

Worship in the Lutheran Confessions – November 2014

The way we worship is both shaped by our confession of the faith *and* shapes us in the confession of the faith. *lex orandi; lex credendi* – the practice, the manner, even the torah, of worship reflects and is reflected by the confession of the worshippers.

One rightly expects a Roman Catholic to worship in a way that confesses Roman dogmas. One would be surprised if a Roman mass did not somehow include the cult of the saints, the prayers to Mary, the possibility of purgatory. The Baptist worships as a Baptist, the Pentecostal as a Pentecostal, the Methodist as a Methodist, the Orthodox as Orthodox. As unthinkable as praying the Rosary might be to a Baptist, so a man in suit walking back and forth on a stage next to the band would be confessionally abhorrent to the Orthodox.

But a proviso in these assertions is needed. The proviso is the assumption that the Roman Catholic is truly Roman, the Baptist congruently Baptist, the Orthodox confessionally Orthodox. We must realize that all of Christendom has long entered well into the post-modern world, where one may not be what one is. The obvious connection between confession of the faith and the practice of worship consistent with that confession is not necessarily so obvious. It needs pointing out.

What does the *Lutheran* Confession have to say about worship?

We may begin at the beginning, with the three ecumenical creeds. These creeds are **our** confession, but our confession shared with all of historic orthodox catholic evangelical Christendom.

The creeds tell us much of God, but above all they confess the blessed **Holy Trinity**; God is One God in three Persons and three Persons in one God. What do the creeds tell us of our worship?

The Trinity is not simply a concept to be known. The Triune God is the Actor in the creation, redemption, and sanctification of the whole world. God makes. The Son of God suffers, dies, rises, ascends, redeems. The Holy Spirit creates the holy church, with one baptism forms the *communio sanctorum*, speaks, forgives, raises the dead. But what does this mean for our worship? Simply that with the Father and the Son together the Spirit is worshipped and glorified. The whole three Persons are **coeternal with each other and coequal so that in all things... the Trinity in Unity and Unity in Trinity is to be worshiped**.

The Trinity is worshiped. The orthodox confession – the right teaching of God – is combined with the orthodox worship – the right praise of God. There is no other God but the Holy Trinity, and to worship what is not the Trinity is false worship, idolatry. And to worship as though someone other than the Trinity could be worshiped in the same way is false worship, false confession.

At the heart of the Creeds is Jesus, the Word made flesh, the incarnate Son of God Who has suffered and been raised for our justification before God. And so then at the heart of creedal, confessional worship is the Son of God Who has taken on flesh to redeem us. At the heart of worship is our justification before the all-holy God.

In AC IV, Our churches teach that people cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works. People are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith, when they believe that they

are received into favour and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake. By His death, Christ made satisfaction for our sins. God counts this faith for righteousness in His sight (Romans 3:21-26; 4:5)

Justification is the article by which the church stands or falls. Justification by the grace of God for the sake of Christ, delivered in His Word and received through faith, is what makes the church the church. Likewise, justification is the article by which true worship stands, or falls into false worship. Luther thus writes in the Large Catechism: **(LC II 55) Everything, therefore, in the Christian Church is ordered toward this goal: we shall daily receive in the Church nothing but the forgiveness of sin through the Word and signs, to comfort and encourage our consciences as long as we live here. So even though we have sins, the grace of the Holy Spirit does not allow them to harm us.**

The church, that is, we could say, the 'church proper', the community gathered in the Divine Service (cf. Acts 2:42), is nothing more and nothing less than a forgiveness house. Everything in worship is directed toward this goal – the forgiveness of our sin through Word and sign (that is, the Sacraments), and the comfort and encouragement of consciences. Anything that does not tend ultimately toward the forgiveness of sins has no place in the worship of the church.

