

WHY LUTHERANS NEED TO KNOW WHAT THEY'RE DOING: THE IMPORTANCE OF
EDUCATING CONGREGATIONS IN THE DYNAMIC OF LUTHERAN WORSHIP

BY

ZACHARY C. SEMMANN

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PROF. AARON CHRISTIE, ADVISOR

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ABSTRACT

If someone were to walk into a church and see many ceremonies being carried out, a question might enter their minds. That question would be: “why are they doing *these* things; and why *this* way?” The answer to that question will do a great deal to shape their perspective of those ceremonies and practices. This thesis seeks to explore the reason why it is important to educate Lutheran congregations on the reasons for, history of, meanings of, and dynamics of Lutheran rites, ceremonies, customs, and practices. The term *rites* will refer to significant texts and orders of service. *Ceremonies* refer to actions of worship. *Customs* refer to traditions created to emphasize truths. *Practices* refer to doctrine implemented. Finally, the term *dynamic* means the essence of what is happening in a rite, ceremony, custom, or practice. This thesis begins by explaining what these are, what they mean and what their dynamic is. The second part explains the reason why those ceremonies, rites, and customs should be explained to congregations. Part three suggests some possible methods of doing so. This thesis will explain that educating a congregation in these matters will increase how much they are edified by them and how much they value them.

INTRODUCTION

The question “why” is a question that human beings learn almost before they can walk. Humans have a curiosity about the world around them. This is simply a part of human nature. When humans consider what things they are going to do, the routines they are going to make a part of their daily lives, the ceremonies in their lives they are going to adopt, they will typically want to have an answer to that question, “Why?” They want to know *why* they are doing these practices and ceremonies.

Concerning the practices of the church, the rites and ceremonies it employs, the customs it makes common, human curiosity is still present. If no reason or rationale for a practice is given, one will assume it is arbitrary. Thus, if a congregant of a church sees the ceremonies and customs of the church growing up but is never informed or never deduces what they mean or what purpose they serve, he will assume the practice does not have value or is simply arbitrary.

The simple fact of the matter is that in order for a congregant to find value in the rites, ceremonies, customs, and practices of the church, he must know what they mean and what purpose they serve. When the congregation knows the meaning of the practices and ceremonies that they observe, they find more value in them. In addition, they will understand the dynamic of the ceremonies, that is, what is happening when we perform these rites and ceremonies in the church. They will be edified and built up as Christians.

PART 1: WHAT LUTHERANS DO AND WHY

The Things We Do

There are any number of ceremonies and customs that can be seen in a Lutheran church, so the wisest course of action is to look at the basics. In a typical, confessional Lutheran church service, one will see a pastor, vested in some kind of vestment. This may be an alb and stole, cassock and surplice, or alb and chasuble. This has been the case since the Reformation. “Lutheranism in central and northern Germany retained the liturgical colors, vestments, and vessels of the ancient church.”¹ The vestments were never uniform throughout all of Lutheranism. “Liturgical vestments enjoyed the greatest favor in Lutheranism of northern and central Germany.”²

The service will begin with a hymn, and then an invocation, most commonly, “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” This is followed by the Confession and Absolution, where the congregation confesses their sins to the Lord, and the pastor responds by forgiving them in the stead of Christ. This is then followed by the canticle of the *Gloria*, and then the proper, which is a set of prayers and readings that is specific to each Sunday throughout the Church Year. These readings come from a lectionary. “The Church Year is guided by the lectionary, which gives a set of readings appointed for each Sunday and festival.”³

These readings are commonly interspersed with hymns and psalms which are sung by the congregation. Following the completion of the readings and hymns, the pastor will preach a sermon on one of the readings appointed for the day. After the sermon, the pastor leads the congregation in a number of prayers.

1. Zeeden, Ernst Walter. *Faith and Act: The Survival of Medieval Ceremonies in the Lutheran Reformation*. Translated by Kevin G. Walker (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2012), 30.

2. Zeeden, 31.

3. Winger, Thomas M. *Lutheranism 101: Worship* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 127.

This ends the “Service of the Word.” The Service of the Sacrament then begins. The pastor will lead the congregation in a prayer prior to the Sacrament, typically accompanied by the Lord’s Prayer. The congregation then sings the canticle *Sanctus*, followed by the Words of Institution, the canticle *Agnus Dei*, and distribution of the Sacrament to the congregation. Following the distribution, another prayer of thanks for the gifts which have been given is spoken. Finally, the blessing is spoken, typically accompanied by a closing hymn.

This is the basic skeleton of a Lutheran service; most Lutheran services will typically look like this. But outside of the service itself, there are more customs that Lutherans observe. An important part of the service is the building in which the service takes place. How do Lutherans customarily build their churches? Like with vestments, this has had variety throughout the years. A simple look at Lutheran churches around Europe and America can tell you this. But what are the common themes?

Commonly, there will be a series of pews for the congregation to sit upon, sometimes two straight rows or multiple rows angled towards the front. Balconies are common in Lutheran churches also for additional seating as well as an area for the choir to sing from and for the organ to be placed. The front of the church will usually have a chancel from where the pastor leads. An altar is central in the chancel. The altar may be a free-standing altar or placed up against the east⁴ wall.

The church will also feature a pulpit or ambo from which the pastor to preach and sometimes a lectern on the opposite side of the chancel where he reads the readings. The baptismal font is also a central feature in many Lutheran churches. Sometimes it is placed near

4. The “east” wall referred to here means the wall opposing the entryway which the congregation faces.

the entryway as people enter. Other churches place it near the center of the chancel where there is a good view of it.

In all these things, Lutheran practice has a general skeleton that is the same, but the muscle and flesh can vary. But all these rites and ceremonies and customs do not edify fully if the congregation does not know the answer to the quintessential Lutheran question: “What does this mean?” What’s the purpose for this structure? What do these things provide? What advantages do they have? Are there possible disadvantages to some furnishings?

Why We Do These Things

The Lutheran Church is a church that is centered on the means of grace; the gospel message in Word and Sacrament. The Lutheran Confessions affirm this: “Therefore we should and must insist that God does not want to deal with us human beings, except by means of his external Word and sacrament. Everything that boasts of being from the Spirit apart from such a Word and sacrament is of the devil”⁵ (SAIII.VIII).

Since the Lutheran Church teaches that God does not deal with human beings apart from the means of grace, the only logical conclusion is for confessional Lutherans to seek to emphasize that truth. Practice is doctrine implemented. This is the most basic reason for every truly Lutheran practice: God comes to us in Word and sacrament, and no other way.

This does and always has set the Lutheran Church apart from nearly all other church bodies in the United States of America. Fred Precht notes this when such non-sacramental and non-gospel-oriented practices seeped into Lutheranism from American revivalism. He states that the Lutheran Church’s ceremonies are directly opposed to the revivalists, Evangelicals,

5. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 323, hereafter Kolb-Wengert.

Pentecostals, etc. “The modern assault on liturgical worship is aimed not simply at a few old-fashioned customs or adiaphora, but at the whole liturgical, churchly spirit itself, which necessarily goes with a serious doctrine of the means of grace.”⁶

If the church’s job is to bring God to the people, and if that happens only through the means of grace, then only a practice that take the means of grace seriously can be acceptable in the church. “Let Lutheran practice be determined by Lutheran theology.”⁷ Again, practice is doctrine implemented. Rites, customs, and ceremonies will form to emphasize the truths of doctrine and practice.

The means of grace are the gospel in God’s Word and the sacraments of Holy Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. This is how God graciously choses to deal with us. So why do we have the practices that we have? Why have rites, ceremonies, and customs developed the way that they have? What do they do?

The first answer is theological. The Lutheran rites have developed in order to surround and encapsulate the truths of the gospel. When it comes to worship, there are things that God commands us to practice. God commands us to give his gifts, the means of grace, to his people.

He commands us to preach his word: “He said to them, ‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation’” (Mark 16:15 EHV). He commands us to baptize: “Therefore go and gather disciples from all nations by baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19).

He commands us to practice his last will and testament, the Lord’s Supper: “And when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body, which is for you. Do this in

6. Precht, Fred L. *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1993), 71.

7. Precht, 72.

remembrance of me.’ In the same way, after the meal, he also took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new testament in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me’” (1 Corinthians 11:24–25).

He commands us proclaim the words of absolution and forgiveness to the world in his stead: “Receive the Holy Spirit. Whenever you forgive people’s sins, they are forgiven. Whenever you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven” (John 20:22–23).

He commands us to bless his people—to place his saving name upon his people. God’s name itself is a name of action, not of hopeful wishes. In the Old Testament, God gave his priests specific blessings to give. In the New Testament, they are fulfilled in Christ, but God’s desire to bless is still the same. The epistles of the New Testament nearly all end with some sort of blessing.

We are told to sing praises to God: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, with gratitude in your hearts to God” (Colossians 3:16).

These are commands⁸ of God. As such, they are non-negotiable. This is the theological answer to the question “why do we do these things?”

God commands us to do these things in an orderly way. “God is not a God of confusion but of peace and order... So when the Church enacts the liturgy, she must have an order or ‘rite.’ Some elements of the rite are given by God, some are received from the Ancient Church, and some are worked out by present-day Christians.”⁹

8. “Commands” here is not meant to mean a work that is meritorious for salvation, but rather they are commanded in the sense that these are the only means through which God has promised to interact with us human beings.

9. Winger, 49.

The second answer to the question “Why do we do these things?” is practicality. As Lutherans draw their teachings from the word of God, they keep in mind God’s desire that “all things be done decently and in good order” (1 Corinthians 14:40). This passage is contextually about church order, as Paul speaks of how to conduct church affairs in godly and orderly ways throughout 1 Corinthians 14. Lutherans follow this desire of God communicated by the Apostle Paul and make rites and ceremonies around the practices which God commands in order to make them central to our worship. We ought to speak in sensible ways to communicate the gospel clearly and understandably, and so when we communicate with the language of the eyes, we also want to be orderly and clear.

