



CEREMONY, RITUAL
AND REVERENCE IN
WORSHIP IN THE
EVANGELICAL
LUTHERAN CHURCH



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In his 1964 book, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Marshall McLuhan wrote his famous maxim, "**The medium is the message**" – meaning that *how* something is communicated is an essential part of *what* is communicated.

Prof. Kurt Marquart reminds us that "one of the prime requirements of evangelical liturgical form is that it cultivate reverence." (63) He then quotes Martin Luther.

Today we have in the churches an altar because of the communion of the Eucharist; we have platforms or pulpits for the purpose of teaching the people. This has been done, not only for the sake of necessity but also for the sake of **solemnity**. (63) [emphasis mine]

The Augsburg Confession declares: "Nothing contributes so much to the maintenance of dignity in public worship and the cultivation of reverence and devotion among the people as the proper observance of ceremonies in the churches." (Tappert 49)

Marquart goes on to say:

Connected with good order is ... the principle of continuity with the ancient church. The church of the evangelical Reformation wishes to be neither a new-fangled sect nor a biblicistic one which imagines that it can bypass the whole intervening history of the church. Wanting to be simply a faithful continuation of the orthodox church of the ages, it makes a point of having introduced nothing, either in doctrine or in ceremonies, that is contrary to Holy Scripture or the universal Christian church. Article XXIV in both the Augsburg Confession and the Apology repeatedly refers to the church fathers and to the Greek liturgy, by way of precedent. Luther's Large Catechism says, "Since from ancient times Sunday has been appointed for this purpose, we should not change it. In this way a common order will prevail and no one will create disorder by unnecessary innovation." Behind this respect for genuine tradition—Chesterton called it "the democracy of the dead"—stands what might be called the principle of ecclesial humility: "Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached?" (1 Cor, 14:36). (Marquart 63-4)

Reverence and Devotion

Reverence and devotion are closely related in religious matters. Reverence is a feeling of deep respect for God, mixed with wonder,

awe, and love. Devotion is a loyal, steadfast affection and consecration like that of the holy women who ministered to our Lord during His earthly ministry. Both reverence and devotion are primarily matters of our inner life and determine our attitudes, but they express themselves in our outward actions. (Lang 17)

The rubric above all rubrics is “be reverent.” For some, the ceremonial details can be overwhelming; especially to those who are not accustomed to paying such close attention to them. Therefore, it is necessary to emphasize that reverence covers a multitude of sins and contributes greatly to the proper conduct of the Divine Service.

Ceremony

While the word rite (or ritual) refers to the texts of the liturgy, ceremony refers to the actions of the liturgy that accompany the texts. A variety of ceremonies may legitimately exist in the Church of the Augsburg Confession. (Pless 224)

The ceremonies used at Bethlehem are completely “Lutheran.”

You’ve heard that actions speak louder than words. God is holy. We should, therefore, come into His presence with reverence and humility. The purpose of liturgical ceremonies is to give form and order to our reverence and remind us of Whose presence we are in. Or, as our Lutheran Confessions put it, “The purpose of all ceremonies is to teach the people what they need to know about Christ.”

Of course, ceremonies vary among Christians. The Gospel gives us a wonderful freedom in Christ Jesus, which does not bind us to a detailed set of ceremonial laws. It would not be possible to do all of the same things in the same way in every place.

[Ceremonies] have long-standing traditions in our church. Yet, some of these may never have been done in your previous congregations. Every congregation has its own personality, just as our homes are each uniquely decorated. Whenever we worship away from our own church home we are almost sure to notice things that seem unusual. For that reason there may be certain things that feel “new,” “different,” or “strange” ... [People are invited] to participate in these external things as much as [they] are comfortable doing so.

While ceremonies can help us confess our faith through bodily action or physical things, it is important to remember that such things

are not the main things in worship or absolutely necessary for worship. God gives His gifts with or without these ceremonies. (“Introduction to the Liturgy”)

Since there is no such thing as an “informal” service, that is, a service without form, the question of ceremonies can be ignored only to the detriment of the pure preaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the blessed sacraments. Thus, many of the ceremonies of the ancient church were purified of superstition and retained in the Lutheran Church.¹

This proper use of ceremony is evident in Luther’s instructions regarding prayer in the Small Catechism. Here Luther directs the head of the family to teach those in his household to use such customs as the sign of the holy cross, kneeling, standing, and the folding of hands.

