



“I will tell you what God has done for me” (Psalm 66:16): A Place for “Testimony” in Lutheran Worship?

FREDERICK J. GAISER

Should Lutherans offer “testimonials” in church? Is there a place for such a thing among Lutherans and others who retain some form of historical Christian liturgy? Is this not too raw, too messy, too dangerous? What in the world would our forebears say?

Well, Martin Luther, for one, said this:

“Sing to the Lord a new song. Sing to the Lord all the earth.” For God has cheered our hearts and minds through his dear Son, whom he gave for us to redeem us from sin, death, and the devil. [Those who believe] this earnestly cannot be quiet about it. But [they] must gladly and willingly sing and speak about it so that others also may come and hear it.¹

Believers cannot be quiet about it, says Luther, and he’s quite right. To hear and see—*truly* to hear and see—is to go and tell. Which one of you, asks Jesus, will not call together the neighbors to rejoice over finding a lost sheep? Who could avoid

¹Martin Luther, *Preface to the Babst Hymnal* (1545), in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 53, ed. Ulrich S. Leupold (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965) 333.

To see and hear what God has done inevitably compels the believer to go and tell. The believer’s witness or testimony is properly brought into communal worship where it will point to Christ and illuminate the gospel.

rushing to tell friends about finding a treasure that had been lost (Luke 15:4–9)? The point is not that you *should* tell, but that you *must*. Here there is no *ought*, there is simply the spontaneous eruption of joy that is itself witness of the best kind.

Our singing and speaking the good news, says Luther, is the sign that we “belong under the new and joyful testament” (that is, the gospel) rather than “under the old, lazy, and tedious testament” (that is, the law).² The gospel elicits the internal response that no external compulsion can produce; not even Jesus himself can hold it back: “After sternly warning” the cleansed leper to “say nothing to anyone,” Jesus sent him to give “testimony” (!) only to the priest; but the man “went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word” (Mark 1:40–45).

Such personal and spontaneous response is inevitable. To be sure, it might be suppressed by cultural conditioning or social constraint, but the urge remains. To experience God’s self-giving love, anew or for the first time, is to say “Wow”—with the same wonder and the same joy that makes us point to a rainbow and say, “Look!” You can’t not.

The question remains whether there is a place in church for such raw expression—especially in a congregation whose worship is normally governed by a well-developed liturgy. Can church accommodate my experience?

THE WITNESS OF PSALM 66

The Bible can provide us with models to help us think about this question. One of the best is Ps 66, a psalm that has two perfectly parallel parts—one communal, one individual.

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|---|---|----|--|
| A | 1 Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth; 2 sing the glory of his name; give to him glorious praise. 3 Say to God, “How awesome are your deeds! Because of your great power, your enemies cringe before you. 4 All the earth worships you; they sing praises to you, sing praises to your name.” | A’ | 13 I will come into your house with burnt offerings; I will pay my vows, 14 those that my lips uttered and my mouth promised when I was in trouble. 15 I will offer to you burnt offerings of fatlings, with the smoke of the sacrifice of rams; I will make an offering of bulls and goats. |
| B | 5 Come and see what God has done: he is awesome in his deeds among mortals. 6 He turned the sea into dry land; they passed through the river on foot. There we rejoiced in him, 7 who rules by his might forever, | B’ | 16 Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell what he has done for me. 17 I cried aloud to him, and he was extolled with my tongue. 18 If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. |

²Ibid.

| | | |
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| | whose eyes keep watch on the nations— let the rebellious not exalt themselves. | 19 But truly God has listened; he has given heed to the words of my prayer. |
| C 8 | Bless our God, O peoples, let the sound of his praise be heard, 9 who has kept us among the living, and has not let our feet slip. 10 For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried. 11 You brought us into the net; you laid burdens on our backs; 12 you let people ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water; yet you have brought us out to a spacious place. | C' 20 Blessed be God, because he has not rejected my prayer or removed his steadfast love from me. |

Psalm scholars are clear that Israel's worship included hymns of praise, sung in the "great congregation," the community gathered in the temple to offer sacrifices and sing of God's mighty acts of deliverance: exodus, conquest, the defeat of chaos—verses like Ps 66:1–12. Scholars also understand that Israel's worship included songs of thanksgiving or narrative praise, in which individuals offered sacrifices in response to God's personal deliverance: childbirth, recovery from illness, forgiveness and renewal—verses like Ps 66:13–20. Of particular interest now is how these two psalm types are brought together—that is, how individual experience and communal worship are brought together—in clear and careful poetic parallelism:

| | <i>Community</i> | | <i>Individual</i> |
|--------------|---|----------------|---|
| A (vv. 1–4) | Call to communal worship | A' (vv. 13–15) | Individual responds with worship and sacrifice |
| B (vv. 5–7) | "Come and see what God has done" for the community: exodus, just rule | B' (vv. 16–19) | "Come and hear...what God has done for me": answered prayer |
| C (vv. 8–12) | Bless God for communal deliverance: brought through fire and water | C' (v. 20) | Bless God for individual deliverance: prayer has been heard |

The two panels are precisely parallel, not only in theme but often in vocabulary. Communal worship and individual worship have been brought into close and deliberate congruence. What will this mean for our question about the relationship between the individual and the community in worship?