But while God commands us to have order, he does not tell us what that order is. He leaves to human reason to work out the ceremony. “*Ceremony* refers to the way in which the rite is conducted. It includes things like candles and crosses, postures like standing or kneeling, gestures like the sign of the cross, vestments like albs and chasubles, and musical choices like instruments or chanting.”¹⁰ So while we have a skeleton of practices that are necessary because Scripture specifically says that these practices are how God comes to us, the ceremony with which we perform these practices are in and of themselves neither commanded nor forbidden by God. This applies also to architecture.

Architecture is a visual language. A building can and does communicate something. Winston Churchill once said, “We shape our buildings, and ever after they shape us.” This is an apt statement. The way we design buildings has an impact on us. Architecture speaks. Therefore, when we design our buildings, we will want to also have in mind the mission of the church—to bring Christ our God to the world by means of Word and sacrament. “Christian Worship is less

10. Winger, 50.

about what we can do for God and more about what He does for us. And if God has gifts to offer in the Divine Service, then our response ought to be to receive them.”¹¹

What Rites and Ceremony Communicate

Ceremonies communicate to the eyes what words communicate to the ears. A close examination of Lutheran practice will reveal what these things communicate. The Lutheran service typically begins with the invocation: “In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” with the minister making the sign of the cross with his hand. “This invocation tells us what’s going on ... At the start of the service, we speak the name of our divine family ... and God acknowledges us as His own. He opens the door, and He calls us into His house to dine at His festive Table.”¹²

This invocation and the sign of the cross communicates to the people that they are being welcomed in the name of their God. They are a part of his family. The sign of the cross serves numerous purposes. One, it reminds us of Christ by whose sacrifice our sins which separate us from God are removed. Two, it reminds us of our Baptisms when that very same sign of the cross was placed over us and the benefits of Christ’s sacrifice were granted to us. Baptism was when we were made a member of Christ’s family through faith and by that faith we are worthy to worship him and receive his gifts.

This recalling of Baptism feeds into the following portion of the service—confession and absolution. Absolution, when the pastor forgives sin in the place of Christ, is but a return to baptism, when our life of repentance began. “The liturgy ... returns us to our Baptism by

11. Winger, 50.

12. Winger, 10.

repeating the triune name and leading us to confess our sins and be forgiven. This entrance rite teaches us who we are and shows us how God calls us into his house.”¹³

A hymn of praise is then sung, “In recognition of the mercy that God gives to his people in granting forgiveness and answering their previous petitions, the people of God once again offer thanks and praise in response to God’s actions in behalf of the congregation.”¹⁴ This canticle is typically the *Gloria in Excelsis*, the canticle of the angels on Christmas from Luke 2. This canticle begins a story that is told through the canticles in the service. “A canticle (coming from the Latin for “little song”) is a liturgical song based on a Bible text.”¹⁵ This canticle story begins with the birth of Christ. An alternate song is *This is the Feast*, another song of the angels from Revelation. Some congregations may choose to use *This Is the Feast* throughout the Easter season. This slightly changes the story that is told through the canticles.

Following the hymn of praise is a prayer called the “Prayer of the Day.”¹⁶ This begins the section of the service known as the “Service of the Word.” The Service of the Word is the container of the “Proper,” which is a prayer and set of readings that changes throughout the year. The Proper is determined by the lectionary and the Church Year.

There are three readings in the Proper. The first is typically taken from the Old Testament, the second from an Epistle, and the third from the four Gospels. This focus on Scripture is even more ancient than the New Testament. “This focus ... echoes the nature of synagogue worship, where a variety of readings were used, usually including one text from the Pentateuch as well as one from a prophetic book or psalm.”¹⁷

13. Winger, 79

14. Cooper, Jordan. *Liturgical Worship: A Lutheran Introduction*. (Watska, IL: Just & Sinner, 2018), 54.

15. Meyer, Kristi. *Understanding Lutheran Worship*. (St. John’s Ev. Lutheran Church, 2017), 12.

16. The concept “of the Day” is what the proper essentially is. This is an important working concept of the Lutheran Church.

17. Cooper, 57.

The lectionary's benefits are many. The lectionary avoids the issue of selecting just a couple verses based on a pastor's theme, ensuring the congregation hears the context of those verses. It also helps to ensure the congregation will cover a wider breadth of Scripture. "If the lectionary readings are followed, then every major Christian doctrine will be taught each year as the text is expounded."¹⁸ The lectionary is also a benefit to the pastor by not binding him to his own thoughts or desires but keeping him in the whole body of Scripture, not just the parts about which he likes to talk.¹⁹ Despite what one might think, a scheduled and consistent set of readings broadens one's understanding and coverage of Scripture, instead of constricting it.

These readings are typically separated by music. The first and second readings are separated by the "Psalm of the Day" which is also appointed by the lectionary. "In singing the psalms as God's people have across the centuries, we proclaim the peace of Christ that dwells in us richly."²⁰

Surrounding the Gospel reading is the "Gospel Acclamation." In acclaiming the gospel, we welcome Christ as our King and prepare to hear about his words and works. This Gospel reading is a liturgical high point of the service, which is why there is such ceremony surrounding it. All Scripture points to Christ. "He said to them, 'These are my words, which I spoke to you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms'" (Luke 24:44). The Old Testament points ahead to Christ, the Epistles of the New Testament point back to Christ, and the Gospels tell us the story of Christ. The Gospel is the last of the readings, but the center of them all. "The centrality of the gospel is noted in a number of different manners through the liturgical actions surrounding its

18. Cooper, 70.

19. Cooper, 60-61.

20. Meyer, 15.

reading ... The act of standing is one of respect and reverence toward Christ who is described in the text.”²¹

Following the gospel reading is generally the Sermon, an exposition and appropriation of one of the texts. This does put Lutheranism in a different category than much of Evangelical Protestantism, where the service is almost exclusively focused on preaching. “Luther, rather than abandoning the medieval Mass, retained essential elements of historic worship and viewed the sermon as an essential element of that liturgical service.”²² The goal of Lutheran preaching also is different than that of other Protestants, where many treat it as bible study, the emphasis of Lutheran preaching is to proclaim Law and Gospel. “In the task of preaching, the minister is to proclaim God’s judgement over sin as well as his grace toward sinners.”²³ This is integral to the Lutheran doctrine of the means of grace and their purpose. Lutheran theology of Law and Gospel states that with the law God terrifies sinners to alert them of their dreadful condition, and then comforts them with the gospel that they are forgiven.

Therefore, it is true that the proclamation of the suffering and death of Christ, God’s Son, is a sobering and terrifying proclamation and testimony of God’s wrath. Through it people now are really led into the law, after the veil of Moses is taken away from them, so that they now really recognize what great things God demands from us in the law (none of which we can keep), and that we therefore should seek all our righteousness in Christ²⁴ (EpV.IX).

The objective of the means of grace is to bring us to faith in Christ, seeking all our righteousness in him. Thus, any preaching and exposition on the Word must also have this as its primary objective. The practice of Lutheran preaching is built around this doctrine. Preaching Law and Gospel is the implementation of the doctrine of Law and Gospel.

21. Cooper, 65.

22. Cooper, 68.

23. Cooper, 69.

24. Kolb-Wengert, 501.

One of the Ecumenical Creeds is read following the sermon. “The word *creed* comes from the Latin word *credo*, which means ‘I believe.’ The three creeds that Lutherans confess regularly in their worship services—Apostles’, Nicene, and Athanasian—are called *ecumenical* because they are accepted by many Christians throughout the world.”²⁵ It is spoken as a response to what was just said in the sermon. “After listening to the sermon, the congregation confesses its faith in the triune God.”²⁶ The creed is a summary of faith that the assembly uses to proclaim their agreement to an orthodox sermon. The preacher will (by the Holy Spirit’s grace), preach and rightly exposit God’s Word, and the people respond by saying, “yes, this is what we believe, as is said in this creed.”

Creeds are even found on the pages of Scripture. “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God. The LORD is one!” (Deuteronomy 6:4) and the following verses were meant to be a creed for Israel. Paul expands on this creed in his letter to the Corinthians. “Nevertheless, for us there is one God—the Father, from whom all things exist, and we exist for him—and one Lord—Jesus Christ, through whom all things exist, and we exist through him” (1 Corinthians 8:6). “By reciting these words repeatedly in worship, the congregation is catechized in the basics of the Christian faith.”²⁷ In many professions, there is a common exhortation to not forget the basics. They are called so because they are the “base” upon which more advanced skills are learned. These short statements give Christians a base upon which to build and to fall back upon when other things fade. The Alzheimer’s patient might not remember his own grandchildren, but he will remember the Creeds he spoke every Sunday.

25. Meyer, 17.

26. Meyer, 17.

27. Cooper, 76.

Following the creed, the prayer and the offering take place. This is nothing more than simply fulfilling the exhortation of God to pray continually in all kinds of situations. “Do not worry about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God” (Philippians 4:6). The historic “Prayer of the Church” has been refined for centuries to be applicable. The prayer is designed to ask God for his aid in all things, both in the church and throughout the world. This portion of the service offers the church an opportunity to broaden its scope beyond the gospel’s theme and consider some of the congregation’s situations; the sick, social ills, etc.²⁸ Praying written prayers is a great benefit to the congregation. C.S. Lewis spoke well concerning the benefits of “ready-made prayers.”