What, then, is the purpose of ceremonies in the liturgy of the Evangelical Lutheran Church? Ceremonies necessarily exist to teach the faith. As the true worship of the triune God is always anchored in the Christian’s fear, love, and trust in this one God above all things, so proper ceremonies have a didactic function in the Christian congregation. This is the intention of Article XXIV of the Apology: “The purpose of observing ceremonies is that men may learn the Scriptures and that those who have been touched by the Word may receive faith and fear and so may also pray.”

Although the function of ceremonies is never less than pedagogical, ceremonies are more than visual aids to faith. Since worship in the name of Jesus is never without form or structure, ceremonies serve to maintain good order in the worshiping congregation.

As God is not a God of chaos and confusion (1 Cor. 14:33), so his divine service to the congregation is both ordered and orderly. Evangelical ceremonies reflect this order as they point to the gracious gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation which our Lord bestows through Word and Sacrament. Even as these ceremonies point to the giver and donor, they also assist the recipient to embrace the gift in faith and reverence.

Although ceremonies are not part of the Divine Service per se, they nevertheless bear witness to what the congregation actually believes

¹ See Apology of Augsburg Confession Article XXIV

regarding the means of grace. The posture and movement of the congregation during the service (i.e., standing for the reading of the Holy Gospel, or kneeling for the reception of the Lord's body and blood), the manner in which the remaining consecrated elements are treated after the Communion, and the custom of reverencing the altar are examples of ceremonies that point to the congregation's confessional position. (Pless 224-225)

Certain actions have symbolic meaning for Christians—they symbolize our reverence and our faith. Kneeling indicates our humility and repentance, remembering the Psalmist's plea: "O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker" (Ps. 95:6). We acknowledge that it is God who made us, and not we ourselves. Kneeling is the ancient posture of prayer. (Stauffer 8)

Outward signs of devotion are not enough, however. They are worthless if they do not flow out of hearts full of love for God and obedience to his will. The way we live our lives affects how we care for the house of God: "Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false, and does not swear deceitfully" (Ps. 24:3-4). An inner life of prayer—with confession of sinfulness, adoration of God simply because he is God, thanksgiving for all he has done for us, petitions for his help, and intercessions for the needs of others—is essential to the reverent spirit. (Stauffer 8)

God's House

The church is a symbol of God's greatness in love and grace, and therefore [we] treat the church as God's house. [We] keep the sacred place holy. When [we] go in, [we] walk reverently. [We] may genuflect and make the sign of the cross. [We] may kneel in prayer, adore God, thank Him, and ask His blessing on [our] work. While [we] are in church, [we] behave as well as if [we] saw God among [us] with [our] bodily eyes. [We] are quiet. [We] limit conversation to brief and softly spoken comments in reverence to God. (Lang 16)

God's Word

God says that He exalts His Name and His Word above all things (Psalm 138:2). Therefore, if God so exalts His Word, our attitude during the reading of Holy Scripture in the Divine Service is one of awe-filled attention and reverence. There should *NEVER* be movement and/or private conversations during the reading of Holy Scripture and the Sermon.

Realizing that there are times when one must leave the Nave, it is both reverent and respectful to God, our fellow worshipers, and our Pastor to remain in the Narthex or in a back pew until an appropriate time (e.g., a hymn or voluntary) to return to our seat. That Almighty God would even give us His Word to read and hear, is a gracious gift to be received with humble gratitude. "The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him." (Habakkuk 2:20 ESV)

We see superior etiquette displayed at the theater or symphony than in churches today; when entrance into the theater or concert hall is prohibited during the performance. If such is the case for showing respect to human entertainers and audience, how much more should we show respect for God's Word, the servant who brings it to His people, and our fellow parishioners who long to hear this means of grace! Of course, that assumes that there is an actual hungering and thirsting for God's Word, which this author is not convinced exists by the evidence of indifference shown.

