

It Does Matter What You Do: How Practical Choices Reflect Theology

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We would all, I trust, agree with the centrality of baptism for Lutheran theology and its importance for Lutheran liturgical renewal. Yet, how many of us are from parishes where baptisms, if done during the Sunday assembly at all, are at small, out of the way fonts, with a few drops of water, no candles or oil, and little or no congregational involvement? Certainly, the baptism is valid, but is it salutary? Have we done any more than meet the “lifetime minimum requirement of grace”? Have we lost a wonderful opportunity to *celebrate* the richness of grace poured out in baptism, not only on the baptized but on the community?

It is almost an axiom of liturgical scholarship that praxis, the practical liturgical choices we make in designing parish liturgy, and theology, the conceptual framework behind our actions, are intrinsically related. Articles and books in the field of liturgical theology almost assume its truth but say little in its support. While we do not have the time to fully develop this theme, there are several observations I would offer for your continuing reflection. First, educators inform us that only 7% of human learning is auditory, a whopping 93% is non-linguistic, yet our worship is predominantly auditory in focus! It’s as though, of the five senses we’ve been given, God will communicate only through our ears! Second, anthropologists have differentiated 700,000 different symbolic gestures each conveying a precise meaning and more than 250,000 facial expressions each conveying a thought or emotion. Given these insights, dare we ignore our postures, our expressions, or our movements in the planning of liturgy? Perhaps we need to be more cognizant of the influence of these factors in the proclamation of the Gospel? Communication is not simply a matter of saying clearly what you have to say, it is also ascertaining whether you have been heard and understood. Finally, our theology is profoundly incarnational in nature—God’s Word finding its ultimate revelation in its incarnation in God’s own

creation. As Paul Hoon, author of *The Integrity of Worship*, asserts, Christian theology and worship is grounded in the dialectic of God become human in Christ.

During our brief time together I would like to look at several areas of liturgical concerns and make some preliminary observations about ways in which our choices reflect theological underpinnings.

I have heard it said that a church edifice is a “systematics in stone” giving shape and substance to the builder’s theological perspective. We have only to look at a Roman basilica, an Eastern iconostasis, a medieval cruciform cathedral, or a contemporary worship space to see the interplay of form and substance. Modern liturgical theory recognizes that the configuration of liturgical space shapes the way in which the church understands itself when it worships. As our theological perspective changes, so do the ways in which we use our worship spaces—witness the renovations of thousands of Roman parishes in the wake of Vatican II. In the planning of worship in our own parishes, we must analyze the theological “posture” of the building and the ways in which ritual can help moderate or enhance that construct. Valparaiso University’s Chapel of the Resurrection is a truly glorious space in which to worship; however, the architectural gulf between the nave and the chancel implies more of a separation between heaven and earth or the clergy and laity than might be salutary. Hence movement of the Liturgy of the Word to the pavement level and the abandonment of the “high” pulpit. But this is just one example of the interplay of theology and praxis.

Rites of gathering and hospitality are also undergoing new scrutiny. Too often parishioners move from car to pew with little or no interaction with other humans, revealing the underlying self-understanding of a voluntary gathering of an organization rather than the gathering of the baptized body of Christ around word and sacrament. Current rites of gathering, or lack thereof, support individualism and the underlying movement to see Christianity as moralism. We must remember that as Christ is the sacramental incarnation of the Word in the world, so the church is the sacramental body of Christ in the world. We gather not to form the body of Christ, but to reveal it. Our ritual life needs to enhance rather than belie this truth. Related to this is the role of laypersons in the leadership of worship. We all know that “liturgy” means “the work of the people” but I would venture to guess in many of our parishes it appears to be “the work of the clergy”. This again underscores a distinct theological position. Without commenting on the propriety of the underlying theology, I do want to underscore that our choices reflect our theological presuppositions and can have a direct bearing on the message we convey. The involvement of lay assistants, the role of the choir, the vesting of lectors, and even where the presider sits make, ipso facto, profound theological statements. We must bear this in mind if we are to be faithful to our calling as liturgical theologians.

While there are a number of other areas worth considering, I would like to direct our attention in our closing moments to the theological implications inherent in the choices made by the presider. The fundamental decision relative to the use of a eucharistic prayer involves an entire constellation of theological issues. While these questions may not seem germane to many people in the pew, the heated debate during the development of the LBW demonstrates the substantive issues at stake. In the same way, the manual postures of the presider can reveal the underlying understandings of the eucharist. For example, fraction during the Agnus Dei can be understood to be tied to a broad understanding of the four-fold action of the eucharist—the gifts are taken during the offertory, blessed in the eucharistic prayer, broken during the Agnus Dei, and given during the communion. Conversely, fraction during the Verba itself perhaps underscores their consecratory role. Finally, the simple question of when the presider communes can make a statement. While ancient models of hospitality demanded the host be fed first, contemporary etiquette encourages the reverse. As presider, standing in the place of Christ, there is something to be said for leading the congregation and so communing first of all. In the age of AIDS, however, there is also something to be said for the presider's commonality with the assembly by communing last.

In summary, I would simply like to restate my fundamental assertion that it *does* matter what you do. The choices we make reflect our theological biases. Being aware of this can encourage us to make more careful choices, thinking not only of what we intend, but what it might mean in a wider perspective or how it might be interpreted by others. In this way we can be increasingly faithful to our mandate to proclaim the Gospel in its full splendor and purity.