Worship, Liturgy, and Ceremonies in the Lutheran Confessions

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The churches among us teach with complete unanimity...that one holy church will remain forever. The church is the assembly of saints in which the gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly. And it is enough 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. As Paul says [Eph. 4:5, 6]: “One faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all...” (Augsburg Confession [Latin] I:1, p. 37; VII:1-4, p. 43)

Concerning church rites they [our churches] teach that those rites should be observed that can be observed without sin and that contribute to peace and good order in the church, for example, certain holy days, festivals, and the like. However, people are reminded not to burden consciences, as if such worship were necessary for salvation. (Augsburg Confession [Latin] XV:1-2, p. 49)

As can be seen, there is nothing here that departs from the Scriptures or the catholic church, or from the Roman church, insofar as we can tell from its writers. ... For even the canons are not so severe as to demand that rites should be the same everywhere, nor have the rites of all churches ever been the same. Nevertheless, the ancient rites are, for the most part, diligently observed among us. For the accusation is false that all ceremonies and ancient ordinances are abolished in our churches. Truth is, there has been a public outcry that certain abuses have become fused to the common rites. Because such abuses could not be approved with a good conscience, they have been corrected to some extent.

...the churches among us do not dissent from the catholic church in any article of faith but only set aside a few abuses that are new and were accepted because of corruption over time contrary to the intention of the canons... However, it can easily be judged that nothing contributes more to preserving the dignity of ceremonies and to cultivating reverence and piety among the people than conducting ceremonies properly in the churches. (Augsburg Confession [Latin], Conclusion of Part One: 1-5, p. 59; Introduction of Part Two: 1, 6, p. 61)

Our churches are falsely accused of abolishing the Mass. In fact, the Mass is retained among us and is celebrated with the greatest reverence. Almost all the customary ceremonies are also retained, except that German hymns, added for the instruction of the people, are interspersed here and there among the Latin ones. For ceremonies are especially needed in order to teach those who are ignorant. Paul advised [1 Cor. 14:2,9] that in church a language that is understood by the people should be used. The people have grown accustomed to receiving the sacrament together – all who are fit to do so. This also increases reverence and respect for public ceremonies. ... The people are also reminded about the dignity and use of the sacrament – how it offers great consolation to anxious consciences – so that they may learn to believe in God and expect and ask for all that is good from God. Such worship pleases God, and such 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. ...
Since the Mass is such an imparting of the sacrament, among us one common Mass is held on every holy day, and it is also administered on other days if there are those who desire it. Nor is this custom new in the church. For the ancient teachers before the time of Gregory...often speak of the common Mass. ... Since, therefore, the Mass as we conduct it has on its side the example of the church, from Scripture and the Fathers, we are confident that it cannot be disapproved, especially since the customary public ceremonies are for the most part retained. (Augsburg Confession [Latin] XXIV:1-5, 7-9, 34-35, 40, pp. 69, 71, 73)

It has been a general conviction, not only of the people but also of those who teach in the churches, that distinction of foods and similar human traditions are useful works for meriting grace and making satisfaction for sins. That the world thought so is evident from the fact that daily new ceremonies, new ordinances, new holy days, and new fasts were instituted and that the teachers in places of worship exacted these works as necessary worship for meriting grace and viciously terrified consciences if people omitted any of them. Much misfortune has ensued in the church from this conviction concerning traditions. ...these traditions obscured the precepts of God because traditions were preferred far more than the precepts of God. All Christianity was thought to consist of the observance of certain holy days, rites, fasts, and vestments. ...

Nevertheless, many traditions are kept among us, such as the order of readings in the Mass, holy days, etc., which are conducive to maintaining good order in the church. But at the same time, people are warned that such acts of worship do not justify before God and that no punishable sin is committed if they are omitted without offense. Such freedom in human rites was not unknown to the Fathers. For in the East, Easter was kept at a different time than in Rome, and when the Romans accused the East of schism because of this difference, they were admonished by others that such customs need not be alike everywhere. (Augsburg Confession [Latin] XXVI:1-3, 8, 40-43, pp. 75, 77, 81)

Moreover, it is debated whether bishops or pastors have the right to institute ceremonies in the church and make laws concerning food, holy days, ranks or orders of ministers, etc. ...concerning this question, our people teach...that bishops do not have the power to establish anything contrary to the gospel. ...it is not lawful for bishops to institute such acts of worship or require them as necessary, because ordinances that are instituted as necessary or with the intention of meriting justification conflict with the gospel. ... It is necessary to retain the chief article of the gospel: that we obtain grace through faith in Christ, not through certain observances or through acts of worship instituted by human beings.