Sacred Things

Reverence for God also includes showing due respect for things set apart especially for worship of God. Uzzah was struck dead because he laid his hand on the ark of God, which the priests and Levites alone were allowed to touch (2 Sam. 6:3-8). The altar is a symbol of the presence of God. Every time [we] pass it, [we] show reverence to God by bowing the head. The consecrated bread and wine left over from the Sacrament of the Altar have participated in the sacramental presence of the holy body and precious blood of Christ. Those whose duty it is to dispose of them will do it reverently. ... They may [dispose of] the water used for Holy Baptism in the same way. The sacred vessels and linens used in the administration of the sacraments come into direct contact with Christ's holy presence. When [we] handle them, [we] do it reverently. (Lang 16-17)

Bowing

Bowing is a sign of reverence and respect. In the ancient world, people bowed to emperors and kings. In part, this made them defenseless and vulnerable to attack. They laid their necks open to the king's sword, and thus placed themselves at his mercy.

We bow before the Lord God because we depend upon His mercy in Christ Jesus, though "we daily sin much and surely deserve nothing but punishment" (*Small Catechism*, Lord's Prayer, Fifth Petition.) The bending low of our bodies before Him is an outward sign of repentant faith. We acknowledge and confess our sin, yet trust the Lord for His forgiveness. We bow before the Lord in reverent faith, because we fear, love and trust in Him alone. We bow out of respect for His divine Majesty, because His true glory is too much for sinful mortals to behold; as even the holy angels hide their faces in the presence of the Holy Triune God (Isaiah 6:2).

Keeping this in mind, some Christians bow at the mention of the Holy Trinity and/or at the confessing of the Incarnation of the Son of God in the Creed. Similarly, in keeping with the words of St. Paul, many Christians even bow "at the name of Jesus" (Philippians 2:10), and when the Gloria Patri ("Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit") or another Trinitarian doxology is sung. (Introduction to the Liturgy)

Bowing our heads is an action of reverence. We bow our heads for prayer to show our respect for God. We may also bow toward the altar, because it represents Christ's presence among us; or bow when Christ's name is mentioned in the liturgy, as a sign that we accept him as our Lord. These ceremonial acts are merely a matter of church etiquette, a means of signifying our reverence and adoration for the holiness of God. (Stauffer 8)

Points During the Liturgy at Which Bowing Is Appropriate

The Gloria in Excelsis:

At the words “worship.” “Give thanks,” “Jesus” and “receive our prayer.”

The Gloria Patri:

At the words “Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit” and return to an erect position at the words: “As it was in the beginning, etc.”

The Nicene Creed:

As the celebrant ... says, “God,” he may bow his head. He may also bow his head at the Holy Name of Jesus and, if he wishes, at the words “worshiped and glorified.” He may bow from the waist at the words, “And was incarnate” and remain bowed through the words, “Was crucified also for us”; he raises himself erect again before the words, “Under Pontius Pilate.” (The explanation given for this was that the soldiers of the Roman procurator knelt and bowed before Our Lord in mockery during His Passion.) (Piepkorn 26)

The Altar

Since the altar is a symbol of the constant presence of God and since it serves as the focus of devotion in the church (except during the reading of the Gospel when the focus of attention shifts to the book), it is appropriate to salute the altar with a profound bow when first entering and last leaving the sanctuary and to bow moderately whenever crossing, approaching, or leaving the midst. (Piepkorn 4)

The altar is the center of the church’s worship. It is not a piece of church furniture like the pulpit or lectern; it is a monument. God prescribed the altar for worship in the Old Testament, and in both the Old and the New Testament era the church’s worship has been at and around an altar. The altar is so central and so sacred that it has been said: “The altar is the church; the church is the altar.”

The altar is a symbol of God’s gracious presence in His church. Its significance is that of sacrifice. It signifies primarily the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ for the redemption of the world. It also

signifies our sacrifice of self, prayer, praise, thanksgiving, and possessions to God through Christ, our Mediator and High Priest. The altar is also the Lord's table for the preparation, consecration, and distribution of the bread which is the holy body and the cup which is the precious blood of Christ in the Sacrament of the Altar.

