

Lutheran Theology and Liturgical Acculturation

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The Lutheran churches in the United States have historically reflected Teutonic and Scandinavian culture and heritage. This was a natural phenomenon due to the fact that the earliest Lutheran settlers in this country were of Teutonic and Scandinavian background.

Due to later immigration, geography, and other factors, the Germans and Scandinavians of Lutheran persuasion never truly assimilated into the “mainstream” of American religious tradition but instead formed their own ethno-religious enclaves. Often the Lutheran churches and schools served as cultural repositories by which Teutonic and Scandinavian immigrants could maintain their ethnic and cultural heritage. This was so widespread that being Lutheran in America was and to some extent still is synonymous with being German or Scandinavian.

Over time, due to evangelistic efforts among other factors, the faith associated with German and Scandinavian settlers began to spread to other groups with differing ethnic/cultural backgrounds. The goal of full participation for non-Northern Europeans in Lutheran churches in the U.S.A. is still in process. Of all the “mainline” churches in America, the Lutheran churches continue to be the most Northern European, with “people of color and language other than English” comprising less than five percent of their total membership.

The United States is the most ethnically and racially diverse country in the world and the mix continues to thicken. The Lutheran churchbodies in this country have seen the need to reach beyond their “traditional” constituency and become truly catholic and American churches, reflecting the rich diversity of the American population.

If this diversification is to be successful, serious work has to be done in order to free Lutheranism from its Northern European cultural preoccupation.

If Lutheranism is defined as a “confessional movement within the Church catholic,” rather than as “German Alumni Association” or a “Scan-

dinavian Culture Club,” it cannot be legitimately bound to any particular cultural expression. To be thus bound is “Babylonian Captivity” revisited.

Lutherans involved in Liturgical renewal need to give more attention to the major task of seeing to it that Lutheranism is incarnated in a manner that is appropriate to the ethnic and cultural heritages of the people represented in our parishes.

The acculturation of Lutheranism in America is in its infancy and there is much work to be done, but we should note that Lutheranism, by its very nature, is uniquely qualified to carry out this task in an exemplary fashion.

The Lutheran church is confessional in orientation. This confessional mode of church is one of three basic modes of church: 1. Experiential 2. Pragmatic 3. Confessional.

The **Experiential model** says that what makes one a member of the church is having the same religious experience. Into this category fall many of the Pentecostal and free church traditions. The **Pragmatic model** says that what constitutes church membership is primarily having “common prayer,” doing what the church does liturgically. Into this category falls the Anglican communion and perhaps the Orthodox communion.

The **Confessional model** says what makes one a member of the church is primarily having a common confession of faith. In this category are the Lutheran, Roman Catholic, and Reformed communions. In these traditions the form of “confession” varies, from subscribing to a written document such as the Augsburg Confession or the Westminster Catechism, to being in communion with the See of Rome. Yet the unifying concept of common belief remains constant.

These three modes are not fixed categories but are fluid. They represent the basic trajectories of the churches. For confessional Lutherans, the key to what is Lutheran and what is not is Augustana VII. This and this alone is the “litmus test” for authentic Lutheranism. Augustana VII states:

The Church is the assembly of saints in which the Gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly. For the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions or rites and ceremonies, instituted by men, should be alike everywhere.

The proper interpretation and implementation of this article of the Augsburg Confession is what is necessary for liturgical acculturation within Lutheran churches.

The Lutheran churches in America often are bewildered when trying to deal with acculturation or multicultural worship. This bewilderment is primarily due to “confessional amnesia.” Whenever Lutherans get themselves into trouble it is usually because they have ignored, misinterpreted, or simply forgotten their own confessional grounding. Thus the key to

curing the Lutheran churches of ethnocentrism is a strong dose of confessional “regrounding.”

In order to be faithful to the Gospel in the American setting, Lutheranism must reconfessionalize by freeing itself from cultural captivity. Because of history and confessional amnesia, many Lutherans (including Lutherans of non-Northern European heritage) continue to confuse Lutheranism with Northern European cultural idioms. This confusion has caused the Lutheran churches to be narrowly ethnic rather than broadly catholic in scope.

The discussion of what is “Lutheran” in worship is more often than not a discussion of what is Northern European Lutheran. Ninety percent of the time when someone is heard saying “this is not Lutheran,” what they really are saying is that “this is non-Northern European” in tradition, style, or idiom, and this is not familiar to or comfortable for someone with Northern European cultural preferences.