First, “it keeps me in touch with ‘sound doctrine,’” rather than sliding into a religion of the self. Second, “it reminds me ‘what things I ought to ask’ (perhaps especially when I am praying for other people),” rather than simply responding to the urgent needs of the moment. Finally, they [ready-made prayers) provide “an element of the ceremonial,” that is, they recognize that there is an appropriate distance between oneself and the God of the universe God is not only the source of one’s own salvation but also an “Unimaginably and Insupportably Other,” whom we can only approach in awe and humility.²⁹

In America, in an age where a casual form of worship dominates, a casual view of God is commonplace. This can be seen in the doctrinal laxity of most American Christians. The spirit of the time is a spirit of casualness. But God does not present himself as a “casual” God. Having these historic, written prayers gives Christians a healthy fear and reverence of God as the omnipotent Creator of all things, the King of all creation, and the One whose name is above all names.

The offering is also an important reminder of another truth: “God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:7b). In response to all things that God gives us, his promises to hear our prayers,

28. Cooper, 90.

29. Patterson, W B (William Brown). “C. S. Lewis and Liturgical Worship.” (Sewanee Theological Review 57.3 (2014): 241–45), 242-243.

his forgiveness from all sins, we give back to God from what he has given us. The offering is a visual reminder of this fact.

After the Prayer of the Church, the Service of the Word comes to a close. The next portion of the service is the Service of the Sacrament. The *Preface* begins the celebration of the Lord's Supper. This is a dialogue between the pastor, God, and the people. All are involved. "This greeting again emphasizes the nature of dialogue in the worship service between the congregation, the pastor, and God. All parties are active when gathered together for corporate worship."³⁰ The dialogue is generally that the pastor begins by saying, "the Lord be with you," the congregation responds with "And with your spirit/and also with you." The pastor continues, "Lift up your heart," and the congregation responds, "We lift them up to the Lord." The pastor finishes, "Let us give thanks to the Lord, our God," and the congregation responds, "It is good and right so to do." This dialogue emphasizes the unity and praise of the church. "With these words, the pastor calls the people of God to take their eyes off all earthly worries and troubles and to focus their hearts on heaven."³¹

Following the preface is the *Proper Preface*, a prayer thanking God for the blessings he gives through Christ. This typically changes with the church year and gives the congregation an opportunity to thank God for specific blessings which are emphasized by the lectionary's texts in that season.³²

Following this prayer is the *Sanctus* or "Holy, Holy, Holy." This canticle is from Isaiah 6:3, where Isaiah hears the song of the Seraphim, and from Palm Sunday, where the people proclaim "Hosannah" to Christ. This continues the story of the canticles in the service, where

30. Cooper, 98.

31. Cooper, 98.

32. Meyer, 20.

after proclaiming with the angels the *Gloria in Excelsis*, we now proclaim the wondrousness of God as his presence comes to us, just as on Palm Sunday. “We sing [the Sanctus] in the liturgy to acknowledge that Jesus comes to us in His body and blood to bring us salvation.”³³

The inclusion of a Eucharistic or “Thanksgiving” Prayer has been debated in Lutheranism. Martin Luther eliminated it from his service because it had been corrupted to emphasize human action toward God rather than vice versa.³⁴ The papists had filled the Eucharistic Prayer with their false synergistic theology. The prayer is ancient though, and if rewritten to be orthodox and emphasize our thanks for what God does for us in the sacrament, it is a worthy inclusion.

Following this is the traditional location of the Lord’s Prayer in worship. It is obvious to see why the Lord’s Prayer would be a common practice. This is literally how Jesus answered the question, “how should we pray?”

Following this, the Words of Institution are spoken over the elements to be used for Holy Communion. Here we do not have a simple rite of the Church, but a practice that must be done. A sacrament is when God’s Word comes to an earthly element. Therefore, God’s Word must be spoken in order for the sacrament to be effected. “Because they are the words of Jesus put into the minister’s mouth, they still accomplish today what they accomplished on Maundy Thursday: effecting the real presence of Jesus’ body and blood in, with, and under the bread and wine.”³⁵ Here the answer to the question “why do we do this” is very simple: we must do so to have the sacrament. Following the words, the greeting of Jesus in the upper room is recalled with “the peace of the Lord be with you.”

33. Winger, 100.

34. Meyer, 20.

35. Meyer, 21.

Following this, the *Agnus Dei* or “Lamb of God” is sung. Continuing the canticle story, this song brings us the apex of Christ’s life. We proclaimed Christ’s birth with the angels in the *Gloria in Excelsis*, we sang his arrival with the *Sanctus*, and now we proclaim, “O Christ, Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world. Have mercy on us.” “Believers approach the altar of God by the sacrificial substitute who died in our place. We join with the cry of John the Baptist to the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29).”³⁶ The story of the canticles ends with the culmination of Christ’s mission for which he was born, the end of the week where he entered into Jerusalem—his sacrifice to take away the sin of the world. In the Lord’s Supper, we receive the very body and blood which was sacrificed. We recall the Old Testament, all of the sacrifices made, all the lambs slaughtered for the Passover, and we then look to Jesus Christ, the ultimate and final Passover lamb who truly takes away all sin. The canticles give a momentum that leads up to this wonderful gift.

The distribution of the Lord’s Supper may take different forms. Some may have a communion rail and have the communicants approach in tables,³⁷ the minister will commune each table, they will be dismissed with a blessing, and the next ones come. Some may use continuous distribution, which will have the communicants approach one at a time, each will commune, then the whole congregation will be blessed, typically with “The true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ strengthen and keep you in the true faith until life everlasting.” Another prayer may follow this to acknowledge what has happened in the supper and to bring the service to a close. After this brief prayer, the Aaronic Blessing is usually spoken. “These words were first given to Aaron and his sons by the LORD and were used to bless the people of Israel

36. Meyer, 21.

37. “Tables” here refers to when a church has communion rails (or similar chancel setup) on the right and left, a group will approach to one side, be communed and be dismissed, and the following side will be communed next, and so on.

(Numbers 6:22–27). Just as we began the service in the name of the triune God, so we also end the service in his name.”³⁸ Following this blessing, a closing hymn which either emphasizes the theme of the day or that has a theme of closing the service is sung.

This is the rite that the Lutheran Church generally follows. This set of texts offers a comprehensive view of the basics of the Christian faith with its canticles, its baptismal references, and its repetition of core biblical truths. It also offers a way to increase the Christian’s broader knowledge of Scripture by following a comprehensive lectionary that covers a broad scope of Scripture. This rite aids us to faithfully follow God’s command for good order. The ceremonies and customs that accompany this rite, however, might vary depending on need or local tradition. “That Lutheran worship is liturgical says nothing about the degree or extent of its ritualism or ceremonialism. It does bear witness that we are a people who desire to receive faithfully God’s blessings in Word and Sacrament according to the pattern he has set.”³⁹ Ceremonies are actions that surround the skeleton of the rite with flesh and muscle. They will give the rite its appearance and shape how people look at it.

One clear visual ceremony that speaks to the eyes is the changing of paraments from church season to church season. “Paraments not only adorn the chancel but also help set the mood with their seasonal colors and symbols.”⁴⁰ Changing colors helps give a sense of movement through the church year. It is something easily recognizable, even by children.

Gestures are also a common ceremony that dress the rite. Standing, kneeling, sitting, processing, bowing, and others offer rich symbolism and say something about what is happening, as was stated previously about standing for the gospel.

38. Meyer, 23.

39. Precht, 435.

40. Winger, 137.

An important truth to remember about these things is that there is no neutral ceremony, no such thing as an absence of ceremony. For example, one might think that the elimination of the “stand, sit” ceremony for certain parts of the service means there is no more of that ceremony—but there is. The ceremony is just “sitting” for the whole service, and that says something. “A visitor from another denomination once commented to the pastor, ‘You Lutherans sure have a lot of audience participation!’ What surprised him was the standing, sitting, kneeling, and walking, when in his church, the congregation mainly just sat.”⁴¹ There is no neutral ceremony. But even if there was, would we want to be neutral? Or would we want to say something? When the Gospel is read, do we want to treat it as though it is like everything else in life? Or do we want to treat it like it is the wonderful message of our God who was made man to save us from our sins?

Similarly, architecture also has meaning, and it is not neutral. Architecture will say, “this is our focus.” A Lutheran Church with a serious doctrine of the means of grace will, of course, center its design around the means of grace. The custom of an altar reminds us of Christ being the Lamb of God (which gives further meaning to the *Agnus Dei*), his sacrifice for us, and the benefits of that sacrifice which are served in the Lord’s Supper—the Sacrament of the Altar. We show that we value the word by having a specific place to proclaim the Word. That place may be the side of the altar, a lectern, or next to the font. Wherever the place is, the message is this: “We want a special place to hold this wonderful gift.” A pulpit for the preacher to preach from also gives this same message.

The pulpit has occupied a prominent place in Lutheran church architecture because Lutherans have established preaching as a central feature in public worship ... in keeping with the emphases that Holy Scripture places on this activity. Whether the prophet was Isaiah, Jeremiah, or Hosea, “Hear the word of the Lord” was the prophetic call, and not

41. Winger, 142.

even a reluctant Jonah could escape the directive of the Lord who said, “Go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.”⁴²

In the New Testament also, Christ instructs his disciples to go and preach the gospel to every creature. Although practical purposes like acoustics or visibility may influence the design, making some pulpits high and lofty, some simply are made high up, decorated, and filled with symbolism to give a testimony to the centrality of preaching the word of God.⁴³ The pulpit says, “we take the proclamation of God’s Word so serious we want a specific, special, and decorated place from which it may be done.”

Having a baptismal font and where it is placed also sends an important message about the centrality of the means of grace.

