

Confessional Indifference to Altitude:
Why Liturgical *Adiaphora* Matter So Greatly
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It astounds me that in the twenty-two years I have shared responsibility for the liturgical formation of seminarians, I continue to hear Lutherans invoke “high church” and “low church” as if they actually describe with clarity ministerial positions regarding worship. It is assumed that I am “high church” because I teach worship and know how to fire up a censor. On occasion I hear acquaintances mutter vituperatively about “low church” types, apparently ecclesiological life forms not far removed from amoebae. On the other hand, a history of the South Carolina Synod [LCA] included a passing remark about liturgical matters which historically had been looked upon in the region with no little suspicion. It was feared upon my appointment, I sense, that my supposed “high churchmanship” would distract the seminarians from the rigors of pastoral ministry into mindless “chancel prancing.” My experience, I assume, is not much different from many others, no matter what the liturgical altitude thought godly or sinful.

“High church” and “low church” are thought to serve as comprehensive and dependable descriptors of very specific ways of “doing” church. This includes the relationship of preaching and the sacraments, questions regarding formal and casual bearing, “smells and bells,” a sense of the interconnectedness of the Church, ministerial office, and the ministry of the laity. While the

terms are invoked as if they are self-evident in meaning, from the standpoint of the Lutheran Confessions they are at best “indifferent,” but more probably misleading and divisive. Properly understood, they have absolutely no place in Lutheran theological and liturgical discourse.

“High church” and “low church” designations emerged during the bitter ecclesiological struggles of the Church of England culminating in the mid-nineteenth century and have little meaning outside those disputes, despite Wikipedia’s views. They were political labels, rallying points for two ministerial parties, the Evangelicals and the Ritualists, engaged in lengthy and rancorous disputes about prayerbook reforms. Was the *Book of Common Prayer* an evangelical “Protestant Book” or did it allow for more “catholic” ritual, resulting in what many feared a “return to Rome.” The Anglo-catholics, as the Ritualists were known, formed the Church of England Protection Society [1859], renamed the English Church Union [1860], to challenge the authority of English civil law to determine ecclesiastical and liturgical practice.¹ The Church Association [1865] was formed to prosecute in civil court the “catholic innovations.” Five Anglo-Catholic priests were jailed following the 1874 enactment of the Public Worship Regulation Act for refusing to abide by civil court injunctions regarding liturgical practices. Such practices included the use of altar crosses, candlesticks, bowing, genuflecting, or the use of the sign of the cross in blessing their congregations.² For readers whose ecclesiological sense is formed by notions about the separation of Church and State, such prosecution seems mind-boggling if not ludicrous. Moreover, it should be noted that Lutheran notions of liturgical

¹Geoffrey J. Cuming, *A History of Anglican Liturgy* [London: MacMillan, 1969], p. 197. *The Evangelical Succession in the Church of England*, D.N. Samuel, ed., [London: James Clarke & Co., Ltd., 1979] provides an overview of Anglican Evangelicals and the Ritualist Controversy seen from their perspective

². Dom Anselm Hughes, *The Rivers of the Flood* [London: Faith Press, 1961], p. 21f. Dom Hughes offers a personal account of his participation in the catholic movement of the twentieth century in the aftermath of the nineteenth century controversy.

altitude, high and low, *all* embrace the ubiquitous brass altar cross, candlesticks, blessing of congregations, and kneeling even if eschewing genuflection, further revealing the on-going confusion. Nevertheless, the “high church / low church” crisis was dependent upon a formalizing of theologically conflicting interpretations of prayerbook rubrics into political positions, virulent because of the moral certitude of each party. Furthermore, each party sought juridically to impose its position as *the* authentic position of the Church of England.

For Lutherans versed in Confessional theology and conversant with their own ecclesiastical history, the attempt to claim *one* liturgical style as the authentic one should invoke memories of the Augsburg Interim, one of the most significant Confessional crises of the sixteenth century. To understand fully the Lutheran Confessional position regarding the liturgy five documents are crucial: 1) “Explanation of the Third Commandment,” *The Large Catechism*, 1529; 2) Article VII of the *Augsburg Confession*, “Concerning the Church,” the *satis est* article, 1530; Article XXIV of *The Augsburg Confession*, “Concerning the Mass, 1530;” 4) Article XXVI of the Augsburg Interim, “On the Ceremonies and the Use of the Sacraments,” 1548; and 5) Article X of the *Formula of Concord*, “Concerning Ecclesiastical Practices: Which Are Called *Adiaphora* or Indifferent Matters, 1570.”

