



Confessional Perspectives on Worship

The Purpose of Worship

By James P. Tiefel

It's not likely that the Lutheran confessors spent a lot of time pondering the purpose of public worship. Once they had rediscovered, individually and as a fellowship of like-minded believers, that human creatures are justified by God through faith in the merits of Christ, the purpose of gathering on the Lord's Day became obvious. They believed and confessed that *to obtain such faith God instituted the office of preaching, giving the gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit who produces faith, where and when he wills, in those who hear the gospel* (AC V: 2). The purpose of worship follows naturally: *The chief worship of God is to preach the gospel* (Ap XV: 42).

Preaching the gospel was no more a burden to the confessors than it was to Peter, who told the Sanhedrin, "We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20). The confessors understood sharing the good news to be a sacrifice of thanksgiving *rendered by those who have already been reconciled as a way for us to give thanks or express gratitude for having received forgiveness of sins and other benefits* (Ap XXIV: 19). *For just as among the sacrifices of praise, that is, among the praises of God, we include the proclamation of the Word, so the reception of the Lord's Supper itself can be a praise or thanksgiving* (Ap XXIV: 33). They grasped what Luther understood and what we believe today, that our use of the gospel is both sacramental and sacrificial, both proclamation and praise.

Public worship is practical and pastoral

The confessors were practical men who understood that worship is more than the proclamation and praise of individuals. Preaching the gospel was something the believers did together. The Church, they believed, *is the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel* (AC VII: 1). Although Luther longed for a service with simple forms (LW 53, 63-64), the confessors never mention an order not based on the traditional rites and rituals handed down from the ancient church. They understood that

the ancient forms were not commanded by God, nor were they replacements for the Old Testament ceremonial laws. They considered the external form of the Decalogue's Third Commandment *an entirely external matter, like the other regulations of the Old Testament associated with particular customs, persons, times, and places, from all of which we are now set free through Christ* (LC: Third Commandment, 82-83). They also confessed *that ceremonies or ecclesiastical practices that are neither commanded nor forbidden in God's Word, but have been established only for good order and decorum, are in and of themselves neither worship ordained by God nor a part of such worship* (FC Ep X: 1).

Why did the confessors approve the regular practice of the confessional churches to retain the historic practices, albeit with the omission of forms that were a contradiction to the gospel? Obviously, they valued the Church's historic voice and the ancient forms that announced the gospel so clearly. They were pleased to say: *Our people have been unjustly accused of having abolished the Mass. It is obvious, without boasting, that the Mass is celebrated among us with greater devotion and earnestness than among our opponents* (AC XXIV: 1, 9).

But there was more to their allegiance to the liturgical traditions than a love of history and an appreciation for the Church. The confessors were practical men with pastoral insights, and their churchly world was far different from ours. They included Luther's Catechisms in *The Book of Concord* and certainly would have agreed with Luther's observations: *The ordinary person, especially in the villages, knows absolutely nothing about the Christian faith,*

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and unfortunately many pastors are completely unskilled and incompetent teachers. Yet supposedly they all bear the name Christian, are baptized, and receive the holy sacrament, even though they do not know the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, or the Ten Commandments! (Preface to the Small Catechism: 2-3). In their world there was but one denomination, the Roman Church, and one order of service. The common churchgoer couldn't read or write and may never have visited the town closest to his. There was no hankering for liturgical variety or interest in worship for outreach. Their concerns were different. From their pastoral perspective, *liberty in these [worship] matters should be exercised moderately, so that the inexperienced may not take offense and, on account of an abuse of liberty, become more hostile to the true teaching of the gospel. Nothing in the customary rites may be changed without good reason* (Ap XV: 51).

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With an honest appraisal of the situation in Lutheran lands in the 16th century, it isn't difficult to understand what the confessors saw as the primary purposes for forms in worship. Note the boldface highlighting (the author's emphasis): *Concerning church regulations made by human beings, it is taught to keep those that may be kept without sin and that serve to **maintain peace and good order** in the church, such as specific celebrations, festivals, etc. (AC XV: 1). [The holy fathers] observed certain days not as if that observance were necessary for justification, but in order that the people might know at **what time they should assemble** (Ap VII and VIII: 40). [The fathers] observed these human rites on account of their usefulness for the body, so that **people may know at what time they should assemble**, so that they may have an example of how all things in the churches might be done decently and in order, and finally, so that the common people may receive some instruction. (For different seasons and various rites are valuable in admonishing the common people) (Ap XV: 20). We also figure that traditions can be rightly preserved for the following reasons. The people may more soberly concern themselves with sacred matters. . . . The order and governance of the church may instruct the ignorant about what may be conducted at which time. Hence, there are the festivals of Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, and the like. . . . For it is much more effective to instruct the common people using concrete things as depicted in rites and customs than using writings* (Ap XV: 21B).

