

# Church Etiquette

[Delivered at Church Council Conference at Lewiston on October 21, 1951]

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General Outline—I. General Premise

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## I

We call our church building the House of God. Consider for a moment the profound implication of this apparent trite term—the House of God.

We know that God is a spirit and as such cannot be confined at a given time to a given place. And yet those four humble or majestic walls do confine for a time, for us miserable, finite creatures, our mighty, loving Lord. It is here where we meet our God face to face through the use of His Holy Word and Sacraments.

What would be our reactions, as Christians, were we to behold with our eyes, if that were possible, the blinding majesty of God? I am sure that we would react as did Isaiah when he beheld, in a vision, “the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up,” His train filling the temple; while “above it stood the seraphims” each one covering his face and crying unto one another: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory.” It was but natural that Isaiah, upon beholding the glory and majesty of God, should cry out in despair: “Owoe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips...for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.” The absolute purity of God’s holiness, when beheld by Isaiah, made his whole being fully conscious of his black, wretched, sinful condition.

Though we shall at no time, while sojourning here on earth, ever meet with so wonderful an experience as did Isaiah, yet each time we make our appearance in God’s House we are presented with a like circumstance. The primacy and foremost purpose which must underlie our attendance at public worship is to hear God’s own Word. Those Words which we hear Sunday after Sunday emanate from the council of the omnipotent and gracious Lord. His Word is no less mighty and majestic than He. We too, therefore, should stand in awe of and tremble at that holy Word which we hear taught to us in church. This is the spiritual condition the Lord would have in us, for He says in Is. 66,2: “To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at My Word.” Such is that true worshipper, upon whom the Lord looks with divine pleasure. The Lord employs His Word, the law, to humble and make low the sinner through the realization of his decrepit, sinful nature; and through His Word, the Gospel, the Lord raises to such great spiritual heights these who humbly and joyfully acknowledge Him their only Lord and Savior.

With this truth in mind, that the majesty of God is ever present with us during divine services, we can well appreciate the psalmist’s rapturous exclamation: “A day in Thy courts is better than a thousand. I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness.” Surely the position of a doorkeeper is a humble one; and we too should be of like condition and enter the sanctuary of the Lord with trembling humility.

Is it not extremely arrogant and supercilious on our parts when we enter the House of God and consider it to naught but a common structure, and our actions bear out such

considerations? Be the place of worship ever so humble and commonplace in appearance and designs yet it is the House of God—the place wherein His honor dwelleth.

## II.

Since the honor and majesty of our loving Lord are ever present during our services in the House of God, there is naturally a certain propriety which should accompany our attendance at this service. We Christians recognize and observe definite social decorum when we are in the company of sinful humans. Are we Christians not debasing the holy, majestic Lord through indifferent and careless actions while in His presence? Are we not then abusing our God-given liberty by casting all restraint upon our sinful inclinations to the wind when we enter the House of God? The fierce, earthy Mohammedan becomes a paragon of virtue and humility when he enters his mosque to worship Allah, a non-existing god and a figment of an irrational imagination. Our Triune God does exist; He is the only existing God.

By His grace we possess knowledge of and faith in Him. It is then ironical that we, who are those endowed, must look with shame when we compare our church etiquette with that of a heathen.

We must all admit that proper and God-pleasing church etiquette within our Lutheran churches is too often at a minimum. Whether this results from a minute respect for God and a lack of Christ-like humility, or simply from gross ignorance of decent church decorum, I cannot answer. That is for the individual Christian to determine for himself after an honest searching of the heart. The opinion does flitter through my mind that the cause is an obnoxious composite of the two.

Before proceeding into a discussion on the various points of proper church etiquette, I do believe that definite principles should be established upon which the numerous forms of church etiquette will be based.

In Eccl. 5,1: The Lord states: “Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God...” This is a clear and unmistakable warning to us who worship in His presence. We are to keep our feet, that is to be cognizant of or be possessed of the full realization of that place where we are going—the House of God. There is reason for the necessity of this awareness. After berating and condemning those who place their trust in and worship wood and stone, though covered with gold and silver, which have no life, the Lord reassuringly observes in Hab. 2,20: “But the Lord in His holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before Him.” The presence of the holy and a majestic Creator demands the awe-filled silence of the miserable, sinful creature. This same pronouncement the Lord makes in Zeph. 1,7: “Hold thy peace at the presence of the Lord God.” Love and respect for God should motivate this silence He requires of us while in His presence.

We are made more fully conscious of that respect which God demands of those appearing in His presence when we stand with Moses upon Mount Horeb and hear the voice of God emanating from that burning bush: “Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.” It was God’s holy presence which made that ground holy.