1. Theological congruence

The psalm's poetic balance (ABCA'B'C') invites liturgical play and invokes the reader's interest and participation. Still, the congruence is more than poetic; it is theological as well. More important than the interplay of structure and vocabulary is the witness to the character and work of God proclaimed in the two parts of the poem. God is worthy of praise and adoration because of his mighty deeds—on behalf of all (A) and on behalf of one (A'). God's deliverance is such that it provokes the recipients to share it with others rather than to hoard it for themselves—whether the community as a whole (B) or one of its members (B'). God is worthy of blessing because God hears the cries of people in distress and responds with compassion—to the people of Israel (C) and to one anonymous believer (C').

This is the kind of theological congruence that unites individual testimony and communal gospel in the Bible, and this is the kind of congruence we must seek in present Christian worship.

2. A necessary reciprocity

Individual deliverance and communal deliverance are included in the Psalter not merely for balance, but of necessity. Each needs the other. "Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth," sings Israel (Ps 66:1); "I will..." responds the one (Ps 66:13). But *one* hardly comprises "all the earth"! Still, if no *one* responds, then there is no *all*. To be sure, community in ancient Israel was a reality in itself, not merely a collection of like-minded individuals. Still, Israel's choirs, like ours, are made up of particular voices with particular characteristics. Each voice finds its necessary place in the choir.

"the deliverance of one is the deliverance of all, for in caring for the one, God demonstrates anew God's compassion and God's presence"

"I will tell you what God has done for me," says the one (Ps 66:16). And what is the point? Certainly not to boast, for, as we have seen, the individual's experience mirrors and finds its shape in the experience of the community. But, occasionally and inevitably, the community is brought to ask, "Okay, God, but where are you now?"—as it does for example in Ps 44. Now, the one can invite all the "faithful ones" to "sing praises to the Lord," for her deliverance makes clear that God's "anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime" (Ps 30:4). The deliverance of one is the deliverance of all, for in caring for the one, God demonstrates anew God's compassion and God's presence.

3. The reality of trial

God's deliverance cannot be assumed or manipulated, either by the community or the individual. It comes not of our deserving or as a guaranteed response to our piety. Those people did "ride over our heads," laments Israel (Ps 66:12). We

were not at all certain how things would turn out; but it was you, God, who “kept us among the living,” who did “not let our feet slip” (Ps 66:9). God did not *reward* Israel’s perseverance in the face of disaster; God *provided* Israel’s perseverance. Faith in the dark hours was God’s gift just as was God’s bringing Israel at last to “a spacious place” (Ps 66:12).

So, too, for the individual, who has “cried aloud” in trouble (Ps 66:17). Would her sacrifice appease God and bring the desired response? Such a notion, as the Bible everywhere makes clear, would have been to “cherish iniquity,” which she does not do (Ps 66:18; cf. Ps 50:12–15). God’s response is open and gracious. God might reject self-serving and manipulative prayer (cf. Jer 14:10), but God has not rejected the prayer of the psalmist, perhaps because the psalmist sees himself at one with all God’s people and knows that his deliverance is theirs (“Come and hear, all you who fear God...”).

4. Poetic and liturgical structure

Always a danger in interpreting the testimony of one delivered is the assumption that it worked quickly and easily. And if so for them, why not for me? I was in trouble; I prayed; God delivered; I gave thanks—bang, bang, bang. Psalm 107 runs through that scenario four times, and it could appear that this is just the way things work for those who believe. But, of course, the scenario is poetic and liturgical, and both poetry and liturgy are able to compress time and experience into an instant of comprehension and joyous response. I was in trouble, and now I’m not—praise the Lord! So goes the liturgical rehearsal. But how much time elapsed in the real world between prayer and deliverance? How much terror was present? How much fear and trembling? Now, though, in the deliverance, the trials of labor are overcome by the joyful exuberance of praise. The troubles, though still remembered, have now become dim—even though, at the time, they may have seemed to go on forever. Later hearers and singers of the psalm are carried out of their own distress into the praise of God’s compassion—but as an anticipation and present experience of God’s final deliverance rather than as a formula for quick success.