It is legitimate to ask if confessional Lutheran pastors in our day and age are observing the same traits in their congregations and neighborhoods that the confessors saw in theirs. People living in the internet age, overloaded with media information, and surrounded by the witness of hundreds of Christian denominations face their own set of challenges, but they are different from what 16th century Lutherans faced—and what 16th century Lutheran pastors had to deal with.

Worship must enable the proclamation of the gospel

The Lutheran confessors wanted to be shepherds of the sheep, not herders of cattle. Controlling the masses was hardly their objective. They wanted worship to be orderly, peaceful, and timely so that their people could hear the Word and receive the Sacrament for the forgiveness of sins. They wanted worship to teach, review, and instruct so people could grow in the grace and knowledge of their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. They accepted Luther's assessment that *places, times, persons, and the entire outward order of worship have therefore been instituted and appointed in order that God's Word may exert its power publicly* (LC: Third Commandment, 94). The confessors grasped the practice of the ancient Church: *Frequently, the people continued to observe certain Old Testament customs, which the apostles adapted in modified form to the gospel history, like Easter and Pentecost, so that by these examples as well as by instruction they might transmit to posterity the memory of those important events* (Ap VII and VIII: 40). Melancthon makes an interesting observation in the Apology: *But let us speak about the term "liturgy." This word does not properly mean a sacrifice but rather public service. Thus, it agrees quite well with our position, namely, that the one minister who consecrates gives the body and blood of the Lord to the rest of the people, just as a minister who preaches sets forth the gospel to the people, as Paul says [1 Cor. 4:1], "Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries," that is, of the gospel and the sacraments. . . . Thus the term "liturgy" fits well with the ministry* (Ap XXIV: 80-81).

As valuable for the Word as all of the rites may have been, it was the sermon that imparted the most important proclamation of the gospel. *Our priests attend to the ministry of the Word. They teach the gospel about the blessings of Christ, and they show that the forgiveness of sins takes place on account of Christ. This teaching offers solid consolation to consciences. In addition they teach about the good works that God commands, and they speak about the value and use of the sacraments* (Ap XXIV: 48). We follow the example, experience, and commitment of the confessors when we strive to assess worship forms and preaching so that the Word can be heard and Christ be seen as the center of the Word.



This perspective is what led the confessors to their decisions about the language of public worship. Criticized by the *Confutation* for eliminating Latin as the language of worship, the confessors responded: *Ceremonies should be observed both so that people may learn the Scriptures and so that, admonished by the Word, they might experience faith and fear and finally even pray. For these are the purposes of the ceremonies. We keep the Latin for the sake of those who learn and understand it. We also use German hymns in order that the [common] people might have something to learn, something that will arouse their faith and fear* (Ap XXIV: 3). This, of course, was also Luther's perspective. Including Father Luther's Baptismal Booklet in *The Book of Concord*, they subscribed to his practice: *Because daily I see and hear with what carelessness and lack of solemnity . . . people treat the high, holy, and comforting sacrament of baptism . . . , I have decided that it is not only helpful but also necessary to conduct the service in the German language. For this reason I have translated those portions that used to be said in Latin in order to begin baptizing in German, so that the sponsors and others present may be all the more aroused to faith and earnest devotion and so that the priests who baptize have to show more diligence for the sake of the listeners* (The Baptismal Booklet: 371).

Although not as ancient as the order of service, Latin was a thousand year old tradition in the church of the West. In the minds of the confessors, this tradition did not deserve the same allegiance as the liturgy. The critical point in their understanding of the purpose of worship and its forms was that people must hear and understand the gospel.