We confess in **AC V: So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. Through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given....Our churches condemn the Anabaptists and others who think that through their own preparations and works the Holy Spirit comes to them without the external Word.**

Forgiveness of sins, and the faith which receives the forgiveness of sins for the sake of Christ's merit alone, comes through Word and Sacraments. It comes through the divinely ordained instruments, the Jesus-designed means to deliver and give His grace. Worship is conceived as the giving of these gifts through these means. It is false worship to believe that our preparations or our works bring the Holy Spirit.

This truth is expressed in the simplicity of the Small Catechism. **(SC II) I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to Him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth...** Nothing I do, nothing we do corporately, can bring the Holy Spirit into the worship of the Church. The Holy Spirit is the Initiator, the Creator, of worship. The Holy Spirit is the Actor in worship, where through the appointed means He is calling hearers to faith in Christ, gathering into being the Church, causing naturally blind eyes to see the truth of His mystery (cf. Psalm 73:16-17), making sinners holy through the pronounced, taught, sung, washed, and delivered-to-the-mouth forgiveness of sins. It is false worship that appears to use our strength (of any kind) to bring us closer to Jesus.

Again we confess: **AC VII ...The church is the congregation of saints (Psalm 149:1) in which the Gospel is purely taught and the Sacraments are correctly administered.**

But what does this mean – *purely taught and correctly administered*? How is confessional Lutheran worship manifested as

confessional Lutheran worship? What are the practical implications for how the Divine Service looks and works in the Lutheran church?

Luther, as you well know, was a *conservative* reformer of the church. That is, he desired to keep, to preserve, to conserve what was received through the working of the Holy Spirit in the holy catholic church up to his present time. Some would say that he was NOT a 'radical' reformer. This is true, in the sense that Luther did not desire to 'throw out the baby with the bath water', as we say. Unlike the iconoclasts, or the Anabaptists and others, he did not desire to start from scratch. That would not only be silly and fractious, but would also be an insult to the Spirit's work in the preceding fifteen centuries.

In another sense, we could say that Luther *was* a 'radical reformer' and that the Lutheran confession is therefore, by extension, 'radical', but only if we go to the root of that word which IS '*radix*', Latin for ROOT. The errors of the church are not combated on the surface, on the branches and in the leaves, so to speak, but at the root. The root issue was and is justification by grace through faith in Christ alone. Is there something we must do or complete or accomplish or finish in order to be the redeemed of God, or is our salvation completed, accomplished, finished in Christ alone, and now simply delivered to us?

When the root is good, the tree will be able to be healthy. It will not be cut down, but pruned. And so Lutheran worship will maintain the good which the Holy Spirit has weaved into the worship practice of the church catholic, but cut off the aberrant and heretical branches which men have wrongly grafted into the tree of God serving us.

Now how does this look? We confess in **ACVII** that: **It is not necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies**

instituted by men, should be the same everywhere. This must be understood correctly and historically. This does not mean that we should be different everywhere, that each local congregation picks and chooses her rites or ceremonies as she sees fit for her location. Nor does this mean that the rites and ceremonies change quickly – from week to week or month to month or even year to year.

Confessing the faith as Lutherans means that we are not sectarian in our worship, either spatially or temporally. We wish to use the rites and ceremonies (and remember, EVERYONE has rites and ceremonies even if they say they do not) which best proclaim the Gospel and center on Christ crucified for the forgiveness of sins. Normally, what we have received, we also pass on.

In AC XV, Our churches teach that ceremonies ought to be observed and may be observed without sin. Also, ceremonies and other practices that are profitable for tranquility and good order in the Church (in particular holy days, festivals, and the like) ought to be observed.

Having ceremony is not an option. Everyone has ceremony in worship, even if the ceremony is not very ceremonial – looking. Notice that the provisos in AC XV are written against human traditions that claim to make atonement, merit grace, or make satisfaction for sins. These are opposed to the Gospel and the doctrine of faith – that is, they take a stand AGAINST justification by grace through faith. It is not ceremony as ceremony which is a problem. As aforesaid, there is no such worship that is free from ceremony or ritual of some kind. The question is: what kind of ceremony, or ritual, or form will you have in order to confess and praise the Holy Trinity, center on the justification

of the sinner by grace through faith, and receive the forgiveness of sins?