Rationalists, pietists, and many Protestants deny the symbolism and significance of the altar and have either discarded it or reduced it to a mere table or only a shelf on which to put things. They have robbed the altar of its true meaning both in their theology and in their practice. Lutherans do not share their beliefs, although some churches have been influenced by their practices or by architects who prescribed for Lutheran clients buildings peculiarly appropriate for their practices. In the Lutheran Church the altar is a monument which is built from the ground up or rests on the floor. A shelf jutting from the chancel wall without legs or attachment to the floor can hardly represent a monument or suggest the symbolism and significance of the altar. The meaning and sacredness of the altar also demand reverent respect for its purpose and use. It should not be designed or used as a cupboard for tucking sacred vessels, candles, or trivia out of sight. If a choir takes its stand in the front of the church, it should not hide the altar, nor should the singers have their backs to the altar. When a projector screen is used, it should stand to the side of the altar, not in front of it. It is important that all our church practices be consistent with the meaning, dignity, and sacredness of the altar. Members of the altar guild should always remember that the altar is a monument of God's presence and that reverence and honor toward the altar are reverence and honor to God Himself and not to the wood and stone of which the altar is constructed. (Lang 51)

The Sign of the Cross

Making the sign of the cross is an action which reminds us of our Baptism. Since the third century, Christians have made the sign of the cross as a remembrance that in Holy Baptism God makes us his own children. (Stauffer 8)

The Sign of the Holy Cross is a confessional gesture. It is made with the hand disposed as for a blessing from the head ("My Lord

Jesus Christ came down from heaven”) to the breast (“and was incarnate for me”) to the right side (“and was crucified for me”) to the left side (“and entered into my heart”). ... This method of making the sign of the Holy Cross is older than the method in common use in the Roman Catholic Church where the right hand crosses from the left shoulder to the right. (Piepkorn 5)

The sign of the cross may be made at any reference to the Holy Trinity, at the passing of the Processional Cross (see below), at the reception of the Eucharist, and at the Benediction.

Processional Cross

Processional crosses have been carried on their shafts in Christian worship since the fourth century; interestingly, altar crosses only date from the seventeenth century! They are carried at the head of the procession into the nave during the entrance hymn, and are also used for the Gospel procession, at funerals in the church, and for processions outside the church (for example, on the Sunday of the Passion/Palm Sunday and the Day of Pentecost). During worship they are placed in a floor standard or wall bracket in the chancel. (Stauffer 22)

It is appropriate to bow and/or make the sign of the cross whenever a processional cross passes by.

Candles

For the celebration of the Holy Communion service, at least two candles traditionally stand at the back of the altar, one on the extreme right and the other on the extreme left end. These are called *Eucharistic lights*. But if the two are the only candles ever placed on the altar, their use need not be restricted to the chief service. They may be lighted at every service.

Lighted candles are a symbol of Christ as the Light of the world. They also express the glory and joy of our holy religion. In the chief

service Christ the Light comes to us in both Word and sacrament. This may be the reason for the traditional minimum of two lights for the celebration of Holy Communion. (Lang 54)

We are not concerned about the utilitarian use of lights in the church, but only the symbolical and ceremonial use. This symbolical and ceremonial use goes back to the Old Testament, where the symbolism of light is referred to often and the ceremonial use was prescribed by God Himself for the church's worship.

Light and the things related to it, such as fire and burning incense, are symbols of God, sacrifice, and prayer. If they are used properly, they may enhance the liturgy.

“God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). He created light. He went before the Children of Israel as a pillar of light. In a special sense Christ is “Light of light” (Nicene Creed). He is “the true light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world” (John 1:9). In the vision of the heavenly Jerusalem, “the Lamb is the light [lamp] thereof” (Rev. 21:23). Light is symbolical of God.

