



Confessional Perspectives on Worship

Retaining Rituals and Considering Ceremonies

By Mark Tiefel

A new trustee stopped by his pastor's office to let him know that he'd be out of town for the weekend. The trustee was excited to be opening his vacation home for the summer and eager to catch up with the folks around the lake. Just as the conversation was wrapping up, the trustee somewhat awkwardly added, "I just wanted you to know that I'll be going to mass on Sunday—my neighbor always asks me." Before the pastor could even ask a follow up, his parishioner reassured him, "But don't worry, Pastor, I'm not going to enjoy it. I don't understand *any* of those odd things that they do." The doctrinal differences didn't even need to be discussed—those were clear—but the look and feel of worship...now that was downright fascinating.

The look and feel of worship registers powerfully with our people. When the forms they have come to know and love are held in contrast to less familiar ones, the result can range from exhilarated fascination to utter confusion. The range of religious ritual and ceremony runs from the nearly overpowering to the downright sterile. It seems new parishioners are often more adept than their pastors at identifying where particular churches fall along the ritual spectrum, leading us to ask "where do Lutherans stand on ceremony?"

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The confessors wanted to be clear when it came to their answer: "The Mass is retained among us and is celebrated with the greatest reverence. Almost all the customary ceremonies are also retained, except that German hymns, added for the instruction of the people, are interspersed here and there among the Latin ones."¹ From the start, Lutherans understood that the look and feel of worship ceremony held a fascinating amount of intrinsic value. At the same time, they also understood that ceremonies held the potential to create uneasy feelings and tensions among their people.

In this issue, we seek to gain a better understanding of the confessors' way of worship by considering Lutheran ceremonies. What were these ceremonies which the Lutherans were so willing to defend? What were the sights, sounds, and smells which they experienced as they gathered to celebrate God's grace? And how did Luther and his followers demonstrate balanced wisdom by retaining some rites and removing others?

Gaining a Clear Sense of Ceremony

The meaning of 'ritual and ceremony' isn't always as clear as the confessors' desire to use them. 'Ceremony' can describe an event as spectacular as a procession of academics in full regalia or a gesture as simple as doffing a baseball hat during a national anthem. In fact, along with 'ritual,' 'rite,' 'order,' and 'event,' the terms are at times used interchangeably. When the confessors spoke of 'ceremonies' they had a clear concept in mind. What is a ceremony? A ceremony is any human activity² which serves the purpose of education³ or edification⁴ in worship. Ceremonies call our attention to the way God treats humanity and to the way humanity responds to God.⁵ Ceremonies are man-made components of worship and accordingly belong to matters adiaphora.⁶ And while the confessors were adamant in distinguishing them from means of grace,⁷ they are used to support the proclamation of grace.⁸ A confessional concept of ceremony and ritual leads us to consider *all those activities which the Church has employed to communicate the Word without words.*

With this definition, all the ceremonies and rituals practiced by a given church or congregation suddenly seem countless. At times, we see hands upheld in prayer, at others, the sign of the cross. We

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watch the officiant turn to face the congregation when speaking the words of absolution or offer a hand of blessing. We see the clerical vestments and the seasonal paraments. We hear prayers chanted and verses sung. We respond "Praise be to you..." after the Gospel and "Glory be to the Father..." at the conclusion of a psalm. We smell burning beeswax and sometimes even incense. Even the days we set for a pastor's installation or a church dedication, or the time of day at which we ring the early Sunday bell—these are all ceremonies determined by human hearts.

We also notice that most of these ceremonies of Christian worship settle into some simple categories. We observe ceremonial *time* inside ceremonial *space* through ceremonial *actions*. Whether lavishly or sparingly, whether combining a number of smaller rituals into an intricate rite, or whether honoring the gospel through the simplest act of standing up, the value of ceremony remains the same: we seek to proclaim the gracious Word of God through our use of time, space, and action, so long as it is free and beneficial. This is the heart of the confessors' concept in Article XXIV.