Beyond proclamation and right praise, the shape and form of worship serve also serve a catechetical purpose. **AC XXIV** states: **For ceremonies are needed for this reason alone, that the uneducated be taught what they need to know about Christ.** Part of that catechesis in worship is to know that the form is given freely, as a shape of the Gospel, not as a new law. For later in **AC XXVIII**, we confess that: **...ordinances instituted as though they are necessary, or with the view that they merit grace, are contrary to the Gospel.**

For example, in **AC XXVIII (58, 60)** we confess that **It is a great error for anyone to think that it is by the authority of the Church that we observe the Lord's Day as something necessary, instead of the Sabbath Day. Scripture itself has abolished the Sabbath Day (Colossians 2:16-17).....Yet, because it was necessary to appoint a certain day for the people to know when they ought to come together, it appears that the Church designated the Lord's Day (Revelation 1:10) for this purpose. This day seems to have been chosen all the more for this additional reason: so people might have an example of Christian freedom and might know that keeping neither the Sabbath nor any other day is necessary.**

This understanding is amplified in the Apology (**Ap IV 33 Church**) **We believe that the true unity of the Church is not injured by dissimilar ceremonies instituted by humans, just as the dissimilar length of day and night does not injure the unity of the Church. However, it is pleasing to us that, for the sake of peace, universal ceremonies are kept. We also willingly keep the order of the Mass in**

the churches, the Lord's Day, and other more famous festival days. With a very grateful mind we include the beneficial and ancient ordinances, especially since they contain a discipline. This discipline is beneficial for educating and training the people and those who are ignorant (the young people).

Because of this approach, which seeks the *bene-esse* of the church, the confessors can speak very positively of the life of our churches relative to those of the opponents. In Article XV of the Apology, we have a wonderful description of the corporate worship life of our churches **(Ap XV:38-44) But we cheerfully maintain the old traditions [as, the three high festivals, the observance of Sunday, and the like] made in the Church for the sake of usefulness and tranquillity; and we interpret them in a more moderate way, to the exclusion of the opinion which holds that they justify. And our enemies falsely accuse us of abolishing good ordinances and church-discipline. For we can truly declare that the public form of the churches is more becoming with us than with the adversaries . And if any one will consider it aright, we conform to the canons more truly than do the adversaries. With the adversaries, unwilling celebrants, and those hired for pay, and very frequently only for pay, celebrate the Masses. They sing psalms, not that they may learn or pray [for the greater part do not understand a verse in the psalms], but for the sake of the service, as though this work were a service, or, at least, for the sake of reward. With us many use the Lord's Supper [willingly and without constraint] every Lord's Day, but after having been first instructed, examined and absolved. The children sing psalms in order that they may learn; the people also sing [Latin and German psalms], in order that they may either learn or pray. With the adversaries there**

is no catechization of the children whatever, concerning which even the canons give commands. With us the pastors and ministers of the churches are compelled publicly [and privately] to instruct and hear the youth; and this ceremony produces the best fruits. Among the adversaries, in many regions, during the entire year no sermons are delivered, except in Lent. [Here they ought to cry out and justly make grievous complaint; for this means at one blow to overthrow completely all worship. For of all acts of worship that is the greatest, most holy, most necessary, and highest, which God has required as the highest in the First and the Second Commandment, namely, to preach the Word of God. For the ministry is the highest office in the Church. Now, if this worship is omitted, how can there be knowledge of God, the doctrine of Christ, or the Gospel?] But the chief service of God is to teach the Gospel. And when the adversaries do preach, they speak of human traditions, of the worship of saints [of consecrated water], and similar trifles, which the people justly loathe; therefore they are deserted immediately in the beginning, after the text of the Gospel has been recited. A few better ones begin now to speak of good works; but of the righteousness of faith, of faith in Christ, of the consolation of consciences, they say nothing; yea, this most wholesome part of the Gospel they rail at with their reproaches. On the contrary, in our churches all the sermons are occupied with such topics as these: of repentance; of the fear of God; of faith in Christ, of the righteousness of faith, of the consolation of consciences by faith, of the exercises of faith; of prayer, what its nature should be, and that we should be fully confident that it is efficacious, that it is heard; of the cross; of the authority of magistrates and all civil ordinances; of the distinction between the kingdom of Christ, or the spiritual

kingdom, and political affairs; of marriage; of the education and instruction of children; of chastity; of all the offices of love. From this condition of the churches it may be judged that we diligently maintain church discipline and godly ceremonies and good church-customs. So far the Apology.