The baptismal font joins the pulpit and the altar as the third major liturgical furnishing in a Lutheran church ... the location of the font in the front of the church where pulpit and altar are situated calls attention to Baptism as a means of grace together with the Gospel and the Sacrament of the Altar. Although the font is usually small in comparison with the pulpit and the altar, the font’s position in the front of the congregation is a regular reminder of Baptism and permits the congregation to witness baptisms.⁴⁴

Baptism is central in any church that takes the means of grace seriously. In the most basic summation of the Christian faith ever produced by Lutherans, Martin Luther’s Small Catechism, he writes about baptism. It “signifies that the old creature in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily contrition and repentance, and on the other hand that daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.”⁴⁵ (SCIV.IV) Baptism is the entrance into the faith, and every day of a Christian’s life is to begin with their baptism “re-drowning” the old sinful nature. Recalling our baptism is important. Putting the font in such a location helps this immensely. When the invocation is spoken and the

42. Precht, 207.

43. Precht, 208.

44. Precht, 210.

45. Kolb-Wengert, 360.

congregation hears the baptismal formula, they can look right at the font and remember their baptisms.

Having the font at the very front is not the only option, however. “It may be located at the back of the church to symbolize entrance into the faith.”⁴⁶ Either way, to have the font in a prominent position is to remind the Christian people of the importance of their baptism in their daily lives.

Artwork such as stained-glass windows and portraits may provide further instruction and edification. Often, these will display bible stories such as the crucifixion, the sermon on the mount, the little children coming to Jesus, Jesus as the good shepherd, and many more. They may show the saints who went before us who spread the Word across the world. They may further emphasize the means of grace with images of Bibles, chalices and wafers, fonts, the Holy Spirit, etc.

There are many styles of architecture that can be employed. Lutheran designs, however, seek to highlight a means of grace focus regardless of architectural style. “To argue for churchly buildings is not to demand a specific style of architecture or to ignore a host of conditions unique to this or that situation.”⁴⁷ Different conditions, such as location, available materials, finances, etc. will influence the design of the church. But if it is intentionally designed to be Lutheran, that is, to emphasize the means of grace, it will be a profitable space. Not only will it be a profitable space, but it will also likely be similar to the general principles of Lutheran church design that has existed throughout the centuries. The same doctrine will mean the same practice which will generally result in similar ceremony and custom.

46. Winger, 134.

47. Precht, 188

How History Explains What We Do

History is an important reason for what we do. While we want to avoid the *argumentum ad antiquitatem* and argue that we ought to do something just because it has always been done that way, the fact that something is traditional and has survived long is something to consider and does have value. Consider, for example, the proper preface to Holy Communion: “The Lord be with you; and also with you/with your spirit...” That call and response is about 2,000 years old. It is likely as old as the church itself. “It is remarkable that this basic structure has remained the same for as long as we have record of the nature of the Eucharistic service. This fact is a great reminder to the people of God that in worship, the church across the ages joins together in the act of praising the Triune God and receiving Christ’s body and blood.”⁴⁸ This is a very basic reason for encouraging traditional practice, but valuable nonetheless. Connecting to the church throughout the ages is important, remembering that, “we all were baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free people, and we were all caused to drink one Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:13). We are one body, not separated by anything, even the ages. We are also reminded of an important fact about Christ, the head of the church. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8). The consistency of a tradition, especially the most ancient ones such as these, emphasize the sameness of our Lord, his gospel message, and his church.

Historically, Lutheranism did away with additions to worship rather than introduce them. They attempted to be historic and do away with the errors that Rome introduced. “The deletions concerned the sacrifice of the Mass, the offertory and the prayers that followed it, as well as the Canon of the Mass, except for the consecration.”⁴⁹ Lutherans did away with practices that

48. Cooper, 99.

49. Zeeden, 14.

emphasized false theology. Because practice is doctrine implemented, Lutherans got rid of papist practices, but kept the ones which were still implementations of true Christian doctrine.

Papism was only one opponent from which Lutheranism sought to separate itself. The German Reformed, Calvinists, often presented a far more sinister and insidious threat. They attempted to masquerade behind Lutheran terminology in order to convince the Lutherans to ecumenically unite with them. But rites and ceremony were one place where a distinction was found which tore the veil that Calvinists attempted to set up to hide their differences in theology from Lutherans. “Wherever these rites were touched—Calvinism sought to dispose of them on principle, though battles and disputes ensued to preserve them.”⁵⁰ These ceremonies and customs were used to identify Calvinists who attempted to portray themselves as “the same” as Lutherans, despite their differences in theology from Lutherans. Calvinists, even though they sought to unite with Lutherans, hated everything that was papist, and the mere existence of a ceremony that resembled papism caused them to slip their mask off in a rage.

Olevian, the Calvinistic reformer of the Electoral Palatinate expressed ... concerning the Lutheran manner of receiving the Lord’s Supper: ‘You go to the Sacrament, raise your hands, kneel down, and allow a little cloth to be held under you; that is an idolatry to which eternal damnation belongs.’ On the same occasion he designated the consecration in the Lutheran Mass as “idolatry” ... Lutheran parsons who used the surplice had to endure being called gross papists. The Reformed visitors explicitly called the hosts in the Supper, against which they had a special battle, papistic Mass-hosts, and, in order to ruin the Lutheran congregations’ taste for them, told them that these hosts were ‘entirely unhealthy’ and that people would get ‘jaundice, dropsy, swollen stomachs, and fevers from them.’⁵¹

After Lutheranism became politically stable, there was ultimately no real doctrinal threat from Roman Catholics. The people knew the difference between them and Roman Catholics. Roman Catholics did not attempt to deceive Lutheran laypeople into thinking Roman

50. Zeeden, 43.

51. Zeeden, 116.

Catholicism was the same as Lutheranism. Calvinism, however, did try to deceive and trick Lutherans into thinking they were the same (or that their differences were, at the most, negligible and shouldn't prevent fellowship between them). Ceremonies became a litmus test to reveal Calvinists when they attempted to deceive with terms and words. The Calvinists responded with malice and accusations. "Against such massive allegations universally levied from the Calvinistic side, the Lutherans reacted with a stronger recourse to ceremonies, among other things. Indeed, ceremonies became the very means for them to ward off (or unmask) Calvinism."⁵² Understanding this history of the rites and ceremonies of the Lutheran Church brings another dynamic to them. This dynamic says to the congregants, "we are different from these other churches; we teach differently from them, and we should know those differences."

PART 2: WHY WE TELL LUTHERANS THESE REASONS

Part One of this thesis showed a myriad of reasons for the rites, ceremonies, and customs that the Lutheran church employs. But why is it so crucial that the congregation actually understands all of these reasons?

Understanding the Message

One simple reason for the importance of educating the congregation about their rites and customs is so that they actually are able to recognize what is being said. Not everyone will deduce just by hearing and seeing that the invocation "in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit" and the sign of the cross is a recalling of baptism. Congregants will need to be told that and reminded of it regularly. "Without an understanding of the meaning of the liturgical elements of a service, these actions become vapid, meaningless motions. There is no benefit in tradition solely for the

52. Zeeden, 116-117.

sake of tradition ... If liturgy is nothing more than tradition, then it can change along with the culture just like anything else.”⁵³ If people do not understand the message of these rites and ceremonies, they are meaningless traditions. On the other hand, if they do understand them, they are great treasures of priceless worth. “In the short time that I have been in the ministry, one of the things I have realized is that when people understand the purpose of liturgical worship, they learn to love it.”⁵⁴ There is a movement in Lutheranism and Christendom which seeks to undermine the liturgical form of worship for the sake of novelty, often complaining that it is too old and not useful in the modern world. This complaint is not entirely without merit, because if the people do not understand the treasure of liturgical worship, how can they value it and gain anything from it?⁵⁵ The solution is not to form a new way of worship, however. The solution is to educate the congregation on the meaning of Lutheran worship so that they see the value in it.⁵⁶

The effects of teaching the congregation the value of our traditions will not only result in the maintaining of our customs and ceremonies as they are, but far more importantly, the treasuring of these ceremonies and customs and an increase of the efficacy with which they edify congregations. “A deeper understanding of this interaction between God and his faithful people naturally leads to a more meaningful worship experience.”⁵⁷ Instead of going through the motions of worship, when a congregant sees the sign of the cross at the invocation, he remembers, “I am worthy to come before God, I am baptized into Christ.” When he sees it again at the absolution, he remembers, “I am baptized into Christ, today, again, my sinful nature has

53. Cooper, 7.

54. Cooper, 8.

55. The somewhat legitimacy of their complaint does not, however, give depth to the alternative forms of worship that anti-liturgical advocates propose.

56. It is arguable that attempting to either constantly keep up with modern trends or creating a whole new form of worship (that would need to develop its own millennia-long history) would be far more difficult than simply telling people what the (already) historic customs and rites mean.

57. Meyer, 8.

been drowned and I am forgiven and renewed to live in my baptism.” When he sings the *Gloria in Excelsis*, the joy of Christmas is remembered, the joy of Christ the newborn king. When he gets to the *Sanctus*, he remembers who that king really is, and the *Agnus Dei* reminds him what that king does for him. When he stands for the Gospel reading, he remembers that he’s standing to acclaim the great words and deeds of his great king.

No one can do this perfectly, and Satan will constantly tempt us to worship without our hearts in it. But if we do not teach people how to put their hearts into worship, how can they possibly resist his relentless assault? If we do not teach them how to use the weapons they have, how can we expect them to fight the evil one properly with them?