Fire symbolizes sacrificial love. Oil burning in a lamp and burning candles are symbols of sacrificial love, both of Christ and of His disciples. “Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children, and walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us and hath given Himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling savor.” (Eph. 5:1,2) (Lang 95)

Two candles are usually placed on the altar, representing the divine and human natures of Christ. (Stauffer 20)

It is proper to light the altar candles for all services. The Lutheran use is to have two single beeswax candles, set near the extremities of the altar, either on the gradine² or as close as possible to the back of the mensa³, if there be no gradine. Six candles is a Counter-Reformatory Roman use. Candelabra as substitutes for the two single

² A raised ledge or shelf at the back of an altar. Normally not used with a free-standing altar.

³ The top of the altar. The mensa properly has five Greek crosses incised in its upper surface, one cross in the center and one near each of its four corners. The crosses represent our Lord's five crucifixion wounds in hands, feet, and side. Thus the altar's significance in commemorating the atoning sacrifice of Christ is carved on its mensa.

candles are a Protestant sentimentality. The Epistle⁴ candle is lighted first; the Gospel⁵ candle last; they are extinguished in reverse order. Lighting with a match held in the hand is not reverent: extinguishing with puffs of breath from bloating cheeks is even less so. Use a lighter and snuffer. The lights may be lit by the officiant if there be no one to assist him, or by a choirboy, or by a server appointed for the purpose. In any case the individual performing this task should be decently vested. New candles should be started before the service, or they may cause embarrassing difficulties. (Peipkorn 3)

Paschal Candle

The Paschal Candle is a large decorative candle which is symbolic of Christ's forty days on earth after his Resurrection. It is first lighted on Easter Eve and carried in procession to the Gospel (the congregation's left) side of the altar... There it remains and is lighted at each service from Easter until the festival of the Ascension. It is then placed near the font and is lighted for each Baptism. (Stauffer 20)

The Paschal Candle is also used during Christian Funerals. It is moved to the foot of the casket and lighted for the funeral service.

Processional Torches

Torches are large candles attached to wooden or metal shafts which are carried in procession just behind the processional cross. Their use and placement in the chancel is similar to that for the processional cross (see above). They symbolize the coming of Christ to lighten the darkness of the world. They are usually reserved for use on festival days, to emphasize the importance of the festival being celebrated. (Stauffer 22)

Sanctuary Lamp

Some churches have sanctuary lamps in which candles burn continuously throughout the week. They are suspended from the ceiling or mounted on the chancel wall. Sanctuary lamps symbolize Christ's living presence in the church, and also follow the ancient Jewish custom of always having a light burning at the altar. (Stauffer 22)

⁴ The Epistle side of the Altar is liturgical south (the left as the congregation faces the altar).

⁵ The Gospel side of the Altar is liturgical north (the right as the congregation faces the altar).

The Advent Wreath

The custom of lighting an Advent wreath during the four weeks before Christmas ... symbolizes the age before the coming of Christ, when the light of prophecy concerning the Messiah became brighter and brighter till He Himself came and said: "I am the light of the world."

The wreath consists of evergreen branches tied to a metal or wooden hoop. To the hoop four candles are fixed at equal distances.

On the eve of the First Sunday in Advent and for all services throughout the week till the eve of the Second Sunday in Advent, one candle is lighted. The next week two are lighted, the third week three, and the fourth week all four, always beginning the week on the eve of the Sunday, that is, Saturday evening. (Lang 99-100)

The Advent wreath contains a number of symbols. The evergreen wreath symbolizes eternal life in Christ. The candles are symbolic of Jesus Christ, the Light of the World. The act of lighting more candles each week anticipates the imminent coming of Christ.

The Candles used in the wreath are either violet or blue in color, with the exception of the third candle, which should be rose colored. This is fitting on this Sunday, named Gaudete, from the first word of the historic Latin Introit: "Rejoice."

At the center is the **Christ Candle** which is lighted on Christmas Eve. This central candle signifies that the Light of the World, Jesus, has come. On the Sundays following Christmas until the Feast of the Epiphany, all the candles may be changed to white.

Sitting and Standing

A general rule of thumb is that we sit for instruction, and stand for confession, prayer, praise and thanksgiving. Some churches have kneelers and so are accustomed to kneeling for confession. Sometimes these different activities are happening all at once, and one or the other directs our posture.