Confessional Lutheran worship retains what is helpful from tradition to serve the preaching of the Good News of Christ. Yet there is more than just pragmatics at work here. There is also the standing together with the voices of those who preceded us. As the sainted Job declared, so must we: ***For we are but of yesterday and know nothing, for our days on earth are a shadow. Will they not teach you and tell you and utter words out of their understanding?*** (Job 8:9-10)

G. K. Chesterton famously wrote: *Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to that arrogant oligarchy who merely happen to be walking around.* Or as Will Weedon explains – the church works on the principle of supplementation. That is, we slowly add to the treasury that we have received. Not everything we produce is a treasure. Perhaps we have very few treasures to admit to the church's storehouse. What we definitely do NOT do is tell all the prior generations to be quiet, because we know the language better or the culture better or – God forbid – the faith better.

Confessional Lutheran worship takes what is received from God and delivers His gifts to His people. First things must come first. The heart of the preaching and the liturgy of the church is delivery of the forgiveness of sins to sinners. This includes the call to repentance through the applied law and the Spirit's working of saving, sanctifying

faith through the applied Good News of Christ's life, work, obedience, suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension for us.

This focus may well distinguish Lutheran worship from many of its counterparts in our setting. Contrary to the Roman church, we confess worship to be primarily God's work toward and for us, rather than our work toward Him. Contrary to some evangelical formulations, we confess that worship is *primarily* God's serving of us through His Word and promise, rather than our serving and honouring God through our praise.

This does not mean that our worship in any way excludes praise. The Apology's article on the Mass (Ap XXIV:17-19) makes a clear distinction here. **Theologians are rightly familiar with distinguishing between a Sacrament and a sacrifice. Therefore, let them be subdivided into either a ceremony or a sacred work. A Sacrament is a ceremony or work in which God presents to us what the promise of the ceremony offers. Baptism is not a work that we offer to God. It is a work in which God baptizes us. In other words, a minister baptizes us on God's behalf. God here offers and presents the forgiveness of sins, and so forth, according to the promise "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16). A sacrifice, on the contrary, is a ceremony or work that we give to God in order to provide Him honour.**

The Apology then makes the further distinction between the *atoning sacrifice* (which reconciles to God, makes satisfaction for sins) and the *eucharistic sacrifice* which does NOT merit the forgiveness of sins. **It is practised by those who have been reconciled, so that we may give thanks or return gratitude for the forgiveness of sins that**

has been received, or for other benefits received....Special care must be taken lest they should be confused.

In fact there has only been one atoning sacrifice in the world, namely Christ's death. (Ap XXIV:22) The rest are eucharistic sacrifices. These are the preaching of the Gospel, faith, prayer, thanksgiving, confession, the troubles of the saints, yes, all good works of saints...They are made by those who have been reconciled.

This is what St. Peter describes (I Peter 2:5: *you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*) as well as St. Paul (Romans 12:1: *I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.*)

Further on in the same article, the confessors make a very important distinction for us in our context. They spurn the view of 'clever men' that the Sacrament is **a mark and reference of profession or a feast to illustrate mutual union and friendship among Christians**, calling this a **secular view**. This view of the Supper, and, moreover, of Christian worship *in toto*, is widely held among our mainline friends. **It speaks only about the exercise of love, which people, however profane and worldly, understand. It does not speak of faith, the nature of which few understand.** (Ap XXIV:68-69)