Gaining a Clear Picture of Practice

Would modern Lutherans even recognize the ritualized worship of our forebears? A number of new studies and English translations are offering a guide to the many volumes of the *Kirchenordnungen* and a glimpse into worship practices during the confessional era.

Joseph Herl's study of the *Worship Wars*⁹ and Kevin Walker's new translation of Ernst Walter Zeeden's work¹⁰ reveal an eccentric blend of Lutheran ceremony in time, space, and action.

Lutherans nearly everywhere kept the time of the liturgical year, with minor festivals featured in the regular schedule of services.¹¹ Among other interesting sights were the widespread use of the chasuble, processional crosses, and processional banners. In the cities, choirs still sang psalms and introits in Latin. In the villages, candles still burned atop free-standing altars. As for actions, Lutherans were known to kneel during the consecration, to elevate the host, and even to genuflect when the name of Jesus was spoken. Perhaps even more surprising are the local anomalies: some confessional Lutherans were happy to ring little bells during the elevation, burn incense, place a monstrance on the altar, and continue to receive the tonsure.¹²

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The picture painted by the church orders is striking enough to make our modern use of ashes and albs seem tame by comparison, and their practice leads us to ask the same question raised by many concerned



On the right, a depiction of the ills of Roman ritual. On the left, the Lutheran perspective.

with ashes and albs: “How is it possible that these Lutherans, who are so adamant in stating their objections to Roman doctrine are so willing to adopt ceremonies which look and sound so Catholic?”

Sixteenth-century Lutherans undoubtedly had a keener sense than we of the look and feel of Roman Catholicism. One Lutheran offered his perspective in vivid artistic detail. Lucas Cranach, a life-long friend of Luther and illustrator of the confessional era, depicted the differences between Lutheranism and Catholicism in several series of graphic prints. His work of 1544-1546 serves as a strong commentary on the use of ceremonies in worship.¹³ Again, the picture is striking: in one frame, all the ills of Roman ritual are on display: below the pulpit, a candle bearer is made to look a fool by the ceremonial bells hanging from his cowl. At several altars, indulgences are sold as a priest ritually lifts up hands in prayer—to say a Mass heard by no one. In the distance, church bells are dedicated through a ‘baptism’ of holy water. Meanwhile, St. Francis looks down in dismay as the friar preaches: “Behold, before you lie many Roman Catholic, not heretical, paths to salvation; you can come easily to glory.”

Does Cranach depict ‘the Lutheran difference’ as the absence of ceremony? Not at all! The opposite panel is full of ritual activity: the Lord’s Supper is offered¹⁴ in two kinds from a free-standing altar positioned among the people, adorned with ordinary white linens. One minister wears cassock and surplice, while the other wears alb and chasuble. Meanwhile, Holy Baptism is celebrated with several ceremonial actions: a book bearer stands beside what appear to be baptismal sponsors, while another assistant readies a white garment to clothe the newly baptized. What is the Word of God which all these rituals are meant to support? Luther preaches it himself: “There is only one Way: the Lamb of God, Christ Jesus.”

Together with the church orders, images like this lead us to the heart of the ritual question: if the Lutherans were willing to admit that ceremonies were at some times God-pleasing and other times self-serving, why did some survive (in some places) while others did not?