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Worship must not lead to confusion

If the doctrine of justification is the most important scriptural witness of the confessional writings, the condemnation of righteousness by works may be the most frequent witness. Since the cornerstone of medieval theology was that participation in worship gained merit before God *ex opere operato*, the confessors took a firm stand against it. *It is taught that all rules and traditions made by human beings for the purpose of appeasing God and of earning grace are contrary to the gospel and the teaching concerning faith in Christ* (AC XV: 3). Again: *No one can earn grace, become reconciled with God, or make satisfaction for sin by observing the aforesaid human traditions. That is why they should not be made into a necessary service of God* (AC XXVI: 21). One could cite dozens of confessional passages that speak the same biblical truth. But the confessors saw a problem in the use of any man-made ritual: the sinful nature invariably perverts every good and godly rite into a work meriting God's approval. *Paul writes to the Colossians [2:23] that traditions have an "appearance of wisdom," and indeed they do. For this good order is most*

appropriate in the church and for this reason is necessary. But because human reason does not understand the righteousness of faith, it naturally imagines that such works justify human beings and reconcile God, etc. This is what the common people among the Israelites thought, and on the basis of this opinion such ceremonies increased just as among us they have expanded in the monasteries. This is also how human reason evaluates bodily discipline and fasting. Their purpose is to restrain the flesh, but reason attaches another purpose to them, namely, that they are acts of worship that justify (Ap XV: 22-24). As we strive to imitate the liturgical preferences of the confessors in our day, we need to remember the reality of the sinful nature in our members. We defend the ancient traditions because of their gospel proclamation and historical value, but we will also teach that these forms are not necessary human traditions.

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The Lutheran churches retained the form of the mass from Introit to Credo as well as the main observances of Sundays and festivals. *Among us the Mass is celebrated every Lord's day and on other festivals, when the sacrament is made available to those who wish to partake of it, after they have been examined and absolved. We also keep traditional liturgical forms, such as the order of readings, prayers, vestments, and other similar things* (Ap XXIV: 1). But they didn't retain all of the ancient traditions. Luther's reform of the liturgy of the Sacrament is well known among us. In his personal confession, added to *The Book of Concord*, he wrote: *Moreover, there is the consecration of candles, palms, spices, oats, cakes, etc. In fact, these cannot be called consecration, nor are they. Rather, they are pure mockery and deception. As far as these innumerable magic tricks go—which we suggest their god and they themselves adore until they become tired of them—we do not wish to bother with these things.* (SA XV: 5). *The Formula of Concord* repeats this injunction: *Foolish spectacles, which are not beneficial for good order, Christian discipline, or evangelical decorum in the church, are not true adiaphora or indifferent things* (FC SD X: 7). It's difficult to know if this truth is easier or more difficult to apply in our age. What constitutes a foolish spectacle? There is, of course, the old adage, "If it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it must be a duck." But in some ways "foolish" may be in the mind of the beholder. The confessors retained a few worship rituals which 21st century Lutherans might consider spectacles; some of today's preaching and music styles might elicit the same opinion. The confessors' concern was always that the gospel might be heard. Our concern must be the same.

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It was the same concern that the gospel might be heard that led the confessors to search and confess the Scriptures during the Adiaphoristic Controversy. We know the difficult history: *The question was whether . . . certain ceremonies that had been abolished (as in themselves indifferent matters neither commanded nor forbidden by God) could be revived under the pressure and demand of the opponents, and whether compromise with them in such ceremonies and indifferent matters would be proper? The one party said yes, the other said no to this question* (FC Ep, X: 2). This article doesn't discuss the confessors' conclusions. Their presentation of the issues does offer, however, the confessors' concern that worship forms not confuse Christians: *We must not include among the truly free adiaphora or indifferent matters ceremonies that give the appearance . . . that our religion does not differ greatly from the papist religion or that their religion were not completely contrary to ours* (FC SD X: 5). This confessional prohibition presents a problem to pastors today, both those who desire to reclaim worship forms common among the 16th century confessors and those who feel it important for outreach to pattern worship after the non-liturgical worship styles of many Evangelicals. We serve many people who, because of weakness and a lack of education, do consider some worship forms to be "Catholic" or "Reformed" and come away confused about our Lutheran use of the gospel in Word and Sacrament. The same pastoral care that dominated the decision-making of the confessors must dominate our efforts at worship revision and revitalization.

People must hear and understand the gospel.

The confessors' worship practices, practices they observed and promoted in their congregations, must be considered descriptive and not prescriptive among us. Their desire and commitment to the scriptural truth that the gospel must be heard when Christians gather is prescriptive and not descriptive. As they strove for this blessing, so may we also strive.

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