The Lord's Supper, and the worship that centers on Jesus, is not our sign of being together, or simply an expression of community. We confess rather in the Apology: **The Sacraments are signs of God's will toward us and not merely signs of people among one another...Just as**

the Word has been given to excite this faith, so the Sacrament has been set up so that what meets the eyes might move the heart to believe. (70)

Remembering Christ is not the useless celebration of a show....Rather, it is remembering Christ's benefits and receiving them through faith, to be enlivened by them. (72)

But here also our praise is included: **The sacrifice also is added.** For there are several reasons with one purpose. After a conscience encouraged through faith has determined from what terrors it is free, it fervently gives thanks for Christ's benefits and passion. It also uses the ceremony itself to God's praise, to show its gratitude by this obedience. It declares that it holds God's gifts in high esteem. So the ceremony becomes a sacrifice of praise. (74)

In his discussion of third commandment in the Large Catechism, Luther defines the purpose of worship this way: **Note, therefore, that the force and power of this commandment lies not in the resting but in the sanctifying, so that a special *holy exercise* belongs to this day.** For other works and occupations are not properly called holy exercises, unless the person is holy first. But here a work is to be done by which a person is himself made holy. This is done (as we have heard) only through God's Word. For this reason, particular places, times, persons, and the entire outward order of worship have been created and appointed, so that there may be order in public practice (I Corinthians 14:40).

Worship is ultimately God's sanctifying work, His giving of His Word that makes us holy. This is expressed in Luther's catechetical hymn: *put aside the work you do, so that God may work in you.* Luther

comments on the third article of the Creed: **In the Word He has the Holy Spirit bring this treasure home and make it our own. Therefore, sanctifying is just bringing us to Christ so we receive this good, which we could not get ourselves (I Peter 3:18).**

In the exhortation to confession in the Large Catechism (LC V: 18-19), Luther writes: ***In our view of Confession, therefore, we should sharply separate its two parts far from each other. We should place slight value on our part in it. But we should hold in high and great esteem God's Word in the Absolution part of Confession. We should not proceed as if we intended to perform and offer Him a splendid work, but simply to accept and receive something from Him. You dare not come saying how good or how bad you are. If you are a Christian, I in any case, know well enough that you are. If you are not, I know that even better. But what you must see to is that you lament your problem and you let yourself be helped to acquire a cheerful heart and conscience.***

What Luther writes concerning Confession is equally true of worship as a whole. It is true that there are two parts to worship – God's Word to us, Jesus' service to us through that word – and our response of praise to God. These two always exist together. Just as there is no true confession of sin apart from holy absolution, and no true absolution apart from the confession of sin, so likewise there is no true and right praise unless there is first the Word to impel praise. And there is no Word of God that does not create a response of praise.

However, while these two parts, two rhythms, two directions, in worship are always together, still we should likewise 'sharply separate' these two parts. The high and great esteem is place on God's doing –

His forgiving and cleansing Word in song, in sermon, in Sacrament, in the Holy Absolution, in the reading of the Word. On the other hand, the slight value should be placed on our part, on our response of praise.

This proper weighting of the parts may well be the key contribution of Confessional Lutheran worship. While it recognizes the fullness of the interaction in worship between God and His people, it also lays the emphasis where it belongs. This may well preserve us from either pride or despair in the self-importance of our praise. This proper weighting will definitely assist to ensure the comfort which God desires for those who call upon Him in Christ, focusing attention off of ourselves or our works, and directing it primarily to Christ and His works for us.

Worship is for sinners. It is for sinners who know that they are sinners. ...***what you must see to is that you lament your problem and you let yourself be helped to acquire a cheerful heart and conscience***

I was speaking with a member of the Alcoholics Anonymous group that meets in our church building. He told me that if someone comes to their meeting, and he says that he does not have a problem (for example, he's just there to listen), they show him the door. You are only allowed to stay there if you have a problem with alcohol. I believe that there is a parallel in regard to the assembly of Christ's people in worship. We likely are not going to show anyone the door, but Christian worship is only for those who have a problem. Christian worship is designed to bring the answer to that problem: the forgiveness of sins in both the Word and the Supper of Christ.