From the foregoing declarations of God, we can derive the following principle: The honor and majesty of God is to be assiduously respected in the House of God.

As was previously stated, the foremost purpose for our attendance in divine service is to hear God’s Word both read and taught. It is primarily for this reason that the Lord warns the worshipper to keep his foot when going to the House of God; for the Lord continue “...and be more ready to hear than to give the sacrifice of fools.”

God's Word is not a dissertation on proposed remedies for social and economic ills, nor is it simply an exposition on a beautiful philosophy of life; but this Word is the power of God unto salvation to all who believe. This Word is the means or the avenue the Holy Spirit employs to make His abode in us. Should not our hungry and parched souls yearn for that eternal bread and water of life which strengthens and sustains us in the true faith?

It is therefore imperative that we in no way permit actions which will distract ourselves as well as our fellow worshipper from the undivided, attentive listening to God's salubrious Word.

The third principle brings us to a subject with which we are all well acquainted. It is one which the world feels is basic for permanent world peace, We all possess sufficient head knowledge concerning its nature. However, we all too often fail to translate our rational concepts into functional precepts. This much talked of principle and the least practiced is love for one's neighbor.

We, who have undergone spiritual rebirth through faith in Christ our Savior, possess the volitionally ability to apply this Second Table of the Law. It therefore seems highly impossible for a Christian to be apathetic towards his fellow Christian. The relation of Christian with Christian is more than being neighbors or fellow inhabitants upon this planet. All Christians, throughout the world, form a living, indivisible and eternal organism of which Christ is the head. We Christians are, as the Lord states in Rom. 12,5: "One body in Christ, and everyone members one of another." How much must we, then, as Christians, love one another, since the Lord has graciously brought us into the fellowship of faith and made us living parts of His glorious body, the Church!

It is difficult to visualize bitter strife and antagonism within the body of Christ, while outside this body there are children of light who appearingly harmonize beautifully with the children of darkness. With this contradictory condition in mind, we can more fully appreciate Paul's pleading admonition to us, "As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, *especially* unto them who are of the household of faith." And what greater opportunity is there provided than the time when we Christians assemble in the presence of our head—Christ?

Yes, love for our fellow believers should be a guiding principle in our church etiquette for only then can that condition be made possible in which our worship will mount unto the Lord as a sweet smelling savor.

The fourth principle, upon which I shall briefly dwell, is the sum of the result of applying the aforementioned principles. This is, "Let all things be done decently and in order. 1 Cor. 14,40. Through our study of the sciences, be it ever so cursory, we gain the realization that our Lord created all physical nature and its laws to function in an orderly manner. Any violations of nature's laws results in dire happenings. God is a God of order therefore all that He created functions orderly. God's spiritual creation, the regeneration of all believers, is the apple of His eye; therefore He not only expects, but requires that all things pertaining to the operation of His Church be done decently and in order. Should there arise during our worship services anything which might mar and disturb this required order, steps must be taken to correct such disturbing influences.

The above principles are all positive in their aspect and are therefore fit to guide. However, there exists a final principle, negative in its nature, when considered under this topic, which, though it guide not, is applicable to this study. It shall merely serve as a warning and as a standard upon which we, as individuals, can test the true value of our church etiquette. Our church decorum, to be of any value, must be acceptable to God.

There exists a seemingly innate danger when the subject of church etiquette is discussed and studied. Since this subject deals with many do's and don'ts, some of which are merely adiabatic in their nature, one soon becomes lost in a maze of authoritative fiat and demands, and loses all understanding of the purpose which should be basic to a functional church decorum. The emphasis is then placed upon the actions of the worshipper and not upon the true condition of his heart.

The Lord Himself provides us with the criterion of true church etiquette. In Ps. 51,17 We read: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise." True humility is required in our church decorum.

It is therefore imperative that we are extremely careful lest our church etiquette degenerate into pharisaic, pietistic formalism and our actions become motivated by glory for Self and not for the sole glory of God.

### III

Proper church etiquette when practiced with comprehension, provides the opportunity for spiritual edification for one's self and his fellow worshipper. It is this golden thread which I shall attempt to weave throughout the following discussion on the points of church etiquette.

No matter on which day or days of the week a Christian congregation opens its doors for public worship, where God's own holy Word is heard and taught, the Lord is ever present. It is therefore imperative that we appear at the Lord's house on time. To be inexcusably late portrays disrespect towards God. His Word and His presence should magnetically draw the Christian to church on time.

There is much spiritual benefit we can derive from arriving not only on time, but early. While seated and awaiting the opening of the service, we can make precious use of the intervening time by reading the hymns to be sung. My personal experience is that while singing the hymns, difficulty is encountered in fully comprehending the meaning of the words and phrases of the hymn. I am sure that others have like experiences. However, after reading the hymns before hand, we shall be able to sing them with greater understanding and appreciation as to their spiritual implications.