Understanding the Source

Previously it was stated just how much the traditional liturgy draws from bible stories and is a review of the basics. Acknowledging this is also an important part of maintaining the rites that we use and the ceremonies that envelop them. When a congregant realizes that all of this is simply a review of the basics of Scripture, how can he oppose? How can he say no to remembering the Christmas story every Lord’s Day? How can he say no to remembering John’s declaration of Christ as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world? We need to return to the basics of the gospel often because we are tempted often to forget them. Martin Luther’s greatest grievance against the papist abuses was that God’s Word was silenced. “Three serious abuses have crept into the service. First, God’s Word has been silenced, and only reading and singing remain in the churches. This is the worst abuse. Second, when God’s Word has been silenced such a host of un-Christian fables and lies, in legends, hymns, and sermons were

introduced that it is horrible to see.”⁵⁸ Lutheran worship has always been about promoting Scripture instead of fables and tales from a host of other sources. Making clear the scriptural source of the liturgy gives comfort to the congregation, knowing that God’s Word is being proclaimed to them in all facets of their worship. This is the blessing that comes from understanding the source of Lutheran customs and rites. Our church teaches that all doctrine comes from Scripture, and all practices, which are expressions of that doctrine, are consistent with Scripture. Thus, our rites, customs, and ceremonies that we have developed to encapsulate our practices not only edify the congregation in the Scriptures through which the Holy Spirit works, they also emphasize the Lutheran doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*.

Understanding the Point

The Congregation further understands what exactly the reason is that we do these things when they understand that Lutheran rites and customs are designed to simply tell us the gospel message and bring the means of grace to us. This is a critical issue because if the congregation assumes that there is no actual point or meaning to all these ceremonies, many may assume that they are arbitrary and can be substituted for other ceremonies. Not explaining the point of ceremonies gives the illusion that there are neutral ceremonies—but such is not the case. All ceremonies make some point. Lutherans want their ceremonies to have a Lutheran point.

“I Didn’t Get Much Out of That” vs “God Did That for Me”

Lutheran practice takes the means of grace seriously. Lutheran rites, ceremonies, and customs express that seriousness. So when we gather around the means of grace, the point of our

⁵⁸ Luther, Martin. *Liturgy and Hymns*. Edited by Ulrich S. Leupold and Helmut T. Lehmann. American Edition. Vol. 53 of *Luther’s Works*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 11.

traditions and customs are to emphasize what God is doing for us. The teaching contrary to this, namely, that when we gather to worship we are doing something for God, was the third abuse against which Luther railed. “Third, such divine service was performed as a work whereby God’s grace and salvation might be won. As a result, faith disappeared and everyone pressed to enter the priesthood, convents, and monasteries, and to build churches and endow them.”⁵⁹

Some might say after church, “I didn’t get much out of that” or “I got a lot out of that.” The former is a grievance some apply to certain styles of worship, traditional or contemporary (and the latter a point of support for their preferred style of worship). But this is a false metric with which to measure our worship. Ironically, this is the metric that the papists use with their *ex opere operato* (by the work worked) understanding of the means of grace. They believe you go to church to get something out of it, to receive some kind of infusion of benefits to assist your working out your salvation in life.

This is not the metric of a church with a serious doctrine of the means of grace. The primary point of the service is to emphasize what God has done for the believer, not what the believer is doing for God. The only thing the believer is “doing” is receiving the gifts that God has given him. The truest and greatest expression of worship is to believe in God and receive his gifts. These gifts are the means of grace. Only by these does God deal with us. “The way we structure our liturgical space and rites depends on our desire to make the Word of God accessible to the people in the liturgy of the Word, and the Supper of the Lord accessible to the people in the Liturgy of Holy Communion.”⁶⁰ The point of our worship is to make God’s gifts accessible to the people. The point is not to “get some (nebulous) thing out of it.” Worship is not about what you’re getting out of it, but what God is doing for you. Imagine a king pardoned you of

59. Luther, 11.

60. Precht, 36.

some great crime, and you bowed in thanks for his mercy, and then after returning home, you thought, “I don’t know if I got much out of bowing before my king.” The point of all that was not what you got out of bowing before the king but what the king did for you in forgiving you your transgressions.

The important part that congregants must understand is the dynamic, that is, what is happening in our practices and ceremonies. When the Absolution is practiced, the most powerful force in the universe has been unleashed in order to forgive us all of our sins. When the Sacrament is practiced, the very presence of the body and blood of our God shed for our sins is being effected. Our ceremonies surround these incredible practices with the awe they rightly should have.

The Point of Law and Gospel

One aspect in which people hope to “get something” out of worship is practical advice. Making applications is certainly something to be desired for any preacher of God’s Word, but the matter of greater import is the appropriation of law and gospel to the congregation. “In the task of preaching, the minister is to proclaim God’s judgement over sin as well as his grace toward sinners. This twofold proclamation has been God’s message of God’s messengers since the foundation of the nation of Israel.”⁶¹ Reading through Scripture we see this is the predominant message. Practical applications are present in the wisdom literature of the Bible, but the main message of Scripture is that God condemns sin and sinners, but Christ took that our condemnation upon himself. Any message of managing one’s temporal life must be secondary to the proclamation of the two main doctrines of Scripture, law and gospel.

61. Cooper, 69.

The entire service is also built around this. The Confession and Absolution is pure law and gospel. We confess our sins, that we have broken God's holy law and deserve his punishment, and we are forgiven for our sins by the minister in the stead of Christ. In Isaiah's call in Isaiah 6, Isaiah cries out in terror as he enters into the presence of the holy God, because he is sinful. "Like Isaiah, we recognize that we are unholy when entering into God's presence. God's majesty reveals the sin which exists within us. We cry unto God, 'Woe is me!' as we recognize our unworthiness in the divine presence."⁶² Like Isaiah also, God comes to us and cleanses our sin. "God's response to the sins of believers is not to punish, but to bring cleansing. The human minister serves the same role as this angel in Isaiah's vision: he is an instrument to bring healing to God's unclean people."⁶³

This is what the worshipper "gets" out of the service—a gracious cleansing from his sin, the realization that he is a sinner that leads him to cry out just as Isaiah did, but then the reception of the same gift of cleansing. It is crucial that the congregation understands that they come to worship to receive the proclamation of law and gospel, not to receive life advice for temporal benefits. They come to receive gospel truths for eternal benefits.

Counter-Cultural Worship

In America, Sacramentarian influences dominate. Other than Roman Catholics and the few Eastern Orthodox in America, the Lutheran Church is virtually the only denomination that consistently confesses the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper, baptismal regeneration, and that the remission of sins is actually accomplished in the Absolution. Considering Lutherans believe differently than the vast majority of Americans, the sensible

62. Cooper, 43.

63. Cooper, 44.

conclusion would be that Lutherans also worship differently than the vast majority of Americans, if they are being honest about their beliefs.

“Evangelistic and liturgical honesty requires that the outward forms really correspond to and inculcate the intended theology. Attempting to disguise Lutheran content with sectarian and quasi-Pentecostal ways in hymns and worship “format”, is both dishonest and ultimately self-defeating. It is intellectualistic self-deception to imagine that as long as a few overly heterodox sentences are weeded out, no alien deep structures are being imported with alien surface forms.”⁶⁴

The question “why do we have these ceremonies” may often come with “and not those ceremonies that the church over there does?” If a congregation is well-educated in why their Lutheran worship is so different from many in America, they will understand better that there is a theological difference between them.

Lutheran ceremonies must be different from heterodox ceremonies. Roman accretions were eliminated specifically to help the congregation understand that they were accretions, that they were the result of doctrinal innovations by Rome. In the same way, we must not give up ceremonies that help our congregations understand the difference between Lutherans and American Evangelicals.

Lutherans are adamant about the fact that God does not come to us apart from the means of grace. Reformed doctrine states that the Holy Spirit does not use a vehicle and works directly. Therefore, Lutherans bring God to people through the means of grace and build their worship around that. Those who oppose this doctrine will build their worship differently. When a Lutheran congregation understands this, they will understand that those other denominations start from different theology. This may even result in a greater interest in theology among the congregation.

64. Precht, 69.

History Increases Understanding

Just as at the time of the Reformation Roman Catholics never attempted to deceive Lutherans into believing that they really agreed and should just get together, so now Roman Catholics will not attempt to liken themselves to Lutherans. It was the Reformed and other Protestants both then and now who attempt to make light of all differences for the sake of unity. When it becomes clear that our rites and ceremonies come from a desire to maintain the purity of God’s word, then the congregation will learn to respond like their Lutheran forefathers. “Since in fact liturgical traditions, vestments, church vessels, etc., were immediately removed wherever Calvinism infiltrated or Reformed ideas even gained influence in the church’s polity, the reaction which it caused in Lutheran areas was a conscious propensity for ceremonies.”⁶⁵ Just as Lutherans responded in the days after the Reformation, so also will serious Lutherans with serious Lutheran convictions respond to any attempts to undermine the truth of God’s Word—be it direct and blunt or deceptive and subversive.

Just as in the days after Luther, modern American Lutherans can smell a papist from a mile away. Roman Catholics pose virtually no threat to Lutherans in the area of secretly undermining Lutheran doctrine to get Lutherans to believe Roman Catholics are virtually the same as them. This is simply not the Roman Catholic *modus operandi*. On the other hand, it is definitely still the *modus operandi* of reformed and evangelicals to make light of differences and simply say something along the lines of “we’re all Christians, we should all just get along and worship together as one!”⁶⁶ There is virtually no danger of a congregant believing Lutherans and Roman Catholics are the same doctrinally because of so-called “high church” ceremonies meant

65. Zeeden, 117.

66. Liberal Catholic laymen may also parrot this, but clergy and church officials won’t follow this mantra by and large.

to refute Calvinists. American Lutherans are under little threat to be deceived by Roman Catholics. Roman Catholics will typically try to convince a Lutheran that Lutheranism is wrong. Calvinists will try to convince a Lutheran that there is no difference between Luther and Calvin.