In his essay, *The Presence of Christ and the Future of the Church*, Hermann Sasse describes the great faithlessness in the church that is the denial of the real presence of Christ. The church's illnesses are due to the lack of a meaningful confession of what Ignatius of Antioch already confessed in the late first century: 'Where Christ is, there is the church'.

After working through the supposed problems of the church, he puts his finger on the very pragmatic problem that leads to such faithfulness. *We believe it is not a mistake to see a correspondence between the celebration of the Holy Supper and the correct understanding of this Sacrament on the one hand, and the belief in the real presence of Christ in the church on the other hand. Since the celebration of the first Supper, the church has been connected with the Supper in a very unique way. Where the Supper is celebrated, there is the church.*

Luther had still perceived in a very vibrant way the connection between the Supper and all other expressions of the life of the church. He had been raised in the great liturgical traditions of the late medieval church and never considered destroying the liturgy as it had been handed down. He only purified it from the paganism which had forced its way into it, especially the works-righteousness of the sacrifice of the Mass. In distinction from Zwingli and Calvin, he left the Lord's Supper in its position in the Sunday Divine Service (there was no Lord's day without the Supper in the early church). He would never have understood the objection that that in the Evangelical Divine Service not the Sacrament, but the Word must form the center point, because for him as for the church of the NT, Word and Sacrament belonged inseparably together. Or was something preached in Wittenberg City

Church and in the old Lutheran churches in general which in the churches of our day has become quite inconceivable? But taking seriously the sermon does not exclude taking seriously the Sacrament! Both belong together and perhaps the preaching of the Gospel lives precisely from the celebration of the Sacrament of the Altar which accompanies it. For without the legitimate celebration of the Supper, the sermon becomes subjective religious speech, whether or not we know it or intend it. This is what happened in modern Christianity. And it has happened also in the Lutheran churches in the latter centuries since the Supper was force out of its old position and became an occasional appendage to the Divine Service.

We leave the discussion of Article X of the Formula of Concord (on Adiaphora) for another time – but wish to finish by sharing this piece of missional Confessional Lutheran understanding from from Rev. Matthew Harrison (A Theological Statement for Lutheran Mission in the 21st Century – Journal of Lutheran Mission)

Questions of liturgical diversity and uniformity need to be set within the context of the distinction between faith and love. Faith is freed by the Gospel from all works of self-justification, but faith is not freed from the Gospel or the means that Christ has instituted to bestow the Gospel (the pure preaching of this Good News and the right administration of the Sacraments according to the divine Word; see AC VII).

Preaching and Sacraments require form, and this form is catholic rather than sectarian or self-invented. Lutherans gratefully inherited the Western liturgical tradition filtered through the sieve of justification by faith alone and honor it as our heritage (AC XXIV). Lutherans make a distinction between what Christ has

mandated and what His Word prohibits. In between the two are “adiaphora” or “middle things,” which are neither commanded nor forbidden by God.

The middle category of adiaphora does not mean that these matters are unimportant or indifferent; they are to be evaluated by how they confess the truth of the Gospel and Sacraments. In times when a clear confession is called for, the Formula of Concord reminds us, matters of adiaphora may cease to be adiaphora (see FC SD X). Ludwig Adolph Petri notes that mission “must abstain from establishing confessions, accepting new customs in the divine service, uniting separated confessions and the like. As soon as mission begins to do something like that, it is manifestly in the wrong, for none of those tasks is charged or relegated to mission.”¹⁹

This is to say that matters of liturgical practice are not best left to the individual but should reflect our confessional consensus so that both the freedom of faith and the love for brothers and sisters is maintained. Love is always given to patience and deference to the weakness of the fellow believer (see Romans 14), but it may never be used as an excuse to compromise the truth of our confession. Liturgical diversity within the larger catholic context will be guided by the need to maintain unity in both faith and love (see FC SD X, 9).