Much of the acrimony in recent Lutheran worship wars actually is reminiscent of the Anglican disputes of the nineteenth century. Lutherans claiming “low church” allegiance discover in the “it is enough” of Article VII of the Augsburg Confession and *adiaphora* of Article X of the Formula of Concord the theological justification to view careful liturgical grounding and preparation as incidental, perhaps even a distraction from proper focus on the Word or a stifling of the Spirit. So-called “high church” Lutherans invoke Article XXIV of the

Augsburg Confession as proof that “catholic” substance and ceremony is appropriate, since “...the Mass is retained among us and is celebrated with the greatest reverence. Almost all the customary ceremonies are also retained...”³

Rather than lobbing Confessional terms out of context, it is helpful to describe the Confessions’ somewhat complex embrace of the liturgy, beginning with the oft-quoted Article X of the *Formula of Concord*. It must be remembered that the general thrust of all the confessional documents is to defend the evangelical doctrine of justification, the “article on which the Church stands or falls.” While other issues are indeed addressed, they are discussed insofar as they relate to justification. Even the closely connected doctrine of sanctification, understood as the manner in which justification is appropriated and embodied in the life of the Church, is mentioned only in passing.⁴ Thus, the Confessions frame all issues in terms of the *one* ultimate question: how does God effect salvation? Anything other than God’s saving work in Christ Jesus by the Spirit’s power is deemed “indifferent” when salvation is the focus. It is in this sense *alone* that all aspects of the liturgy are “indifferent matters” since they are not the agents of God’s saving work – God is.

The 1548 Augsburg Interim, an abortive attempt to repair the rift between Rome and the reformers, was rejected by the Lutheran movement in part because of Article XXVI, “On the Ceremonies and the Use of the Sacraments.” At first glance the document seems fairly irenic: solid preaching, careful teaching, and frequent communion of the assembly are encouraged, issues embraced by the reformers as well. Nevertheless, the assumption that the canon of the

³ The Augsburg Confession, Article XXIV, *The Book of Concord: the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000], p. 69, #1 & 2.

⁴ My dissertation, *The Liturgical Expression of Sanctification: the Hymnic Complement to the Lutheran Concordia*, [University of Notre Dame, 1988] explores the liturgical, and specifically hymnic, language commended by the *Book of Concord*.

mass had reached apostolic perfection prompted the Interim to legislate the following:

The canon, in which nothing is to be changed... The ceremonies of the other sacraments should be conducted according to the directions of the ancient agendas...⁵

Juridical imposition of specific ceremonial and liturgical texts by imperial decree seemed to the reformers a betrayal of evangelical freedom “as if their omission were wrong and sinful⁶” – a betrayal no less true with latter-day Lutheran defense of either “high church” or “low church” positions to the exclusion of the other. Again, the context for the reformers’ rejection of the Interim, particularly Article XXVI, rests on defining *a* liturgical style as the hallmark of orthodoxy, whatever the altitude.

Article XXIV of the Augsburg Confession reveals that the reformers were liturgical conservationists, although flexible in what ceremonial might be retained. While their chief concern was to reestablish a more lively engagement with the Word in worship, the numerous *Agenden* [liturgical orders] printed in Emil Sehling’s monumental collection⁷ demonstrate that “...almost all the customary ceremonies are also retained,” despite regional and municipal variants. Rather than juridical imposition, Article XXIV places the burden of proof for the liturgical choices on the parishes and their clergy. Anticipating Article X of the 1577 Formula, any *ex opere operato*, i.e. mechanistic, understanding of the liturgy as the meritorious agent of God’s saving action is rejected. Rather, the liturgy and its ceremonial is for the “instruction of the people” and “increases reverence and respect for public ceremonies.”

⁵ XXVI, “On the Ceremonies and the Use of the Sacraments,” The Augsburg Interim, 1548, *Sources and Contexts of The Book of Concord*, Robert Kolb and James A. Nestingen, eds., [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001], p. 179.

⁶ Article X, “Concerning Ecclesiastical Practices That Are Called Adiaphora or Indifferent Things,” Formula of Concord: Solid Declaration, *Book of Concord: the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000], p. 638, #15.

⁷ Emil Sehling, *Evangelische Kirchenordnungen des XVI. Jahrhunderts*, [Aalen: Scientia, 1902ff.].

Such worship pleases God, and the use of the sacrament cultivates piety toward God. So it does not appear that the Mass is held with greater devotion among our adversaries than among us.⁸

Article XXIV expects that whatever the choices made, they are to demonstrate fidelity to the liturgical witness of Holy Scripture, to the Church catholic, and to the early Church writers.⁹

Article VII of the Augsburg Confession, “Concerning the Church,” includes “it is enough,” a phrase often used to justify a minimalist understanding of worship as *the* evangelical ideal.