What, therefore, should one think of Sunday and similar rites in places of worship? To this our people reply that it is lawful for bishops or pastors to establish ordinances so that things are done in the church in an orderly fashion, not so that we may make satisfaction for our sins through them or so that consciences may be obliged to regard them as necessary acts of worship. ... It is fitting for the churches to comply with such ordinances for the sake of love and tranquillity and to keep them insofar as they do not offend others. Thus, everything may be done in an orderly fashion in the churches without confusion, but in such a way that consciences are not burdened by thinking such things are necessary for salvation or that they sin when violating them without offense. ... Such is the case with the observance of Sunday, Easter, Pentecost, and similar festivals and rites. (Augsburg Confession [Latin] XXVIII:30, 34, 50, 52-53, 55-57, pp. 95, 97, 99, 101)
Only those things have been recounted which seemed to need saying. This was done in order that it may be understood that nothing has been accepted among us, in teaching or ceremonies, that is contrary to Scripture or the catholic church. For it is manifest that we have most diligently been on guard so that no new or ungodly doctrines creep into our churches. (Augsburg Confession [Latin], Conclusion: 4-5, p. 105)

...God’s Word is the treasure that makes everything holy. ... At whatever time God’s Word is taught, preached, heard, read, or pondered, there the person, the day, and the work is hallowed, not on account of the external work but on account of the Word that makes us all saints. Accordingly, I constantly repeat that all our life and work must be based on God’s Word if they are to be God-pleasing or holy. Where that happens the [third] commandment is in force and is fulfilled. Conversely, any conduct or work apart from God’s Word is unholy in the sight of God, no matter how splendid and brilliant it may appear...

Note, then, that the power and force of this commandment consists not in the resting but in the hallowing, so that this day may have its special holy function. ... 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. (Large Catechism I:91-94, p. 399)

...we gladly keep the ancient traditions set up in the church because they are useful and promote tranquillity, and we interpret them in the best possible way, by excluding the opinion that they justify. But our enemies falsely charge that we abolish good ordinances and church discipline. We can claim that the public liturgy in the church is more dignified among us than among the opponents. ... Among the opponents, unwilling celebrants and hirelings celebrate the Mass, and very often they do so only for the money. They chant psalms, not in order to learn or pray, but for the sake of the rite, as if this work were a required act of worship, or for the sake of financial reward. Many among us celebrate the Lord’s Supper every Lord’s day after they are instructed, examined, and absolved. The children chant the Psalms in order to learn them; the people also sing in order either to learn or to pray. ...

Among the opponents there are many regions where no sermons are delivered during the entire year except during Lent. And yet the chief worship of God is to preach the gospel. And when the opponents do preach, they talk about human traditions, about the devotion to the saints and similar trifles. This the people rightly loathe, and so they walk out on them immediately after the reading of the gospel. A few of the better ones have begun now to speak about good works, but they still say nothing about the righteousness of faith, about faith in Christ, and about the consolation of consciences. Indeed they rail against this most salutary part of the gospel in their polemics. On the contrary, in our churches all the sermons deal with topics like these: repentance, fear of God, faith in Christ, the righteousness of faith, consolation of consciences through faith, the exercise of faith, prayer (what it should be like and that everyone may be completely certain that it is efficacious and is heard), the cross, respect for the magistrates and all civil orders, the distinction between the kingdom of Christ (the spiritual kingdom) and political affairs, marriage, the education and instruction of children, chastity, and all the works of love. From this description of the state of our churches it is possible to determine that we diligently maintain churchly discipline, godly ceremonies, and good ecclesiastical customs. (Apology XV:38-40, 42-44, p. 229)
...it is evident that many foolish opinions about traditions have crept into the church. Some thought that human traditions were necessary acts of worship for meriting justification. ... Likewise, some churches excommunicated others on account of such traditions as the observance of Easter, images, and similar things. From this the inexperienced have concluded that faith or righteousness of the heart before God cannot exist without these observances. ...