The poetic and liturgical structure of the psalm implies something else as well—that it has moved beyond the immediacy of raw experience and been shaped by artistic and theological reflection. The experience still lies in the background—and, one notes, not so far in the background that the report loses its power, authenticity, and occasional audacity. Still, the immediate outburst that responds unbidden to the experience of release is not expressed in carefully balanced poetic lines. Public use has dictated the need for reflection, a reflection that will have been shaped by the voice of tradition and the skill of the artist. This will have had its effect on the careful congruence of the two parts of the psalm—not to create that congruence, for the commonality rests, as we have seen, in the character and work of God. Still, care has been taken to express experience carefully and well for the sake of the hearers, present and future, that they might be drawn into the life of

God and God's people in a way that will resonate with the communal confession of Israel.

TESTIMONY SHAPED BY TRADITION

We, too, will want our witness to be shaped by tradition. Not controlled by tradition, for, as Gerhard von Rad has noted, "a sermon that only repeats the tradition is not yet a real sermon."³ Witness needs to be bold, to tell the God story in a new way. Though, of course, true witness reflects the God story through the ages, so it will recognize the tradition, and the tradition will recognize it. What will this mean for the place of testimony in contemporary worship?

1. *There is a place for testimony*

Worship that is true to human experience and biblical tradition must find a place for testimony—"Come and hear...and I will tell you what [God] has done for me." Since human response to experienced deliverance is natural and inevitable, its suppression will truncate worship and force the response somewhere else. I *will* point to the rainbow, and if not in church, then somewhere else.

"Believers do not live from or endlessly rehearse their own stories. Something has happened, and in telling about it, I give it away."

2. *There is a need for testimony*

The contemporary worshipping community needs to hear the witness of its individual members for the same reasons the people of Israel did. Such witness points to the ongoing reality of God's deliverance; it provides the response to the petitions of God's people that God act now. Faith is strengthened, and praise is elicited. Dietrich Bonhoeffer discovered this in his life together with other Christians in a time of great tribulation, noting that we "need other Christians as bearers and proclaimers of the divine word of salvation. [We] need them solely for the sake of Jesus Christ. The Christ in [our] own hearts is weaker than the Christ in the word of other Christians."⁴

Welcoming the voice of the individual member strengthens community as well. The story of the one is given to all, and it becomes part of the common story. The one becomes more fully part of the group, and the group is strengthened by the fuller presence of the one.

3. *The individual witness needs the community*

The storyteller needs the community as well. In the first place, the story seeks

³Gerhard von Rad, Sermon on Isa 40:1–8 (Peterskirche, Heidelberg, 15 December 1963), in *Predigten* (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1972) 129 (my translation).

⁴Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. Daniel W. Bloesch, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly, in *Life Together; Prayerbook of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005) 32.

out and creates an audience—and where better than in the congregation? Additionally, the story seeks authentication, and rightly so. How will I be certain my experience of “God” is not merely a bit of underdone potato (that is, the result of indigestion), as Scrooge suspicioned about his vision of Marley’s ghost? Telling my story in the community of the faithful will either confirm it or question it—and either reaction, if honest, will be beneficial to my developing spiritual health.

4. Testimony must be honest

The testimony of God’s people in the psalms is brutally honest. It admits the terrors of the night as well as the deliverance of the dawn. It opens the prayer to God and to the people of God in all candor and vulnerability. It finally rejects any attempt at formula or manipulation. Though shaped by the gospel, each new story is at the same time shaping the gospel—or interpreting it anew—which always gives the voice of the witness a risky edge. The witness need not have all the theological answers in order to speak: “I do not know whether he is a sinner,” said the man healed by Jesus. “One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see” (John 9:25). The community, while rightly calling into question anything that would deny the gospel, will, at best, listen with the openness of Gamaliel: “If this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God!” (Acts 5:38–39).

5. Testimony is timely

Because it is honest, because it reports what God has done now, witness is timely. Believers do not live from or endlessly rehearse their own stories. Something has happened, and in telling about it, I give it away. It now belongs to the community, and I will not dwell on it as though it remains mine. My psalm today, yours tomorrow. The community’s story grows and is enriched with each member’s story, so, once my story is delivered, you might tell it even more frequently than I. None of us lives from our own story, however; we live from God’s story.

6. The story points to Christ

Just as the individual’s testimony in Ps 66 pointed to the exodus—the central story of the Old Testament gospel—so our testimony will point to Christ. Faithful witness will not call on others to emulate my story or to be like me; it will open me and the congregation to God’s care for all and invite in those that are perhaps least like us.

