

THE THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE OF ACOLYTES IN LUTHERANISM

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The Lutheran mind, like any other mind, has a keen ability for word-association. I say "acolyte," you think "catholic." I say "catholic," you think "pope." I say "pope," you think "antichrist." At least if you are a good Lutheran, you think that. It is rather interesting that conversation with the average Lutheran concerning acolytes is automatically placed in the context of Catholicism. Why?

Why not? That is where the use and practice of acolytes originated. And since the times of the Reformation, we Lutherans avoid like the plague anything that is associated or connected with Catholicism. This is evident in our words and in our attitudes. Ask a typical Lutheran, "What do you think of using acolytes in our church?", and the stereotypical response is "What? Acolytes? That's a Catholic tradition which we traditionally avoid!"

But why? Why is it that I can almost without fault anticipate the response of WELS Lutherans concerning the use of acolytes? Maybe because we are ignorant of the historical significance of acolytes. Maybe because we are naturally adapted to judging practices which are not born from within our circles. Maybe because we don't really care about what others believe and do. Maybe because all the above are to some extent true.

This paper was assigned with one requirement: that it would present an original theme from the well of subjects within

American Lutheranism. Although the subject itself is as old as the hills (acolytes were used already in the third century), it is not all that old within Lutheran circles, and it is even less known as a word in the vocabulary of twentieth century WELS Lutherans.

As I considered goals for this paper, I came up with three. 1) I would like the reader to become familiar with the subject of acolytes in the context of Lutheranism. 2) Through this study, I hope that the reader will become aware of the current, contemporary attitudes of Lutheran clergymen toward acolytes. And 3) after reflecting on the current theology and practice of acolytes in Lutheranism today, perhaps the reader would consider the use of acolytes in his church, or certain applications of the use of acolytes.

The research for this paper was accomplished through survey/questionnaire sheets which were sent to the district presidents/bishops of the major Lutheran bodies: Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, Lutheran Church in America, and American Lutheran Church. Quite obviously, the bulk of my work was accomplished before the great merger of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Their responses to my survey form the substance and body of this paper.

The survey sheets, as sent out, are attached. The second survey was created after several responses were received from bishops of the ALC and LCA who didn't read the first survey closely enough. Since bishops in those other synods don't pastor

a congregation in addition to their synodical position, some, I suppose, thought that the survey did not apply to them. So I emphasized in the second survey the request for additional names of congregations in their district that use acolytes.

As far as an orderly progression for this paper is concerned, I will address each question on the survey in order, beginning with a general history of the use and function of acolytes through the centuries. It is obvious that the use of acolytes today somewhat models the ancient practice of acolytes, and that our attitudes toward acolytes today to some extent follow the attitudes that were held concerning acolytes in times past.

The origin of the word "acolyte" seems to be Greek, from ἀκόλουθος (akolouthos). This noun is also found in verbal form - ἀκολουθέω . It is regularly used in the New Testament and is simply translated "follower" or "followed." The Gospel writers used this word to show the motion of the crowds on Palm Sunday who followed Jesus (Mt. 21:9). Jesus used this word many times. For example, when calling the disciples to be fishers of men, he invited them to follow him (Mk. 1:17). He did the same when reinstating Peter into his ministry saying, "Follow me!" (Jn. 21:19). So the function of the acolyte is already pictured in the meaning of the word. The acolyte is a person who follows.

From the New Testament example, a follower of Jesus was called a disciple. Now a disciple was someone who walked in the

footsteps of the Master, imitating his action, and learning from him in a close, personal relationship. The training of the acolyte seems to follow this example from the ministry of Jesus. The acolyte was not a low-life, dead-end position in the orders of Catholicism. Rather, the acolyte had very specific responsibilities to perform, as well as a calling to fulfill. He was in the position of servant, and was trained by higher orders of clergy within the Catholic Church.

Since the times of the early church, there is some documentation concerning the use of acolytes in Catholicism, beginning in the third century. Apparently, they were part of the minor order of ministry in the church, being the highest of four orders of the lower clergy. So the acolyte had already graduated to the fourth level of Catholic "clergy," their ultimate goal being the priesthood. There was no acolyte who wasn't committed to becoming an ordained priest within the church.

This commitment is strikingly lacking from the definition of acolytes today. According to the earliest use and function of the acolyte, the office resembles and parallels our Vicar program today. Their days were spent in training.