Within the forefront of our hymnals can be found a section devoted to a goodly number of Psalms. These are God's Word, words provided for our spiritual edification. Let us read them and be edified.

How many Lutherans are there who have not only read, but know of the Athanasian Creed? It's found in our hymnal. In it is found a wealth of Scriptural truths concerning our Savior We can never learn too much of Him.

There are many of our fellow Christians who do arrive on time. Our special love towards those who are one with us should motivate us to cause nothing which might in any way disturb their worshipful attitude. This does happen when we arrive late.

Through prompt or early arrival, we have the opportunity to prepare ourselves for proper God-pleasing worship and we shall not hinder our fellow believers in their praise to God.

It is advisable to sit as far to the front of the church as possible. In so doing we shall not only eliminate many distracting influences, but the Word can be heard so much the better.

If ushers are provided, follow as directed. That all things might be done decently and in order, larger congregations provide the usher service. I am sure that we all can appreciate the embarrassment and dilemma the usher encounters when those he is leading up the aisle suddenly

choose their own pew and are nowhere in sight when the usher turns to face a huge, empty aisle. We can surely forego our American individualism for a time.

Once having taken our place in church, it is not only proper etiquette, but more than this, it is God-pleasing, to offer a silent prayer before we proceed to take our parts in the service. This would be a logical time to ask the Lord to open our hearts that they might be more receptive to His Word, and that our worship does not degenerate into “sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal.”

We can eliminate the possibility of being disturbed in our pre-service meditation if we take our place toward the center or the far end of the pew. Seating one’s self at the aisle end of the pew does seem to imply a desire to hurriedly leave God’s House and His majestic presence.

What is a more gratifying sight than to see an entire family proceed up the aisle and to seat itself as a unit, The family is called the backbone of the nation. This backbone can be strengthened through joint worship in the House of God.

Should the circumstance arise that we do arrive late to services, we should be especially diligent in our church etiquette. If we arrive while a hymn is being sung, we should employ that opportunity of quietly and as unobtrusively as possible to seat ourselves. Since the hymn is a form of worship approved by God, and these worshippers can only sing with profit if their thoughts are fully centered on the words being sung, we should seek a place as far to the rear of the church as possible. However, should our entrance be made during the liturgical service, it is imperative that we remain standing in the rear of the church. This is beneficial to both the late comer and these already participating in the service. It is to hardly possible to concentrate upon the prayer, confession of sins, Scripture lessons, etc., while we are seeking about for a place to sit. Not only does decency and order demand this, but also the desire to profitably hear God’s Word, properly pray to God, and a heartfelt consideration for our fellow saint’s edification.

In relation to this, we might keep in mind that leaving the church during the liturgical service is distracting. Only an emergency should warrant this.

Are we in Grand Central Station or in a Lutheran Church? This question we can often ask ourselves while in church, especially during the time preceding the service proper, during the offertory, and immediately following the Benediction. A brief, but cheery, “Good morning” or a few quiet directives to a stranger sitting beside us are in place. But the continual whisperings, which all too often mounts into voluble talking, plus a sprinkling of disturbing laughter from the rear of the church, is gross disrespect toward the honor and majesty of God. “The Lord is in His holy Temple; let all the earth keep silence before Him.” The Lord is here not offering an apologetic suggestion to us, but His holiness and majesty demand silence of us. If we properly spend the pre-service time in meditation, the time immediately following the sermon to think deeply upon the import of the message as it applies to us personally and not only to our neighbor, and the time following the Benediction and while still in church to thoughts upon our worship in general, we shall find little time for shop talk or other needless, mundane chit-chat. Let us remember, the holy presence of our Lord demands this silence of us.

But let us not carry this required silence into the time the hymns are to be sung. That is the time we can burst forth in adoration and praise to our supreme and gracious Lord and Savior. The psalmist invites us, his fellow saints of the post-Reformation era, to “Come, let us sing unto the Lord: Let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation.” The psalmist does not invite us to apologetically murmur and mumble a melody, but to make a joyful noise. There is every reason for this, for salvation is ours and God’s “holy arm” hath gotten us the victory. Is our blood-bought salvation so irrelevant to us that we can only sing our Savior’s praises and thanks half-heartedly?