For example, we normally sit for the instruction of the Holy Scriptures, when they are read at Daily Prayer and for the Old

Testament and Epistle in the Divine Service; but we stand for the reading of the Holy Gospel in the Divine Service, as an expression of praise and thanksgiving to the Lord Jesus, since the Gospel uniquely proclaims His words and actions. (“Introduction to the Liturgy”)

Other Items

Flowers

The practice of placing flowers on or in the altar area of Lutheran churches has been common and need not be condemned. Cut flowers and plants in churches are symbols of God’s creation, carved representations of which were also included in the art work of Solomon’s temple (1 Kings 6:29-36). Christ himself testified to the beauty of natural creation when he invited his hearers to consider the flowers and plants of the field and to observe that “even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these” (Matt. 6:29 RSV). With their freshness and beauty, flowers and plants suggest the life that God gives; they create a quiet but uplifting spirit of joy and confidence. It is not inappropriate to place such creations from the finger of God in churches.

This does not mean, however, that anything goes. The beauty of the house of the Lord is God’s saving message in Christ Jesus communicated in Word and Sacrament. The permanent liturgical furnishings of altar, pulpit, and baptismal font direct our attention to this beauty. Flowers and plants should by their size or quantity neither detract from the symbolic function of the central furnishings nor interfere with the free use of them. The altar and baptismal font are not floral display stands, and clutter is surely out of place. The advice, “It is better to err on the side of simplicity than to overdecorate” is sound. Altar, pulpit, and baptismal font areas that look the same week after week, except for those meaningful changes in the color of paraments proper to the church year, make a statement about the centrality of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in public worship and about the church’s determination always to proclaim him who is the same yesterday and today and forever (Heb. 13:8). Flowers and plants placed in full view of a worshiping congregation should be but gentle accents to the unchanging message of the chancel. The penchant to decorate must be discouraged in order to preserve the effectiveness of

altar, pulpit, and baptismal font as gospel-centered symbols. (Schmidt 212-13)

Flags and Banners

To maintain the integrity of the major symbols in a church building other things should not be placed in the vicinity of altars, pulpits, and fonts that draw attention away from them or diminish their symbolic impact. Flags and banners, for example, are adornments that should be located with care because they interfere with the symbolic functions of the liturgical furnishings. National flags, denominational flags, or the Christian flag do not belong in the vicinity of altar, pulpit, and font. The latter, as one writer has put it, “all point to Christ.” National flags, on the other hand, “speak not of Christ, but of the nation.” “The Christian loves his country, not only for its bounty, but also for the freedom it has given him to worship God.” But to place a national flag “with the means of grace, Word, and Sacraments, is to invite confusion.” A national flag is an appropriate symbol in a building, but the flag does symbolize something quite different from what liturgical furnishings symbolize. The flag, by its very nature, intends to draw attention to itself, if it is placed in the vicinity of the liturgical furnishings, it is bound to diminish the theological impact which they are intended to make.

Although one might argue that the Christian flag has as its purpose to direct worshipers to Christ, it is worthy of note that since the Christian flag is of rather recent origin, it lacks catholicity and is more of a rallying symbol than a communicator of what God has done for us in Christ. The main liturgical furnishings with their longstanding and well—ingrained universal traditions point more directly to the divinely ordained means of grace, are more powerful symbols than the Christian flag, and should thus not have attention diverted away from themselves. (Schmidt 213-14)

Closing Thoughts

Quite frankly, this author is of the opinion that part of the issue of the irreverence in worship, the passive aggressive refusal to participate in liturgy and hymnody, and the discourteous actions toward God's Word has to do with laziness and apathy on the one hand, and with attire on the other.

As it is now customary to dress casually for church, so follows our behavior in treating worship "casually." As a former advisor for a high school service club, it was required that young men and women in attendance at leadership conventions dress in their "Sunday best" – i.e., dresses for the young ladies and coats and ties for young men. The basic premise was that "when they dress well, they will behave well."

The concept of putting on our "Sunday best" has been discarded in the church of the late 20TH and early 21ST century ... and with it, reverent decorum.

Κῦριε ἐλέησον. Ἐρχου κυριε Ἰησου.
(Lord, have Mercy. Come, Lord Jesus.)

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