...it is enough [*satis est*] for the true unity of the Church to agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions, rites, or ceremonies instituted by human beings be alike everywhere.¹⁰

One must take care to determine specifically what the reformers understand to be “enough.” Absolute uniformity is rejected because congregations themselves are not uniform in abilities or resources.¹¹ However, the traditions, rites, or ceremonies in and of themselves are not rejected [cf. Article XXIV]. Instead, following Luther, the reformers again place the burden of proof on the parishes and clergy to demonstrate that their worship reflects, for example, “...a true and complete sign” of God’s saving presence in their midst.¹² What is at stake is neither uniformity nor rampant freedom from liturgical order, but full and faithful embodiment of God’s gracious work “...for us and for our salvation.” The Word, proclaimed and sacramental, is always an embodied Word. “It is enough” is therefore not a minimalist reduction but rather theological code language for careful and fervent liturgical consideration of “the whole Christ” present as the

⁸ Article XXIV, “Concerning the Mass,” the Augsburg Confession, *Book of Concord*, p. 69, #9.

⁹ Article XXIV, p. 70f., #34-38.

¹⁰ Article VII, Concerning the Church, the *Book of Concord*, p. 43, #2-3.

¹¹ Luther’s discussion in *The German Mass*, 1526, regarding diversity among congregational types and the necessity of liturgical alternatives informs the Augustana’s later discussion.

¹² Martin Luther, “The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism,” *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35, [Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960], p. 29.

proclaimed and sacramental Word, employing the best resources and abilities of any given “assembly of saints.”

Finally, Luther’s *Large Catechism* explanation of the Third Commandment, “You are to hallow the day of rest,” rounds out the Lutheran understanding of the liturgy. As with all his reforming pamphlets regarding the liturgy, Luther’s chief concern is to reestablish a lively engagement with the living Word in public worship for laity and clergy alike. The “day of rest” is not an invitation to spiritual or liturgical bone-idleness. Sundays, and by extension, festival days are observed “...so that [the faithful] may assemble to hear and discuss God’s Word and then to offer praise, song, and prayer to God.”¹³ To “hallow the day” is to do holy things. For Luther that means the stuff of the liturgy – for example, “...the ten commandments, the Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer” – even crossing oneself – and, as he discusses elsewhere, a lively celebration of the means of grace. Remembrance of Holy Baptism is “the daily garment;” the baptized, in turn “should receive [Holy Communion] frequently.”¹⁴ He dismisses mindless “chancel prancing” and questionable devotional practices based on legend and myth because they are innovations and not part of the great sweep of the liturgical tradition. The innovations are not substitutes for preaching and practicing God’s Word. Conversely, the liturgical core of the Western rite is indeed accepted as the evangelical embodiment of faith – thus Luther’s and the Confessions’ many comments about “retaining” this and that.

Far from being targeted as “matters of indifference” or seeking supposed evangelical refuge in minimalism, Luther summarizes for the Church the purpose and value of the liturgy:

¹³ Martin Luther, The Third Commandment, *Large Catechism*, *Book of Concord*, p. 397, #84.

¹⁴ Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, “Baptism,” p. 466, #84; “The Sacrament of the Altar,” *Book of Concord*, p. 470f., #39-40.

In this case, however, a work must take place through which a person becomes holy. This work, as we have heard, takes place through God's Word. Places, times, persons, and the entire outward order of worship have therefore been instituted and appointed in order that God's Word may exert its power publicly.¹⁵

Neither rejected as "incidental" to the Word nor embraced as simply an entertaining addition to the Word, the liturgy, rightly and evangelically perceived, serves as the very embodiment of the living Word calling and sanctifying God's holy people as proclamation, sacrament, prayer, and praise.

Conclusions

1. The liturgy, properly understood, is the carefully considered, prepared, and enacted embodiment of the living Word as proclamation, sacrament, prayer, and praise. Unlike recent, bitter disputes concerning *sola scriptura*, the Word, biblically, cannot simply be reduced to normative *text* while ecclesial embodiment is ignored. We discover, for example, in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, chapters 10-16, that the patterns of baptizing, communing, and gathering as Church are normative and, in fact, pre-date the specific biblical text. Paul assumes that the Corinthian community, fractious though it be, is nonetheless fully conversant with and able to enact baptism, the eucharist, preaching, as well as evangelism as self-evident expressions of what it means to be the Church. Chapters ten and eleven do not establish practice; they are reminders of already faithful praxis.
2. The liturgy embodies who and what the Christian community *is*, not what it is *not*. Liturgical embodiment includes both the embracing or choosing not to embrace various

¹⁵ Book of Concord, p. 399, #94.

liturgical actions and ceremonial customs. The sixteenth century liturgical struggles were complex exactly because much of the liturgical embodiment of the reformers remained and remains identical to that of the western Catholic Church. “But that’s catholic!” or “That’s Baptist!” are specious arguments as far as the Confessions are concerned, besides being rude and divisive chatter ecumenically. The tendency to universalize ones own liturgical comfort zone while vilifying other practices is merely the glib attempt to impose ones own position. Confessionally, to choose, for example, *not* to make the sign of the cross is no more virtuous than signing oneself or blessing the congregation. Whatever is done [or not done] is to be weighed carefully, always with the hope “...that God’s Word may exert its power publicly” through such choices.