How many of us would dare entertain the thought of nodding our heads in sleep while appearing before the throne of our King? Yet there are times when many of us, perchance we ourselves, doze unconcernedly during the teaching of God's Word—that Word which is no less holy and majestic than our Lord. Merry making and perhaps even carousing late into Saturday night or even Sunday morning, will naturally cause a tired feeling to permeate one's body. If a Christian is truly concerned for the spiritual benefits received while in God's presence, he will surely regulate his Saturday nights that his physical being as well as his spiritual nature will be prepared for attentive worship. The old custom of ringing the church bells on Saturday evening at 6 p.m. seems to have lost its real significance. How can a Christian meet his Lord on a Sunday morning with humble acknowledgement of his sins and praise and thanksgiving for His wondrous salvation when that Christians Saturday preparation consists of dining and dancing with the world in night clubs and places of even more questionable repute? Proper preparation for God-pleasing worship is of paramount importance.

In addition to talking or whispering in church, this breach of etiquette, sleeping in church, would appear to be the most flagrant violation of God's honor and majesty. Arrogance and pride must give place to humility and a broken and contrite spirit.

St. Paul admonishes us to do all things to the glory of God. This should be our criterion for the type of apparel we wear in church. Any dress, which is not of a conservative nature, tends to draw other's attention to ourselves. There is then the danger of seeking glory for Self. And the church service soon degenerates into a fashion center in which many vie with one another in appearing in the latest and often flashiest of dress. A "smart" suit or a "stunning" dress does not hide from the Lord the true condition of the heart. That apparel in which each of us must take the greatest interest is the robe of righteousness Christ has made possible for us to wear at the feast of our King. True humility, then, shall properly dictate the type of apparel to wear in church.

"Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal." With theme words Paul opens this Spirit-inspired dissertation on the focal point love is to hold in a Christian's life. Love for one's neighbor radiates from faith. The love we have toward others is a touchstone of the condition of our faith. A dim, cold love filters through from a faith composed of dying embers. A warm and glowing love which permeates the atmosphere around us, radiates from a faith burning with zeal. Are we cold and even indifferent toward strangers in our church? Both are indicative of a lack-luster faith. If the strangers are fellow-Christians, our hearts should open to them for they are one with us. Both we and they are members of the same body. Perhaps the stranger is an unbeliever. What an appropriate way and opportune time to let our light so shine before men, that they might see our good works and glorify our Father which is in heaven. Do you for one moment believe that a cold reception will cause an unregenerate person to return and perhaps obtain the gift of faith through the preaching of God's Word? Lost souls are at stake. Let us not be cold and indifferent toward strangers.

I have not exhausted the subject of church etiquette by any means. There remains much which can be said. However, before concluding this section, I shall merely mention two uncouth and boorish habits which are considered such even in gatherings wholly secular. These are gum chewing and the distracting habit of turning about to see who has just entered.

In concluding this section, I should like to repeat that respect toward God, the glory of God, ours and our neighbor's soul salvation should guide us in our church etiquette.

A paper such as this and tracts and pamphlets on church etiquette are of little value and even wasted time and effort if nothing concrete is done to correct the lack of proper church etiquette prevalent in our Lutheran churches. If we, as pastors, teachers, and council members are of the wholehearted agreement that a God-pleasing church decorum is at shameful minimum within our respective congregations, we dare not sit idly by and simply nod our heads in approval of all that has been said. Definite action is essential. With this in mind, I wish to briefly present some suggested means for fostering church etiquette. You will find them to be self-evident and nothing new. Yet they bear repeating.

Much can be taught through example. We, the called and appointed leaders within our congregations, must set the pace. We must examine ourselves to determine whether there is need for improvement in our own church etiquette. If *we* demonstrate a lack of respect toward God and His Word, what can we expect from others? It is therefore essential that at church council meetings some time be spent in a fuller discussion of this topic. This is to be undertaken primarily for personal improvement and edification. Much effort and time is wasted if we leaders are of the infantile opinion that a grandiose program, which we set up for others to follow, will solve the problem. That simply becomes a huge, glittering shell with no stabilizing core. Our example provides that core.

We teachers can profitably instruct these children the Lord has entrusted to our care in proper church etiquette. The twig, when properly bent, grows in the right direction.

You pastors can make much profitable use of your confirmation classes, young people's meetings, men's club meetings, and ladies aid or guild meetings to discuss this important subject.

This problem can best be solved if a planned, progressive discussion is prepared beforehand. Also, we dare not make the mistake of merely instructing in the supernumerary points of etiquette and stop or begin with that. Much time and effort must be spent in laying the foundation or instructing in the reasons for church etiquette. Only then will the result be favorable. We must ever keep in mind that we are dealing with regenerate Christians who are possessed of the Holy Spirit. When these have been properly instructed in the purpose for church decorum, the remaining time need only be spent in clarifying and pointing out accepted etiquette.

Since we worship in the House of God, wherein His Honor dwelleth, we must through example, admonition and instruction retain its sanctity.