Reintroduction of Ceremonies

In America, Lutheranism has lost many historic ceremonies, which can be chalked up to numerous reasons—the frontier aspect of early American society, the disconnect from Europe, and the influence of pietism. A later section in the third part will cover ways that ceremonies may be reintroduced and what ones might be valuable. Here we will discuss why it is important that the congregation understands why you might be reintroducing these ceremonies.

First and foremost, teaching why Lutherans do what they do and the origins of Lutheran ceremonies may cause a natural curiosity to arise about Lutheran customs and traditions. Are there more ceremonies that emphasize our teachings? What are those practices like? When the congregation itself sees where practices come from, they may naturally request more Lutheran customs and ceremonies.

If, however, the pastor is a stronger driving force to implement the reintroduction of customs and ceremonies that he sees as valuable to the edification of his congregation, then he must ensure his congregation knows why he is introducing them. Human beings are naturally averse to change. This is not unwarranted, and congregants ought to be wary of change and question their pastor as to why he is doing what he is doing. This is where pastoral tact is involved. A pastor must first have established a good relationship with his congregation, showing that he cares about them and loves them. With this trust, the pastor will be charitably understood when he explains the meaning of this ceremony that he intends to reintroduce.

Explanation that this is a Lutheran practice, showing examples from Lutheran congregations in history and quotes from the Lutheran confessions and Lutheran fathers will serve to ensure to the congregation that the pastor is not taking them outside of Confessional Lutherans. This may even generate enthusiasm for the reintroduced ceremony.

Ultimately, if a pastor has created enthusiasm in his congregation to be Confessional Lutherans, as long as he can prove that a custom or ceremony is from Confessional Lutheran doctrine and a good expression of the practice that comes from that doctrine, given time and patience, many ceremonies can be reintroduced.

This shows a great difference between Lutheranism and many other denominations of Christianity. In the answering of the question *why*, Lutherans show themselves as truly pastoral Christians. Papists will simply tell congregants to do what Mother Church tells them. Reformed and Evangelicals invariably opt for plainness so all can agree on terms and ceremony while holding a host of different views in private. Lutherans will dedicate themselves to ensuring that their congregations understand the beauty of their doctrine by explaining to them how their ceremonies and customs dress their doctrine and practice in splendor. They will boldly proclaim the truth and have bold ceremonies that visually proclaim the same truth.

Martin Luther expressed the importance of educating the congregation in ceremonies and rites that they were unfamiliar with in his letter to the Livonians concerning their church customs and ceremonies.

But at the same time a preacher must watch and diligently instruct the people lest they take such uniform practices⁶⁷ as divinely appointed and absolutely binding laws. He must explain that this is done for their own good so that the unity of Christian people may also find expression in externals which in themselves are irrelevant. Since the ceremonies or rites are not needed for the conscience or for salvation and yet are useful and necessary to

67. Here Luther uses the term “practices” to refer to what this paper has been referring to as “customs” and “ceremonies.”

govern the people externally, one must not enforce or have them accepted for any other reason except to maintain peace and unity between men.⁶⁸

Luther himself states that while our ceremonies are not necessary for salvation as Rome might teach, they are not harmful like the Reformed might teach. These rites and ceremonies are useful to establish unity. They foster brotherhood and comradery. When a ceremony is introduced, instruction must accompany it so that misinformation and misunderstanding does not take root, and instead unity and edification is fostered. No Lutheran pastor worth his call would want to accidentally sow disunity and confusion. Education is necessary for full edification and the avoidance of misunderstanding.

PART 3: HOW EDUCATION CAN BE DONE

All of this information is pointless unless this knowledge can be practically disseminated to the congregation. So how can that be done? A good start would be to distinguish between what ceremonies and customs about which a pastor wishes to educate his congregation. Will he discuss the broader customs and ceremonies of Lutheranism or some of the customs more specific to his congregation? Local customs can certainly be valuable, but this thesis will focus more on Lutheranism in general. The same techniques are applicable to more localized traditions.

Direct Explanation

The most obvious manner in which a pastor could educate his congregation about Lutheran practice is a Bible study. At the time of the writing of this thesis, the new hymnal, *Christian*

68. Luther, 48.

Worship 2021, is about to be released. Such an occurrence gives a prime opportunity⁶⁹ for the education of Lutheran customs and rites.⁷⁰ Going through the rites of the hymnal, a pastor can explain why each part is in the hymnal, what the history of this custom and rite is, and what is happening when it is done. This thesis's first section provides a good summary and the books quoted in the bibliography are also good resources for any pastor wishing to create a Bible study for his congregation. What applies to Bible study for adults also applies for confirmation study for adults and youth.

A good approach for such a Bible study is to use analogies and pictures to describe the dynamic of the rites and customs that are done. For example, a pastor might describe a village in medieval times which is under a good king, a king who has defended their land from invaders and kept their lands prosperous. A town crier announces that this good king is about to visit that village. He shouts, "Behold, the King!" And how do the people respond to that, considering what this king has done for them? The students will answer something along the lines of, "Long live the king!" After painting this picture, the pastor would then ask, "What part of the service is like that?" the answer being the Gospel Acclamation. Giving the congregation a good image to consider when describing a particular rite or ceremony can go a long way to cementing the knowledge into them.

There is, of course, an issue that many pastors will see with the Bible study approach: not everyone comes to Bible study! Lutherans need to know what they are doing in worship, and that includes the Lutherans who don't attend Bible study! How else might this information be disseminated then? The service itself can be a teaching moment. A subtle but useful means

69. It is a good opportunity whether or not the new hymnal is adopted, as the conversation will be in the air.

70. If you happen to be reading this further on in the future, first, this author thanks you for considering this thesis still worth reading, and second, there doesn't need to be a specific occasion to have a study on worship. If the congregation is in need of this knowledge, then get it to them!

would be to use the service folder. *Christian Worship: Supplement* made use of footnotes to give a little information about the services and rites contained in it. A service folder for worship may also make use of such annotations. A WELS organization, *Return to Wittenberg*, in their annual conference makes use of ancient rites to give congregants an idea of how Christians in ages past worshipped. In the service folders for the services they hold, the margins have explanations of the histories and purposes of rites and customs, explaining why historic Christians saw fit to do these things.

A pitfall may also be found with service folders and footnotes: not everyone reads those! What else can be done? The congregation can be told directly in the service. A method which some congregations have made use of is to begin the service with an explanation of one element of the service, briefly explaining its history. Week after week, eventually the whole service is explained to the congregation as they worship. While this may be somewhat intrusive to the flow of the service, it is important that people learn how they worship. C.S. Lewis compared the liturgy to a dance. When you are learning how to dance, you have to count and notice your steps. The perfect dance, the perfect service, is when you no longer have to count steps, your attention is simply on what's really happening.⁷¹ Perhaps a congregation might need to worship as though they are still learning the dance, and have yet to master it.

Indirect Explanation

Some customs and ceremonies can be taught indirectly. The pastor gesturing to stained glass windows during a sermon where the story of the text is featured on them is certainly a teaching moment for that architectural custom. The motions of worship can teach in and of themselves,

⁷¹ Meyer, 8.

nonverbally. Direct explanation is the most certain to get the point across, but indirect explanation over time can cement the message just as well. The pastor simply must be aware of his ceremonies and customs and how they are being perceived.

Passing on the Knowledge to the Next Generation

There is a crucial aspect to any effort to educate a congregation about Lutheran rites and customs, and that is the children. Children have even more curiosity than adults do, and they notice things. They will see that those big cloth things on the altar and the pulpit and the pastor's alb change throughout the year. They'll notice that they stand for certain parts in the service. They will wonder the good Lutheran question: "What does this mean?" But most importantly, children are sinners in need of their Savior, just as much as adults. They too need the gifts that are offered and given through the means of grace. They know in their hearts that they need a relationship with God. "As rational human beings conceived with a soul, all people naturally look for a connection to a higher power. This marvelous creation proclaims to humans the existence of God, as does the conscience they were born with."⁷²

Children learn best through parental example. "Whomever children spend time with, science tells us that those are the adults who will shape their thinking and behavior."⁷³ Children learn socially and often will mimic those who influence them. "For example, mimicry happens when children see their parents fold their hands in church to pray and they duplicate the behavior."⁷⁴ Children learn best when they are not only told what to do, but also shown what to do. Educating children in the dynamic of Lutheran rites and customs must be all-encompassing.

72. Huebner, Philip J. "What to Do With Children in Church? A Study on Helping Parents Engage Their Children in Worship." (Concordia Theological Seminary, 2019), 93.

73. Huebner, 99.

74. Huebner, 99.

“Children will learn best based on what their parents have taught them *combined with* what they do and experience, as well as when and where they do it.”⁷⁵ Parents are crucial in educating children about what they are doing in worship. Children can learn the “church script” easily, but if their parents teach them what is happening in worship their learning will be even greater.⁷⁶ Parents have influence on their children and taking time to teach them will ensure that the child understands what is happening. In addition, seeing his mother and father show such sincerity, dedication, and seriousness about worship will also impress upon the child how important worship is.

Being serious about church and what happens there is a way that parents can take the command to raise their children up in the Lord seriously. Parents, fathers especially, showing sincerity towards their faith in this way will teach their children to be sincere in the faith as they grow old too.

So how is this done? How do we teach children? How do we prevent a child’s learning of worship from being undermined? One key part of this is to involve children in worship from young and onward after youth. But what about when a child is acting up? A majority of WELS churches have cry rooms, dedicated for acting up children. But caution must be taken in how these are used. If these rooms become “play rooms” instead of a place for a parent and a child to get a breather and recollect, children will learn to act up in church so they can go to the “fun room.”⁷⁷ In this way, they will learn nothing.

