience of sin and forgiveness before the rite of confession and absolution.
 - A personal confession of faith as an introduction to a hymn/song or a scriptural reading which summarises that person's experience of God's grace.
 - The story of a person's conversion as part of the baptismal service or a confirmation or reaffirmation of faith or an evangelistic service.
 - The sharing of an insight from some verses or a passage of Scripture before the reading of it.
 - An interview by the pastor or report of the experience of God's guidance of a person in work according to that person's station and vocation before the final blessing.