The faithful witness will be like John the baptizer, pointing beyond ourselves to the one whose sandals we are unworthy to untie. It will not do this, I think, by regularly saying “it’s not about me,” because that phrase itself has the curious effect of trumpeting my own humility and making the story all the more about me. It will point to God in the same way Ps 66 pointed to God, by simply reporting what God has done in a way that calls attention not to the specialness of my story but to the way my story is the gospel story. Bonhoeffer understood this as well: “Our salva-

tion is ‘from outside ourselves’ (*extra nos*). I find salvation not in my life story, but only in the story of Jesus Christ....Only in the Holy Scriptures do we get to know our own story.”⁵

*“speaking in public, we now have a greater responsibility
to the church to speak the gospel ‘in its purity’”*

7. Public testimony requires theological and liturgical reflection

Bonhoeffer’s reference to the primacy of the scriptural story reminds us that, since testimony in public worship is for the sake of others and for the sake of the gospel, it is rightly shaped by theological and liturgical reflection. As we have seen, the psalms are a step removed from raw experience, and that removal has allowed them to be more fully conformed to the tradition (while, at the same time, retaining their honesty and particularity). The same thing should happen to our own witness as it is brought into public worship. Speaking in public, we now have a greater responsibility to the church to speak the gospel “in its purity,” as Article 7 of the Augsburg Confession puts it. Pastors and worship leaders will have the tricky responsibility of working with parishioners in planning worship so that public witness is honest and faithful without being tamed or controlled. The caring pastor will be able to listen thoughtfully to parishioners and then gently help them frame their stories in ways that make the gospel shine through more brightly without marring the authenticity of the story or the storyteller—not unlike the interpreter of tongues called for by Paul in 1 Cor 14:27–28.

THE PLACE OF TESTIMONY IN PUBLIC WORSHIP

Christians will always have “come and see” or “come and hear” stories—not all the same and certainly not in every moment, but there will always be stories about our experiences of God, and people will tell them spontaneously here, there, and everywhere. But what will be their place in congregational worship?

1. In its most primal form, closest to the event, our stories will find expression in personal or familial prayer, but then also within small groups or in conversation with a neighbor, pastor, Christian friend, or mentor. From there, they may be drawn into an occasional service of thanksgiving—perhaps on a Sunday evening?—where members could tell “what God has done” for them and invite others to join in prayer and praise. One or a few members could work with the pastor to present a fuller message.

A variation would be the pastor’s compilation of such stories (with permission, of course) for a service of thanksgiving. In one congregation, members submitted brief “thanksgiving” stories through the offering plate on the Sunday prior

⁵Ibid., 62.

to Thanksgiving Day, and these were put together in the prayers for the Thanksgiving service.

Something like this will happen every Sunday, of course, as the pastor and worship leaders put together the prayers, allowing the congregation to weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice. In smaller congregations, or occasionally even in larger ones, people could be invited spontaneously to join their own petitions and thanksgivings to the prayers of the church, following which the pastor would normally draw things together and use the prayers as pointers to the work of God in Christ on behalf of all.

2. The psalms, as we know, are hymns (or choral and congregational song), and hymns have continued the psalmic tradition throughout the history of the church. Occasionally, as preparation for worship or as part of an occasional thanksgiving service, hymns of praise—both classical and contemporary—could be sung by the congregation and the choir, interspersed with psalms and with personal stories of thanksgiving to give present and local concreteness to the work of God. Contemporary hymns will often be more focused on the individual; classical hymns will often be more communal and richer in content—together, they might be used in appropriate worship dialogue with the stories of parishioners. Congregation, choir, hymns, psalms, Scripture readings, personal testimony, and sermon will together provide a richer mix than just one or a few of these elements. As is always appropriate for public worship, music and stories should be planned to make the best and fullest witness to the gospel.

3. The psalms speak often of a “sacrifice of thanksgiving” or of “paying vows” to God in thanksgiving worship. This suggests the offering as another time for congregational testimony. Again, offertory music could be occasionally interspersed with personal witness, offering to God praise and thanksgiving for what God has done on our behalf. This will naturally tie together offering and prayer, as the liturgy already does. With great care, the pastor might occasionally expand the Eucharistic Prayer to include not only the mighty acts of God in history but also the present acts of God in congregation, church, and world. In this way, the present congregation’s worship would be tied to biblical history and to God’s work throughout creation, as it is in the Psalter.