Children’s Sermons are not uncommon in WELS, and like a cry room, they can be valuable or detrimental. “Far too often this time during worship turns into a pause from the

75. Huebner, 102.

76. Huebner, 102.

77. Huebner, 114-115.

sanctity of the divine service for moments of trite and trivial hilarity. This author has seen garbage cans, balloons popped by lighters, puppets, and toy shopping carts appear in the chancel before the holy altar of God Almighty.”⁷⁸ If this is all a children’s sermon will bring, it would be better not to do so. The service is a time to be receiving God’s gifts in Word and Sacrament, it is not a time for being “cute” and trite. A well-done children’s sermon can impart a little knowledge to children. “However, five minutes once a week is not likely the best solution for helping parents to teach their children to understand or participate in worship.”⁷⁹

There is a trend in American Evangelicalism to separate children during the church service for their own “children’s church.” This practice has seeped somewhat into WELS. This idea, however, has problems. Children will not learn from the example of their parents who are (or ought to be) the greatest influence on them.

Children are separated, especially young children who learn best from watching and mimicking their parents, when will they see dad sing or mom confess her sins or both with tears in their eyes receiving the body and blood of the Lord? And finally, what is subtly taught to children about their value and abilities in worship when they are sent down the hallway to their own service? Are adults communicating to children that they are not ready for what God offers in the divine service, as if there is an age of discretion for receiving his gifts of grace?⁸⁰

The default for “children’s church” is play time or song and craft time. It is an exception for this to be valuable time, so the practice ought to be very seriously questioned in any church that takes Word and Sacrament seriously and wants its children to take Word and Sacrament seriously. This is a modern trend, and until someone offers a good answer to the question as to why children were never separated from their parents for worship for the past several thousand years of believers worshipping, children’s church ought to be avoided.

78. Huebner, 116.

79. Huebner, 118.

80. Huebner, 119.

Many miscellaneous attempts to find the place of children in worship are usually just ways to keep them quiet and occupied and not ways to actually teach them what is happening. It does not engage them in worship. It shows them that this is playtime for them while the adults do something else.

Most of the previous paragraphs dealt with what *not* to do, and that is because emphasis must be made on the one thing that is actually proven to be effective. “Scripture, Church History, and science have all directed focus and attention to the parents teaching and training their children for worship.”⁸¹ Parents must be the ones to take the lead in training their children. They are the ones who have the most influence on the children. As such, a pastor must routinely emphasize this fact to the parents. The pastor can only do so much. This is a fact churches must acknowledge. If they do not acknowledge this, they will try in vain to come up with all sorts of ridiculous and pointless ways to get children involved, while ignoring what is needed. The parents need to care. If you cannot get the parents to care about their children learning what happens in worship, there are limited options to get the children to care.

There are options for the pastor, however. One clear area is catechism classes. A unit on Lutheran Worship or simply emphasizing how worship focuses on Word and Sacrament while teaching Word and Sacrament from the catechism can go a long way. When the pastor teaches baptism, tell them about the invocation and the sign of the cross. When the pastor teaches the Lord’s Supper, explain the reason for the church’s customs and ceremonies in distribution.

In the past and still today, Hymnology courses have been featured in WELS schools. Where they are still in practice, they ought to be retained. Where they are not, they ought to be instituted or reinstated. In both situations, an emphasis on liturgics should also be added to

81. Huebner, 122.

these courses. This should not be done flippantly, however, and they ought not be done unless the school is dedicated to teaching these lessons well, and not with apathy and a “well I guess they should know something...” attitude.

Ultimately, since parents are the most influential on their children, this must be the main avenue for approach. “There should be *more* opportunities to teach and train parents about parenting, discipline, and training their children. This includes teaching and training parents about how to teach and train their children in worship.”⁸² An important fact to keep in mind is that there will be no secret ingredient to this issue.

There is no ‘silver bullet,’ no book or set of materials that can solely solve any challenges with children for parents or congregations. Rather, it is the parents who need to take active lead in teaching and training their children. Maybe they make use of education or training received from their pastor or congregation. Maybe they use materials that someone else created, such as a book, worksheets, or otherwise. Maybe they borrow ideas from other parents. Whatever the method or means, it is when the parents take the lead to teach and train their children to understand and participate in worship that they will see results of growth and progress over time.⁸³

The author of this quote, Phil Huebner, conducted an extensive experiment to consider ways to improve children’s participation in worship and educating them on what is done in the service. The results showed no difference between children who had special materials to help them and those who didn’t.⁸⁴ When it comes to children in worship, we need to focus on the parents, not the children.

In the end, the most beneficial thing is for parents simply to take worship seriously and show that to their children with both their words and their actions. Parents serious about their faith and putting it into practice leads to children serious about their faith and putting it into practice.

82. Huebner, 129.

83. Huebner, 149.

84. There was a benefit to materials in the respect that they aided understanding and comprehension of those children that were participating, but not increase the overall participation of children in worship.

How Rites and Ceremonies Can Be Reintroduced

Earlier, the value of reintroducing rites and ceremonies was discussed. Here we will discuss how that can be done. Before considering the reintroduction of ceremonies or the deletion of them, considering this exhortation of Martin Luther would be wise:

For those who devise and ordain universal customs and orders get so wrapped up in them that they make them into dictatorial law opposed to the freedom of faith. But those who ordain and establish nothing succeed only in creating as many factions as there are heads, to the detriment of that Christian harmony and unity of which St. Paul and St. Peter so frequently write.⁸⁵

When considering what rites and ceremonies to reintroduce, do not do anything that would make a congregation appear to not be a Lutheran church or a WELS church. This does not mean that a ceremony cannot be one that is rare in the WELS, but caution must be taken that it is not presented in a way that separates a congregation from the wider body of fellowship. There should never be an air of “We’ve brought back this great historic ceremony; we’ve risen above other WELS congregations.” This goes for eliminating customs too.

Again, Luther provides sound advice for this matter: “We should consider the edification of the lay folk more important than our own ideas and opinions ... so that there will be one uniform practice throughout your district instead of disorder—one thing being done here and another there—lest the common people get confused and discouraged.”⁸⁶ This is more than a matter of personal preference or opinion. This is a matter of Christian love. If the logic behind reintroducing a ceremony or custom is “*I think it’d be neat,*” it will not be introduced well. We are not to be experimenters with ceremony and custom and turn these things into pet-projects. We must consider love and the edification of our neighbor.

85. Luther, 46.

86. Luther, 47.

To those who would clamor “*adiaphora!* These external matters are free!” Luther responds, “But you are bound to consider the effect of your attitude on others. By faith be free in your conscience toward God, but by love be bound to serve your neighbor’s edification.”⁸⁷ When considering how introducing a new custom or ceremony, or removing an unprofitable one, this is the attitude that must be had.

The first thing a pastor would need to introduce a profitable new custom is rapport with his congregation. If a congregation trusts its pastor and understands that he loves them and wishes for their edification, they will trust that something new he intends to introduce also serves this purpose. Again, Luther shows his pastoral heart in this manner. “This I said to the preachers so that they may consider love and their obligation toward the people, dealing with the people not in faith’s freedom but in love’s submission and service, preserving the freedom of faith before God ... for you are there for their edification.”⁸⁸

Secondly, the pastor ought to do what he should already be doing with the existing customs—teach the congregation what this is intended to do, what it intends to communicate, what it means. A congregation may trust that a pastor loves them and cares for their edification, but that will not tell them what this new ceremony means. Next to establishing a relationship of love with his congregation, this is the most important part of reintroducing any ceremony.

Thirdly, establishing precedent is also quite helpful. If this ceremony is done by other WELS congregations, then there is an easy source of precedence. For example, consider the ceremony of a processional crucifix. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and Martin Luther College use this ceremony on regular bases. These institutions are well-respected among the synod and displaying that these institutions make use of these practices shows that there is nothing “un-

87. Luther, 48.

88. Luther, 48.

WELS” or un-Lutheran about this ceremony.⁸⁹ Quotations from Martin Luther may also help, as it would be hard to find a ceremony or custom “un-Lutheran” if Martin Luther supported and advocated for it. Lutherans take Luther seriously and have great respect for him. This should all be done in love, just as Luther says. One should not confront a skeptic about this ceremony with, “Well, doubter, why don’t you take a look at what *Martin Luther* says about this, then maybe you’ll see just how *wrong* you are!” That would be quite the opposite of edification.

Fourthly, patience is absolutely necessary. A congregation, even with a pastor who has rapport with them, will be wary of a ceremony they have never seen before, or if they have a preconceived notion of some practice. For example, consider the ceremony of the imposition of ashes on Ash Wednesday. Many might see this as a Romish ceremony—and not without reason. In many places, Roman Catholics make this somewhat of a mark of confession of being a Roman Catholic. That, however, does not remove potential benefits of the ceremony. It may take some time to warm the congregation up to the idea, years even. And the first time it is done, it would likely be best not to do it again the following year, unless it was received extremely well.⁹⁰

Fifthly, the pastor must know what he is doing and prepare for it deliberately. The pastor must ensure that he studies the ceremony or custom that he plans to introduce so he will introduce it well and do it professionally when he does do it. An example would be stripping the altar on Holy Thursday. If those performing this ceremony are walking into each other and clumsily fumbling about, it will edify less. If the pastor informs himself and those who are to carry out this ceremony and they also rehearse this so that the ceremony is careful and

89. Not to imply that WLS and MLC are incorruptible and would never engage in ceremony that is perhaps flippant or that doesn’t exactly emphasize Lutheran doctrine, but as long as Lutheran doctrine is maintained as strongly as they are in these institutions, Lutheran ceremonies will dominate. Of course, an explanation of how a ceremony emphasizes Lutheran doctrine ought to be the main convincing factor, showing how Lutheran institutions adopt these practices is just an aid.