Gaining a Clearly Pastoral Perspective

The decade before the Augsburg Confession had forced Luther to weigh ceremonies with a keen eye and a pastor’s heart. Beginning as early as 1520, Andreas Karlstadt attempted to free the peasants of ecclesiastical burdens through the removal of as many rituals,

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images, and ceremonies as possible. But his radical ideas only led to further destruction and confusion of the faithful. Furthermore, Karlstadt opened the doorway for later Reformed churches to distance themselves from anything resembling the Roman church which they left. Luther and those who followed him held a middle

course, appreciating the tensions that always exist in the use or disuse of a given ceremony. Eventually, the Lutheran acceptance of ceremony became a mark of distinction for those on either side—Lutheran and Reformed.¹⁵

Where did the Lutheran middle road lead? In several instances, Luther altogether abolished a given ritual. The canon prayers of the Mass were so infected with false theology that they seemed beyond repair. In other instances, Luther retained a ceremony as it was because it held an inherent value and should not be removed. In still other cases, Luther insisted that a ceremony be kept for a time simply because it was familiar to the people. The vestments and the sign of the cross were simple enough for simple people. Why disturb them needlessly? Finally, in the greatest number of instances, Lutherans sought to adapt and explain a given ceremony so that the Word of God which it proclaimed would be clearly understood. As it only made sense to make Latin songs of the Ordinary accessible in German, so it also made sense that an act such as the elevation of the host be retained so long as it could be understood as glorifying Christ.

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Not surprisingly, the Confessions’ treatment of ceremonies and rituals is the direct result of Martin Luther’s pastoral insight.¹⁶ Even during the most strenuous days of ceremonial controversy—days when the Interims forced Lutherans to decide whether a surplice could be worn in good conscience—even then, the most vigorous defenders of freedom understood pastoral principle. Ceremonies must be fought for out of love for the weak and love for the doctrine which the ceremonies illustrate: “The poor people look mostly to the ceremonies, for they fill the eyes; doctrine cannot be seen.”¹⁷

Proper pastoral concern is perhaps best demonstrated through the patience Pastor Luther showed early in his career, struggling with the mere notion of ritual reform and ceremonial innovation. Though he was well aware of the problems of the Mass even before he entered the Wartburg, Luther waited nearly five years to even advise on the topic. Even then, he did so with “great humility and hesitation.”¹⁸ How did Luther justify such caution? His patience was simply a product of his balanced pastoral approach to worship, ceremony, and ritual.¹⁹

Where do Lutherans stand on ceremony? We follow a middle course. We are free to investigate the intrinsic value of a given ceremony while also holding up the hearts of the weak. When a ceremony such as the elevation of the host, a gospel book-bearer, or even censuring with incense—all of which were appreciated by the confessors—might cause as much consternation as the donning of cope and mitre,²⁰ we make no command. At the same time, some ceremonies such as the processional cross, the sign of the cross, or the lighting of a paschal candle can lead people to

new and lasting appreciation and devotion. Here we may offer rich blessings through these actions whether common (standing for the Gospel) or uncommon (imposition of ashes). Ceremonies and rituals can fascinate and educate members of the Church. Let's enjoy them in worship and put them to use as we share Christ's gifts of grace.



Save the dates!

Save the dates for the next national worship conference: **July 22-25, 2014**. Returning to the site of the first conference in 1996, Carthage College in Kenosha, Wis. Proximity to WELS heartland and convenient airports. A chapel that seats 1700! Pass the word to interested musicians and lay people. For more details visit wels.net/worship.

¹ AC XXIV (Latin text). Citations from the Lutheran Confessions are from *The Book of Concord*, Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds. Augsburg Fortress, 2000.

² Two ceremonies might be considered as an exception to this definition, i.e. the Rite of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. As divinely instituted, they are not adiaphora, though the ceremonial actions which surround them certainly are. Discussion of these sacraments is left to a subsequent issue of WTL.

³ AC XXIV (German text): "No noticeable changes have been made in the public celebration of the Mass, except that in certain places German hymns are sung alongside the Latin responses for the instruction and exercise of the people. For after all, all ceremonies should serve the purpose of teaching the people what they need to know about Christ."

⁴ AC XV (Latin text): "Those rites should be observed that can be observed without sin and that contribute to peace and good order in the church, for example, certain holy days, festivals, and the like."