3. Confessionally, there is no universally ideal pattern of liturgical and ceremonial embodiment – thus there is neither “high church” nor “low.” Rather, the Confessions adopt Paul’s understanding developed in his letter to the Colossians:

As you therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving... Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.
[Colossians 2:6; 16-17]

The goal of the Church’s liturgical observances is to embody what Luther would on occasion call “the whole Christ.” Such embodiment is contextual, dependent upon the resources and best insights and planning of a given people for a particular occasion at a particular time. The liturgy may be “only a shadow of what is to come,” only “a foretaste,” but nevertheless it is the faithful embodiment of the living Word for a people

eschatologically oriented to the lavish banquet of heaven. Thus, the Confessions' insistence that fidelity to the liturgical tradition is not a matter of indifference, but the sign that Christ's peace does "rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body." [Colossians 3:15] That gracious rule is established in God's baptismal act of ingathering, by which the formative process into the image and likeness of Christ is accomplished. So formed, such an assembly hungers for the Word proclaimed and embodied eucharistically. These, if the New Testament canon is to be trusted, remain the clearest, most reliable ways God is encountered.

4. The Christian community gathered and formed by the living Word will, because of the Spirit's myriad gifts and the Creator's manifold diversity so evident in any assembly, celebrate differently at different times and in different places. However, diversity is our present reality, not our Christian calling. The much maligned "unity in diversity" slogan is often an excuse to justify entrenched positions and relativism regarding far more than the liturgy. The Confessions' utter rejection of *one* authentic liturgical embodiment as well as juridical canons to impose such ceremonial or the lack of same is finally a most evangelical act.
5. Far from being in general "matters of indifference," the Confessions' list of *adiaphora* offers the Church both a vocabulary and patterns of embodiment which provide the narrative for this journey of faith. Contextual, they demand both humility and careful consideration so that they can communicate as clearly as possible the Church's worshipful encounter with the risen Lord. For some, the narrative will be detailed and exuberant since God has crafted them so. For others, the narrative will remain brief,

reserved, and cautious so that they too might inhabit the journey with authenticity.¹⁶

Lavish or simple, liturgical embodiment is authentic if it serves to open the Word ever more clearly and fully to a particular people at a particular time in a particular place. This does mean that the liturgy focuses us on the entirety of life and human experience lived in God's presence, not merely a sanitized "Sunday School" approach to faith which keeps the world and God at a safe distance.

On occasion I served as organist for St. Stephen, King of Hungary Catholic Church in South Bend, Indiana. Established to serve Hungarian automobile workers, it was largely populated by retired people who continued many of their ethnic customs. St. Stephen's also enjoyed a ministry among young Latino migrant workers, resulting in rather unusual juxtapositions of lively Hispanic folk music, including native dance and vesture, with more reserved Hungarian piety serenaded by a small choir of grandmothers. However, ask anyone in the parish about the diversity within the rite, and they would answer that it was simply "the mass." Marriachi-style band members and quietly kneeling retired auto workers gathered together as one body in the Lord. Their pieties and preferred ceremonial became transparent to each other. Various languages, dance, and repeated genuflections did not serve to block sight of brothers and sisters in faith nor their Lord. So it should be – and Lutherans have much to learn from such gracious humility.

¹⁶ Martin Marty, *A Cry of Absence: reflections for the winter of the heart*, [San Francisco: Harper, 1993] reflects on varieties of pieties which sustain the practitioner but can oppress the other.

The Palestrina *Matin Responsory*, made popular by King's College Choir, Cambridge, offers a final word of guidance, correction, and hope to liturgical factions:

“...High and low, rich and poor, one with another,
Go ye out to meet him and say:
...Stir up thy strength, O Lord, and come”¹⁷

Whether “high” or “low,” “rich” or “poor,” God’s insistent call is to venture beyond our carefully defended diversity, to go out “one with another” to plead for the Lord’s advent. Whatever our choices, this is the goal of the liturgy, high and low.

¹⁷ “Matin Responsory,” *Carols for Choirs 2*, David Willcocks and John Rutter, eds., [Oxford: Oxford Press, 1970], p. 68ff.