4. As we see in the psalms, praise and witness are closely related. To thank and praise God is to proclaim God, the one “enthroned on the praises of Israel” (Ps 22:3). Thus, praise and witness will and can properly be drawn into formal public proclamation, that is, into the sermon. “[P]reaching must change,” writes Michael Foss, “in order to include personal stories that affirm and testify to the fact that the gospel changes lives....It may mean that destructive behaviors cease or that a personal relationship can be healed or strengthened. Or, it may mean that someone will come to faith.”⁶

Of course, it may also mean that nothing at all gets better, but that we believe

⁶Michael W. Foss, “Building a Missional Congregation,” in *A Story Worth Sharing: Engaging Evangelism*, ed. Kelly A. Fryer (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004) 96–97.

nevertheless in the midst of strife. This too is the story of God's people, as we recognize God's presence in our suffering. Faithful testimony will always beware of turning God into a "cosmic bellhop,"⁷ who simply delivers on demand. The story of hardship endured will be as needed by the congregation—and will be as faithful to the biblical story—as the story of hardship overcome. The theological pitfall to be avoided will be a positivist and triumphalist rendering of human stories that overlooks Good Friday and promises prosperity as the inevitable outcome of faith and piety. Such is not the Christian gospel.

*"faithful testimony will always beware of turning God
into a 'cosmic bellhop,' who simply delivers on demand"*

Preaching that includes personal stories will, of course, never replace preaching the biblical story. Preaching Christ remains central, though good preaching will always be personal and will help us find ourselves in the Christ story. Preaching will normally be done by the pastor, though here, too, on occasion, lay preachers might offer their own witness. Since, in Lutheran teaching, testimony-as-sermon now becomes word of God—that is, no longer an offering to God, but an offering from God to the people—pastors will work with lay preachers (just as they must wrestle with themselves) to ensure the fidelity of such preaching to the gospel.

IS "TESTIMONY" THE BEST WORD?

Some of our difficulty in thinking about the place of "testimony" in worship may be its legal connotations—that sense of pressure, judgment, confrontation, and even manipulation that seeks "conviction" above all else. Now to be sure, the term is biblical, and there, too, it has a legal basis. Still, biblical trials were not adversarial in the modern sense. The goal was to "reason together" toward truth, and the point of the witness was simply to tell the truth. Then (and now) the witness is neither lawyer nor judge.

In recent times, the genre of "testimony" has often taken a different character, marked not so much by the law court as by the market or the entertainment industry. This gives rise to a formulaic (even "canned") package that is simply too neat to be honest and too success oriented to be faithful. Experience is no longer spontaneous and direct, since it has to "come out right" in order to fit the paradigm and the strategy of the worship leader. But the Christian witness has nothing to sell and no performance to rehearse; she simply reports and invites.

Telling the truth is fundamental to Christian witness. Truth requires no embellishment, has no need to obscure difficult realities, does not claim to be free from doubt or uncertainty, and finds no place for manipulation. "The truth will

⁷The term was used with this same caveat by Luther Seminary student Cynthia Williams in a paper in my recent Psalms course.

make you free,” said Jesus (John 8:32), not technique and not human prowess. The truth of which Jesus spoke was “my word”—and precisely that will be the goal of all Christian testimony: pointing to Christ and holding fast to the word of God that will continue to be the source and norm of our confession.⁸ ⊕

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⁸For a homiletical treatment of this text and issue (in dialogical form), see my April 17, 1999, sermon at: <http://www.luthersem.edu/fgaiser/sermonsHymns.htm>. For another homiletical treatment of the theme, see my colleague Rolf Jacobson’s December 12, 2004, sermon on Ps 40 at <http://www.luthersem.edu/ramgen/rjacobso/20041203.rm>.

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He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty. The only way the void is filled is by us coming to Him

10 Isaiah 55:1-2 (NIV) "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come; buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labour on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. Give ear and come to me; hear me that your soul may live. Jesus tells us that true worshipers will worship God in spirit and in truth (John 4:24). This means we worship from the heart and the way God has designed. Worship can include praying, reading God's Word with an open heart, singing, participating in communion, and serving others. Worship is done for God "because He deserves it" and for His pleasure alone. Worship can be public praise to God (Psalm 22:22; 35:18) in a congregational setting, where we can proclaim through prayer and praise our adoration and thankfulness to Him and what He has done for us. True worship is the acknowledgment of God and all His power and glory in everything we do. The highest form of praise and worship is obedience to Him and His Word. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. Reasons for Worship. Deuteronomy 12:5-7 But you shall seek the place that the LORD your God will choose out of all your tribes to put his name and make his habitation there. Philippians 2:9-11 Therefore God has highly exalted him [Jesus] and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.