Their specific functions varied from parish to parish, but their general assignments were the same. The acolyte served the priest, and assisted him as needed. In the public worship, he bore the processional cross or candelabra, lighting the other candles that were dispersed around the chancel. He would also be

prominent in the Eucharistic celebration by carrying to the priest the wine and wafers. He assisted in gathering the offerings as well.

Outside of the church, he ministered to the sick, taking to them the communion elements. Aside from these pastoral acts, he acted as secretary to the bishop, no doubt including typical office duties.

In the area of teaching ministry, the acolyte was also involved with the training of catechumens who were preparing for their examination before baptism. Perhaps this involved drilling the catechumen on his knowledge concerning baptism and its significance for his life and the church.

The definite impression that we must derive from this review of the ancient church's use of acolytes is that they were more than just lay people involved in the command of their Lord to serve the church. These men had as their goal the public ministry. Such being the case, they were set apart from the lay people in public worship by special garments. The vestments, then, had these two purposes: 1) to show that this person had separated himself from the world in order to serve the church, and 2) to show that he had entered a profession which is separate from the world.

History has traditionally told us that the acolyte wore a cassock and cotta. The cassock was a long, loosely fitting garment, probably not much nicer looking than a bed sheet. The cotta was a short surplice, which was a wide-sleeved, loose

garment worn over the cassock. How these vestments came into being or tradition is uncertain. But there seems to be some correlation between the garments that the Romans wore and the robes of the clergy. That is the subject of another paper.

Over the years, the original function and purpose of the acolyte has changed. Nothing passes through time without being tested by current beliefs, attitudes and needs. So as the years passed by, and the church found that fewer and fewer men were desiring of the priesthood, the system of training an acolyte was somewhat streamlined. The church no longer required men to pass through the three lower orders before becoming an acolyte, but whoever was willing was elevated to that service. The order of acolyte lost its status as being a priest-training program, and became simply a group of men who helped fill the immediate need of the priest, tending to the smooth order of the worship service. Gone was the commitment to becoming an ordained priest in the Catholic church. Gone was the true symbolism of the vestments, the separation from the world. The true acolyte in the historic sense of the word was lost to time. But not forever.

Now to the surveys. What do contemporary theologians say about this ancient practice? What are the current attitudes concerning the use of acolytes in the church today? Is there merit in reviving and resurrecting this order that the ancient church made good use of? Or is it completely unreasonable, considering that the numbers of men and women committing their

lives to the public ministry of the church is declining? What could be gained through the use of acolytes in our churches today? Let's find out from the clergy who responded to my survey.

Four major church bodies were the target of my survey, those being the WELS, the ALC, the LCA, and the LC-MS. No response was received from our sister synod, the ELS. In the miscellaneous category, I found one Serbian Lutheran Church in Milwaukee which also responded to my survey.

The surveys were addressed to the district presidents/bishops of the synods, with the hopes that they would be the people who could readily supply information concerning the use of acolytes within the churches of their district.

1) Do you use acolytes?

In response to question #1, these are the results. Seventeen surveys were sent out to the WELS, 12 of them in the hands of district presidents, and the remaining to parish pastors. All 17 responded to the survey. Three indicated that they use acolytes; 14 said that they do not.

Within the ALC (prior to its merger into the ELCA), 20 surveys were sent out to the 20 bishops of that synod. Only three were returned, representing a 15% response factor. Of those three that were returned, all three indicated that their congregations do use acolytes.

The statistics for the LCA are rather interesting also.

There were 20 surveys sent out to the bishops of the synod, and again, only three were returned, representing a 10% response factor. All three did indicate, again, that their congregations use acolytes.

The LC-MS responded quite well to the survey. A total of 37 surveys were sent out to their district presidents, while 12 were returned, showing a 32% response factor. Nine responded by indicating that they do use acolytes, and three replied that they do not.

The Serbian Lutheran Church responded by saying that they do use acolytes. Their synodical status is unknown to me.

In comparison to results received for national surveys, I should be happy. Thanks to the true-blue pastors of the WELS, my statistics look even better! Apparently, the self-addressed, stamped return envelope was not easy enough for the other targeted participants on my survey. Other factors do play into the picture, such as the celebration of Christ's birth, which was not to be outdone by the super merger of the ALC, LCA, and the AELC.

The totals look like this: 106 surveys were sent out, 36 surveys were returned, showing a 34% return rate. Nineteen out of the 36 responses were positive, showing that 53% of the congregations polled do use acolytes in their worship. That leaves 17 congregations who responded negatively, representing 47% of the congregations polled that currently do not use acolytes.