⁵ Cf. Apology XXIV, 16-66; also Peter Brunner, *Worship in the Name of Jesus*. Martin Bertram, tr. CPH, 1968. p. 122f.

⁶ AC VII (German text): "It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that uniform ceremonies, instituted by human beings, be observed everywhere."

⁷ "The Word, and only the Word, I say, is the vehicle of God's grace" (LW 27:249).

⁸ Vilmos Vajta uses the terms "framework" and "scaffolding" to describe Luther's perspective on ceremonies and rites. This perspective may deepen our understanding of the expression "forms of worship." Vajta, Vilmos. *Luther on Worship: An Interpretation*. Fortress, 1958. p. 107.

⁹ Herl, Joseph: *Worship Wars in Early Lutheranism*. Oxford, 2004. p. 54ff.

¹⁰ Zeeden, Ernst Walter. *Faith and Act: The Survival of Medieval Ceremonies in the Lutheran Reformation*. Kevin Walker, tr. CPH, 2012. 30-36, 53-56.

¹¹ Included: The Circumcision of Jesus, (Jan 1.), the Ascension; the Purification, Annunciation, and Visitation of Mary, Michael and All Angels, the feasts of St. Stephen, John, Peter, Paul, and others.

¹² The descriptions above are collected from Walker and Zeeden. Cf. also Graff, Paul. *Geschichte der Auflösung der alten Gottesdienstlichen Formen in der evangelischen Kirche Deutschlands*. Vol. 1. Göttingen: Vanderhoeck & Rupprecht, 1937.

¹³ Lucas Cranach the Younger, *The Contrast between Christ's True Religion and the False Idolatry of the Antichrist*. c. 1544-1547. Staatliche Museen, Berlin.

¹⁴ Concerning objection to a "continuous distribution" of the Lord's Supper see: Schatz, Helmut. "Historische Bilder zum Evangelisch-Lutherischen Gottesdienst: Eine Dokumentation." Accessed online: tinyurl.com/no9jq9z.

¹⁵ Zeeden (p. 12f.) and Herl (p. 195f.) both cite the entertaining anecdote of Reformed clergyman Wolfgang Musculus, who attended a Lutheran service in Eisenach and was shocked by its "entirely papistical fashion." Zeeden also remarks that by the mid-17th Century, "The chasuble was, like the ceremonies, regarded as a symbol of the difference between Calvinism and as a criterion for pure Lutheranism, just as conversely, wherever Calvinism gained access, it immediately insisted on abolishing the surplice and chasuble" (p. 32). In light of reformed evangelicalism's influence on Lutheran worship forms, Zeeden's assessment of ceremonies is worth noting.

¹⁶ AC XV: "Those rites should be observed that can be observed without sin and that contribute to peace and good order in the church...however, people are reminded not to burden consciences, as if such worship were necessary for salvation."

¹⁷ Flacius, Matthias. *Vom wahren und falschen Mitteldingen*. Cited by Kolb and Wengert, p. 636 n. 310.

¹⁸ Senn, Frank: *Christian Liturgy*. Fortress, 1997. p. 276f. Senn also notes that though Luther disagreed with the celebration of Corpus Christi as early as 1520, he continued to preach on it (with adaptation) up until 1524, and allowed it to be celebrated in neighboring communities after 1525.

¹⁹ "We however take the middle course and say: There is to be neither commanding nor forbidding, neither to the right or to the left. We are neither papistic nor Karlstadtian, but free and Christian, in that we elevate or do not elevate the sacrament, how, where, when, as long as it pleases us, as God has given us the liberty to do. Just as we are free to remain outside of marriage or to enter into marriage, to eat meat or not, to wear the chasuble or not, to have the cowl or tonsure or not. In this respect we are lords and will put up with no commandment, teaching, or prohibition" (LW 40:130).

²⁰ Though the mitre is hard to find in historic Lutheran practice, examples of the cope can be found during the confessional era. Both are now appearing more frequently in several Lutheran synods.