Many people have the idea that Lutherans are people that “don’t clap, have 60-minute liturgies, use pipe organs, sing chorales, exalt Bach, use green or blue hymnals, wear white vestments, say ‘trespasses’ instead of ‘debts,’ have German or Scandinavian surnames, and have a sign that says ‘Lutheran’ on the church lawn.” Speaking from a pragmatic point of view, this has been and is the truth—these things do describe ethnocentric Lutheranism as it has been generally practiced in America.

The confessional truth which should bind Lutherans is that none of the previously mentioned things has anything whatsoever to do with truly being Lutheran. All those things, important as they may be, are adiaphoral and they reflect cultural background, style, tradition, idiom and taste, rather than confessional integrity.

Lutherans, truly defined, are those Christians who hold to the utter centrality of the protestant principle of justification by grace through faith (i.e. the Gospel) and believe that this principle (i.e. the Gospel) is made manifest to and received by God’s people through the catholic *ordo* of Word and Sacraments.

Any Lord’s Day liturgy is fully Lutheran if the Word is proclaimed purely and the sacraments are administered rightly. Thus liturgical style and cultural orientation is adiaphoral. To include adiaphora in judging what is and is not Lutheran is tantamount to confessional heresy.

The Lutheran Church has always been solidly anchored within the western Catholic tradition. This is not disputed. “The Mass is retained among us and is celebrated with the greatest reverence.” (Augustana XXIV). The Mass is essential—without it the Church does not exist.

Thus the task for modern Lutheran liturgical renewal is to see that the Mass be said in “the vernacular.” A proper understanding of vernacular is central to liturgical acculturation. When Luther used the phrase “in the vernacular,” what he meant was that the Mass is for the people of God; thus

if the Mass is said in a foreign “tongue” then the effect is to cut people off from the Word and the Sacraments. In Luther’s day the foreign language was Latin. He reformed the Mass, uplifting the centrality of the Gospel and by adapting it to the German language and idiom, thus opening up God’s Word and Sacraments to the German people.

Our task is exactly the same as Luther’s—to make the Mass available in the “vernacular” of the people and thereby open up God’s Word and Sacraments to the various peoples in America. Translation into the vernacular involves many components. Vernacular is not merely spoken language but includes culture, style, music and art, idiom, and conception of time.

Lutheranism assumes that the catholic *ordo* is always maintained. This is the confessional foundation, namely Word and Sacrament. How this *ordo* is incarnated is the task of acculturation. The variations are as numerous as there are cultures and parishes. All the “variations” can and must be done without compromising the common “theme” in any way. The theme to be maintained is nothing less than the Gospel, in the basic form of Word and Meal.

When beginning the process of liturgical acculturation there are a few key points to remember:

(1) Ethnic/cultural groups that may appear monolithic are not. African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, Native Americans, and others are diverse communities, with varying culture and varying expectations. Trying to culturally define any group in a monolithic manner is offensive. There is no more one style of African American, Hispanic, Asian, or Native American worship than there is one style of White Worship. Do White Pentecostals, Quakers, and Episcopalians share a common “White” worship style?

The point is, in each parish setting, there are many “cultures,” regardless of the racial make-up of the parish. How an acculturated liturgy will look will differ from parish to parish. Acculturation is a crucial task, done not for the sake of “variety” but for the sake of the Gospel. Whatever is done in acculturation must drive the people gathered in a particular time and place to Christ. It must maintain the catholic *ordo* of Word and Meal in the “vernacular” of the people. Vernacular includes music, art, style, idiom, language, and other factors.

(2) An adept liturgical leader needs to be a solid confessional theologian, a student of cultures, visual arts, music, anthropology, sociology, psychology. Having a good working knowledge of such wide ranging areas allows one to be a good exegete. Doing solid exegesis on the community you are serving is as important as any biblical exegesis. If you don’t know who it is you are serving with a particular liturgy, it will not be effective.

(3) Finally, the determining factor in Lutheran worship is not the cultural idiom or liturgical style, but whether or not the Gospel is proclaimed

to the assembly through Word and Meal. This is the only criterion for authentic Lutheran worship. It is nothing other than justification by grace through faith embodied in liturgical expression.

This is enough now about the Mass and Communion. What is left can be decided by actual practice, as long as the Word of God is diligently and faithfully preached in the Church. And if any should ask that all these forms be provided from the Scriptures and the example of the Father, they do not disturb us; for as we have said above, liberty must prevail in these matters and Christian consciences must not be bound by laws and ordinances. That is why Scripture is silent on these matters, but allows freedom for the Spirit to act according to his own understanding as the respective place, time, and persons may require it. ("An Order of Mass and Communion," *Luther's Works*, vol. 53: 37)