If I were to make a judgment concerning the value of using acolytes on the basis of these statistics, it would be a mighty foolish move. Barely half of the churches who responded use acolytes. But the statistics are rather heavily weighed by one synod...ours. Seventeen of the 36 returned surveys are from the WELS. Almost half of the returned surveys are from our own pastors, so the results of the surveys are hardly representative of Lutheranism, as a whole. So before any conclusions are made regarding the practice of acolytes in our churches today, let's continue to look at the survey results.

2) Do you know any other Lutheran congregations in your district that use acolytes?

The second question was written to get an idea of the number of congregations within the individual districts that use acolytes. From the WELS surveys, names of eight congregations were provided by the district presidents as churches that use acolytes. That's eight congregations out of 1,190.

The LC-MS surveys reported names of five additional congregations that use acolytes. But several surveys came back with notes like these:

practically every church in our area uses acolytes ... just about all 83 congregations do ... I believe I would not be underestimating when I state that more than 90 of our 110 congregations are using acolytes ... to the best of my knowledge every one of our congregations have acolytes

These notes give a completely different picture of the use of acolytes within the LC-MS than the statistics show.

The ALC surveys contained similar notes, that many of their

congregations do use acolytes: "probably more than half do ... all 120 of them"

The LCA surveys again revealed that many of their congregations actively use acolytes in worship, even though the survey results didn't reveal an overwhelming majority.

The impression I received from some of the notes quoted above is that the use of acolytes in the LC-MS, ALC and LCA is a given. So maybe there is more to this practice than we see in the WELS. But we are not a synod to jump on the bandwagon of doing what everybody else is doing, so most likely there are other reasons why the use of acolytes in the WELS is slim.

3) On what do you base your practice of acolytes?

Why would such an ancient tradition receive such wide use in many Lutheran churches today? Many interesting reasons are provided by the clergy who responded to question #3.

Only one pastor from the WELS recognized the use of acolytes to be based on Scriptural principles. He believed that general stewardship principles of time and talent are support for the use of acolytes in worship. In addition to this, this same pastor wrote, "We wanted to involve children in service." Ministry is obviously not something that is reserved exclusively for the clergy, but it involves all disciples of Jesus, young and old.

The other WELS surveys reported the congregation's tradition as being the primary reason for using acolytes, even if the congregation themselves didn't use them. Some mentioned

christian liberty as a basis for the practice. A further Scriptural principle is mentioned in this note:

The previous pastor [was] very "high church" w[ith] all the trappings. Acolytes [were] his legacy. He only used two. I, however, use all the boys I can to give them an opportunity to serve their congregation and learn a little responsibility. There is no Scripture reference except that these boys or girls [not my emphasis] have the right to light candles by virtue of the universal priesthood and in line w[ith] "decency and in order."

This pastor most likely had in mind 1 Peter 2:9 and 1 Corinthians 14:40.

But there is some variance of opinion whether the use of acolytes in WELS churches is proper at all. One pastor wrote back:

It is not contrary to Scripture per se, but it does cause offense, just as does the custom of wearing all the clerical vestments which [are part of] the "high church" movement which does stand for teachings contrary to Scripture. Therefore the practice should be avoided.

Perhaps there is a variance in how we define "offense," but the last time that I heard it defined scripturally, it had something to do with causing someone to sin. The use of acolytes in public worship to my knowledge doesn't cause anybody to sin. But some WELS members may not like the practice, simply because they are not used to it, or because it has Catholic connotations.

Moving over to the LC-MS, half of those who responded indicated that their use of acolytes was based on their congregation's tradition. There were two pastors who based the practice of acolytes on Scripture, and supplied the following Scripture references.

1 Samuel 2:19 - But Samuel was ministering before the LORD--a boy wearing a linen ephod.

Proverbs 22:6 - Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.

Acts 6:2-4 - (This portion of Scripture shows the division of ministerial duties in the early church.)

One other passage - 1 Corinthians 14:40 - has already been mentioned above.

Of special notice is the 1 Samuel reference. Hannah prayed to the Lord for a child, promising to dedicate him to the Lord's service for his entire life, if the Lord would answer her prayer (1 Sam. 1:11). Samuel's service for Eli seems to be similar to the position of an acolyte. He had a particular function, as mentioned in 2:18. What his duties were is uncertain, but Eli perhaps gave him simple tasks around the temple in Shiloh. As he grew older, his work more than likely increased.