90. Not doing a ceremony every year can help assure some who question it that you aren’t requiring this as something necessary.

methodical, it will edify much more, and the congregation will be so much more inclined to want to keep that ceremony.

Finally, a pastor must be realistic. Some practices will not be suitable or acceptable for certain congregations. Human beings can be stubborn and set in their ways. A pastor may need to begin education with the youth of the congregation, planting the seeds of a return to historic ceremony and customs in them.

A pastor may need to pick his battles wisely. Thankfully, there is a large breadth of Lutheran customs and traditions, such that if one is not accepted by or suitable for a particular congregation, there are many more that could be more well-received or suitable. Again, the law of love ought to be at the forefront of the pastor's actions.

What Ceremonies and Customs Should Be Reintroduced?

A list of ceremonies that have been lost or gone by the wayside in WELS from historic Lutheranism could cover a thesis in and of itself. What follows is a brief list of suggested ceremonies, customs, and rites that might be of benefit to be reintroduced in WELS.

Previously mentioned was the ceremony of a processional with a crucifix. This is an historic practice with rich meaning. "The cross is at the center of the worship life of the church. The church lives under the cross, and the sacrificial death of Christ is the central message of the church. Thus, the cross goes forward first because the cross is where worship begins, and it is only through Christ's atoning death that sinners can gather to worship before the throne of God."⁹¹ This has been practiced in WELS before, as mentioned previously. As a whole, the synod is becoming more familiar with it. Because of this, especially at festival services, a

91. Cooper, 36.

processional would not be beyond the pale for many in the synod. With careful instruction, this would not be hard to introduce.

The imposition of ashes was also mentioned earlier, and this ancient ceremony is most valuable. This ceremony ought to be reintroduced wherever possible. This ceremony is the source of the name “Ash Wednesday.” The imposition of ashes is a powerful reminder of our mortality as a result of sin and the fate from which Christ saved us. This practice, because of Romish conceptions in the laity, will take patience and education. A pastor will have to want to introduce it and be dedicated to it.

Liturgical vestments ought to be retained wherever they are still in use, and in congregations where vestments have fallen out of use, reintroduction would be wise. Vestments are a hallmark of a liturgical service. They also set Lutherans apart from many of America’s protestant denominations. Lutherans should not look like American Evangelicals. Lutherans should not try to mimic them. Lutherans should look like Lutherans. “Vestments are used as ensigns of the office of the holy ministry. These liturgical garments cover the man, reminding the congregation that their pastor speaks to them not simply as a fellow Christian, but as ‘a called and ordained servant of the Word.’ The vestments are the clothes of a servant.”⁹² Vestments are a great reminder that the congregation has set apart this man to serve them as their shepherd. Vestments are also an ancient custom, used in both the Old Testament and New Testament churches.⁹³ “Thus in the Evangelical Lutheran Church vestments are not merely aesthetic decorations, but are symbols of the historic continuity of our church with prophets, apostles,

92. Precht, 223.

93. It is worth noting that vestments in the New Testament Church did not derive from Old Testament regulations but came about from regular clothing being used for specific liturgical meanings and purposes.

martyrs, and confessors of all times and places.”⁹⁴ This is again a part of Luther’s exhortation to have uniform practice out of love for the whole body of the church.

Typically, WELS churches make use of the alb and stole. Very recently, the chasuble has seen limited usage in some WELS congregations. This may also be a useful vestment to employ, depending on circumstances. Another issue with vestments is laymen assisting in the service, such as assisting the distribution of Holy Communion. It may be wise to reintroduce this practice also, that the assistants vest as the pastor does (though without a stole or chasuble, as typical WELS custom is to use these as a symbol for called ministers). This shows the congregation that the pastor is extending his call to teach and administer the sacraments out to these assistants. As with all customs, education is key whatever is used.

A rite that has also seen more use in WELS lately is the Easter Vigil service. This service is packed with Word and Sacrament and is an excellent way to reign in the glorious celebration of our Lord’s Resurrection. Scheduling the time for it and encouraging congregants to come may pose a challenge, but the value that this service has is worth the attempt to reintroduce it.

Festival services for saints and certain biblical events are also very historic and valuable customs. Celebrating St. Michael and all Angels is an historic Lutheran custom. Michaelmas was almost as popular as Christmas for Lutherans at the time of the Reformation and afterwards. These festivals give Christians a chance to remember the great examples of faith from the past, remind them of their roots, and their connection to the Holy Christian Church throughout time. They also give the preacher a chance to preach on doctrines not often covered in the lectionary, such as angels or the doctrine of the call.⁹⁵ There has been a renewed interest in “the great cloud

94. Precht, 223.

95. St. Matthias’ feast day would be the festival to do so.

of witnesses,” and giving congregations confessional Lutheran ways to express that interest is imperative, otherwise they may be drawn to heterodox means.

Chanting is not uncommon in WELS, but the settings to chant of the services in the altar book are sometimes ignored. If the pastor is musically inclined enough, and the congregation is also, chant should see use on regular occasion. Associating more parts of the liturgy with music is quite useful, especially for children. Children often learn the songs of the liturgy first, and so making the service more musical would be a benefit.

The sign of the cross is a custom that may be valuable to be reintroduced. Christians crossing themselves is ancient, just about as ancient as the *ichthus*, the “Jesus Fish.”⁹⁶ Luther himself recommended this custom for daily prayer, the instructions for which are absent in WELS’s edition of Luther’s Small Catechism.⁹⁷ “The sign of the cross is not a superstition or empty ritual, but it is a powerful reminder of one’s identity in Christ.”⁹⁸ It is a powerful reminder of baptism, that one has been washed clean and is fit to stand before God. This can be a wonderful comfort for Christians if taught correctly. It can be a powerful way to begin the day in one’s baptism, just as Luther instructs. Again, if actual meaning is ascribed to a custom, then Christians will find value in it.

Private confession is a practice that could see more customary use in the WELS. Private confession is a practice, that is, a doctrine implemented. It is the implementation of the doctrine of the keys. How we practice it is customary, though. Modern WELS churches do not put as

96. Cooper, 39.

97. It is this author’s opinion that Luther’s instructions for daily prayer ought to be printed in the full in the catechism. While it is true that many in WELS don’t use this custom, the Catechism is a teaching book. If pastors simply teach this custom and its meaning in their catechism classes, then the practice would be normalized in WELS in a generation. Apart from crossing, Luther’s other instructions for daily prayer, saying the Lord’s Prayer and the Apostle’s Creed and suggesting going off to work singing a hymn are also valuable customs that would be beneficial. Giving people more options and suggestions for daily prayer and devotions would be wise.

98. Cooper, 39.

much emphasis on the practice of regularly coming to the pastor when one is struggling with a certain sin that they feel in their heart. The Augsburg Confession states, “Concerning confession they teach that private absolution should be retained in churches, although an enumeration of all faults in confession is not necessary.”⁹⁹ Can the WELS say it has been retaining this practice as well as it could be? Certainly, no WELS pastor would turn away a congregant who would happen to come and confess a sin he is struggling with, but have we been doing the best we can to remind people of this great gift of comfort that we can offer troubled sinners in the Absolution? There is the challenge of the abominable Roman Catholic concept of confession, where an enumeration of sins is required and then penance is assigned. Thus, the pastor should encourage Private Confession, but make sure to present it in the most un-papist way that he can. Telling congregants to “come to him to receive forgiveness” or “absolution” or “receive help for pet sins” might be a better way of wording to avoid Roman Catholic conceptions.

With all of these customs, it is again imperative to keep in mind what Luther says about the edification of one’s neighbor. With the custom of crossing oneself, for example, there might be some who take to it, some who are uncertain about it, and some who view it as popish nonsense. We do not want anyone to sin against one’s conscience—or to enforce their conscience upon others. If a Christian finds value in remembering his baptism by the sign of the cross, then no other Christian ought to demean them for it. This goes for any custom. For those who are uncertain, patient teaching is necessary. For those who demean others for their customs, patient rebuking is necessary. We also want to avoid any air of superiority. The one crossing himself should not view others who do not as wanting to forget about their baptisms. Christian

99. Kolb-Wengert, 45.

love must be the foundation in all these things. “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal” (1 Corinthians 13:1).

CONCLUSION

Lutheran rites, customs, ceremonies, and practices have abundant historic, theological, and practical reasons for them. They have been refined for centuries both before and after the Reformation. It is important for Lutherans to know these historic, theological, and practical reasons, so that they understand what they are doing in worship, are further edified by what they do in worship, and understand the importance of passing on the continued use of these rites, customs, ceremonies, and practices to their children and those around them.

By understanding how these things benefit their lives as Christians, they will be edified in their faith all the more by them. That is the basic reason for all these practices. The pastors of the Holy Christian Church, over centuries, have used their pastoral hearts to create ceremonies that will serve the flocks of their overshepherd, Jesus Christ. The gospel message of Jesus Christ in Word and Sacrament is at the center of all these practices. The gospel message is what saves souls from death and hell and turns them to the kingdom of God. Thusly the church creates its rites and ceremonies to let the Christian people live in the gospel whenever they worship.

In the education and implementation of these rites, customs, ceremonies, and practices, the law of love must always be in view.

For even though from the viewpoint of faith, the external orders are free and can without scruples be changed by anyone at any time, yet from the viewpoint of love, you are not free to use this liberty, but bound to consider the edification of the common people, as St. Paul says, I Corinthians 14 [:40], “All things should be done to edify,” and I Corinthians 6 [:12], “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful,” and I Corinthians 8 [:1], “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.”¹⁰⁰

100. Luther, 47.

It is an act of Christian love to educate the congregation in the dynamic of Lutheran worship.

S. D. G.

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