His garment also set him apart. Samuel wore a linen ephod--
תַּבְּרֵיטִי־אֶפְרוֹדִית - while serving in the temple with Eli. Perhaps this was a copy of the special ephod made for the high priest. At any rate, it was a scaled-down version of what Eli might have worn, connecting the boy Samuel to the priestly ministry, and the important work of proclaiming the Lord to the people.

One pastor made reference to the Augsburg Confession, citing the historic Lutheran position on ceremonies as the basis for his church's use of acolytes.

Responses from the ALC are even more interesting. One bishop based his use of acolytes on Scripture, tradition and the 'other' category. From Scripture he referred to the Torah and

the instructions that are given for temple service. In the Old Testament in general, he referred to allusions to torch bearers. In Acts, he referred to the use of lights wherever the church gathered, and then looks at the function of acolytes in the early church: "...servers / light bearers / 'runners' with the sacrament to sick / 'bouncers' at church door - lookouts."

Another ALC bishop says this about the practice of acolytes:

To draw it out of Scripture would be insane. To substantiate it by [not my emphasis] Scripture would be far-fetched and totally unnecessary. To admit that Scripture says nothing about it (and could care less!!) and that we are free to do as we damn well please is both honest and sensible!! The tradition of the Church of Jesus Christ in such adiafera is to do what is helpful, orderly and expedititious. The involvement of lay persons in the liturgies of the worship of the people of God meets any and all criteria for appropriate Christian practise. [original spelling included]

There is only one interesting note worth passing along from the responses of the LCA. One survey was filled out by a lay person in charge of the acolytes in the church. She mentioned that her congregation's use of them is based on tradition. The acolytes are trained by some manual that is published by the Lutheran Church.

From the Serbian Lutheran congregation comes this note:

Scripture refers to a number of persons involved in the care and functional performance of the Tabernacle and Temple.

4) How long has your congregation used acolytes?

On to question #4. Since there is very little use of acolytes in the WELS, most of the surveys came back blank under

this question. First Lutheran of Green Bay listed 25+ years, and Garden Homes of Milwaukee listed 40-50 years. Since Immanuel of Fort Worth, Texas was begun as a mission, it has used acolytes. The congregation is now 18 years old.

The LC-MS responses consistently listed 30+ years for the use of acolytes.

The ALC surveys reported an average use of acolytes for 35 years or more.

The same is true of the LCA surveys. It seems like the practice has been initiated in many cases since the beginning of the congregations.

- 5) Do they wear special vestments?
- 6) Do you know the origin of the vestments that they wear?

Consistent throughout the surveys were the responses to questions #5 and 6. All wear some type of white alb or surplice, to hide the person and set him or her apart in the role as acolyte. No one was aware of the historical origin of the vestments.

- 7) What is the specific function of your acolytes in worship?

Their function throughout Lutheranism is quite similar as well, as noted from question #7. Almost all of those responding positively to the use of acolytes mentioned that they light and extinguish the candles (baptism, advent, Christ candle, and communion candles), and receive the offerings. Several other uses were noted, which mirror the historic catholic use of

acolytes, as well as the early church's use of "acolytes." One pastor mentioned that he uses his acolytes in conjunction with leading festive processions, and using them to run last minute errands. Several surveys mentioned using acolytes in the communion service, to keep the vessels filled and the bread in supply. In the case of individual cups, they pick up the empty cups. Assisting in the baptism ceremony was also mentioned.

* * * * *

That is my research. What's the conclusion to the whole matter? Whatever you, the reader, would like to conclude, I suppose. As for me, a few things became very apparent through my study. First of all, it is obvious that there is a marked difference between the church bodies that do use acolytes and those that don't. For some reason, the WELS has not fully accepted the use of acolytes in our congregations. The idea has not caught on as it has in the other church bodies. For what reasons? Maybe because we like to be set apart from the others. Maybe because we are too quick to judge the practices of others, labeling acolytes as "too much catholic."

If the name is the problem, why not come up with a new name, but incorporate the principle? What are acolytes but lay people in disguise? They are people serving their Lord in a specialized function, the corporate worship service. They are people in a particular age bracket, targeted by the "higher" clergy as ones

who particularly need to stay close to the Lord. And what better way to have youth stay close to the Lord than by incorporating their energy and service into the public ministry as acolytes. I won't disagree with those who feel that youth can serve in other capacities in the church. There are enough church youth groups that come together once a month merely to socialize. My point is this: let's integrate them into the mainstream of the church's mission, namely kingdom service and disciple making.

Secondly, the responses received from those churches aside from the WELS indicated that the use of acolytes has been an accepted practice. This isn't somebody's cute idea of youth service, but a meaningful way of causing youth to think about ministry as a life-long service. One pastor from the LC-MS responded in this way:

The rationale is very practical. It serves to interest and educate young people in the Lutheran way of worship and sometimes sparks an interest in a full-time church position as pastor or teacher.

What WELS person could argue with such a rationale? Perhaps we have ignored and overlooked this recruitment tool for too long.

Thirdly, I find it very interesting that the use of acolytes as "high church" was mentioned by only one pastor, who happened to belong to our synod. If that practice is "high church," what practices belong to "low church" or "normal church"? Who is the one who decides what is high or low or normal or abnormal? Isn't it in the hands of those who use them?

It's easy to look back on history and label churches that use acolytes and those that don't as being either right or wrong

in their practices. I guess that is everybody's right and freedom to do. But let's not allow our labeling of a particular practice as "high church" stop us from encouraging young people into the ministry. Maybe it's time to stop talking, and start getting them involved directly in ministry, so that the youth themselves may discover by God's Holy Spirit the gifts that they have been given. I have never known anyone who learned to ride a skateboard just by listening to someone else talk about it. Getting involved is where it's at.

Fourthly, I don't particularly care whether I am labeled just because I advocate the use of acolytes. Different strokes for different folks. Who will deny that there aren't two schools of thought in our synod today? It is obvious that God doesn't care one way or the other whether our churches incorporate acolytes in the public worship service. If he did, he would have left a clear command to that fact. But he did command us to serve him and each other. So how can we avoid not using acolytes, or altar boys, or whatever you want to call them? If we are agreed on the principle of service, why have we delayed this long in studying and emulating the example of the early Christian church as well as the historic Catholic church?

If there are any better ideas, let's get them out on the table.

December 11, 1987

Dear Pastor,



Greetings to you in the name of our coming Savior. As your work begins to escalate in this Advent season, I pray that your Savior's coming brings you extra joy!

I would like to ask just a few minutes from your busy day. I am a student at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (Milwaukee), and am currently working on a study of "The Theology and Practice of Acolytes In Lutheranism." If your congregation actively uses acolytes in worship, I would appreciate five minutes of your time to fill out the questions below. If you don't, perhaps you could supply the names of Lutheran congregations in your district that do.

* * * * *

1) Do you use acolytes?

___ Yes ___ No

2) Do you know any other Lutheran congregations in your district that use acolytes? (please supply the church's name and address)

___ Yes ___ No

3) On what do you base your practice of acolytes?

___ Scripture ___ congregation's tradition
___ other

(please supply Scripture reference or any history about the practice that you can)

4) How long has your congregation used acolytes?

_____ years

5) Do they wear special vestments?

_____ Yes _____ No

6) Do you know the historical origin of the vestments that they wear? (please explain)

7) What is the specific function of your acolytes in worship?

(filled out by)

(church name)

(city)

Thanks for your time! Please return this as soon as it is convenient in the enclosed envelope.

Robert Timmermann

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4) How long has your congregation used acolytes?

_____ years

5) Do they wear special vestments?

_____ Yes _____ No

6) Do you know the origin of the vestments that they wear?
(please explain)

7) What is the specific function of your acolytes in worship?

(filled out by)

(church name)

(city)

Thanks for your time! Please return this as soon as it is convenient in the enclosed envelope.

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6717 W. Wartburg Cr. 117N
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December 17, 1987

Dear Pastor,



Greetings to you in the name of our coming Savior. As your work begins to escalate in this Advent season, I pray that your Savior's coming brings you extra joy!

I am a student at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (Milwaukee), and am currently working on a study of "The Theology and Practice of Acolytes In Lutheranism." If your congregation actively uses acolytes in worship, I would appreciate five minutes of your time to fill out the questions below. If you aren't a parish pastor, perhaps you could supply the names of congregations in your district that use acolytes. (question #2)

* * * * *

1) Do you use acolytes?

___ Yes ___ No

2) Do you know any other Lutheran congregations in your district that use acolytes? (please supply the church's name and address)

___ Yes ___ No

3) On what do you base your practice of acolytes?

___ Scripture ___ congregation's tradition
___ other

(please supply Scripture reference or any history about the practice that you can)