But just as the different lengths of day and night do not undermine the unity of the church, so we maintain that different rites instituted by human beings do not undermine the true unity of the church, although it pleases us when universal rites are kept for the sake of tranquillity. Thus, in our churches we willingly observe the order of the Mass, the Lord’s day, and other more important festival days. With a very grateful spirit we cherish the useful and ancient ordinances, especially when they contain a discipline by which it is profitable to educate and teach [the] common folk and [the] ignorant. ...

The opponents say that universal traditions ought to be observed because they are thought to have been handed down from the apostles. ... They ought to interpret these rites in just the same way as the apostles themselves interpreted them in their writings. For the apostles did not want us to think that through such rites we are justified or that such rites are necessary for righteousness before God. ... They observed certain days not as if that observance were necessary for justification, but in order that the people might know at what time they should assemble. Whenever they assembled, they also observed some other rites and a sequence of lessons. Frequently, the people continued to observe certain Old Testament customs, which the apostles adapted in modified form to the gospel history, like Easter and Pentecost [cf. Acts 18:21; 20:16], so that by these examples as well as by instruction they might transmit to posterity the memory of those important events. (Apology VII/VIII:32-33, 38-40, pp. 179-81)

...we do not abolish the Mass but religiously retain and defend it. Among us the Mass is celebrated every Lord’s day and on other festivals, when the sacrament is made available to those who wish to partake of it, after they have been examined and absolved. We also keep traditional liturgical forms, such as the order of readings, prayers, vestments, and other similar things.

The opponents include a long harangue about the use of Latin in the Mass, in which they childishly quibble about how it benefits hearers who are ignorant of the church’s faith to hear a Mass that they do not understand. Apparently, they imagine that the mere act of hearing itself is a useful act of worship even where there is no understanding. ... We mention it only in passing in order to point out that our churches retain the Latin readings and prayers.

Ceremonies should be observed both so that people may learn the Scriptures and so that, admonished by the Word, they might experience faith and fear and finally even pray. For these are the purposes of the ceremonies. We keep the Latin for the sake of those who learn and understand it. We also use German hymns in order that the [common] people might have something to learn, something that will arouse their faith and fear. ...

Consciences were tormented by enumeration of sins and satisfactions. The opponents never mentioned faith, by which we freely receive the forgiveness of sins. All their books and sermons were silent about the exercise of faith in its struggle with despair or about the free forgiveness of sins on account of Christ. In addition, they horribly profaned the Mass and introduced many other godless acts of worship into the churches. ...

By contrast, due to God’s blessing, our priests attend to the ministry of the Word. They teach the gospel about the blessings of Christ, and they show that the forgiveness of sins takes place on account of Christ. This teaching offers solid consolation to consciences. In addition they
teach about the good works that God commands, and they speak about the value and use of the sacraments. ...among them [our opponents] the priests use the sacrament to make money. Among us it is used more frequently and more devoutly. For the people use it, but only after they have been instructed and examined. They are taught about the proper use of the sacrament, that it was instituted as a seal and testimony of the gracious forgiveness of sins and therefore as an encouragement to sensitive consciences in order that they may be completely convinced and believe that their sins are freely forgiven. ... Moreover, if we must speak about outward appearances, attendance in our churches is greater than among the opponents’. Practical and clear sermons hold an audience. But neither the people nor the theologians have ever understood the opponents’ teaching. The true adornment of the churches is godly, useful, and clear doctrine, the devout use of the sacraments, ardent prayer, and the like. Candles, golden vessels, and similar adornments are appropriate, but they are not the distinctive adornment of the church. ...

But let us speak about the term “liturgy.” This word does not properly mean a sacrifice but rather public service. Thus, it agrees quite well with our position, namely, that the one minister who consecrates gives the body and blood of the Lord to the rest of the people, just as a minister who preaches sets forth the gospel to the people, as Paul says [1 Cor. 4:1], “Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries,” that is, of the gospel and the sacraments. And 2 Corinthians 5:20, “So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ...” Thus the term “liturgy” fits well with the ministry. (Apology XXIV:1-3, 46-51, 79-81, pp. 258, 267, 272)

We should not regard as free and indifferent, but rather as things forbidden by God that are to be avoided, the kind of things presented under the name and appearance of external, indifferent things that are nevertheless fundamentally opposed to God’s Word (even if they are painted another color). Moreover, we must not include among the truly free adiaphora or indifferent matters ceremonies that give the appearance or (in order to avoid persecution) are designed to give the impression that our religion does not differ greatly from the papist religion or that their religion were not completely contrary to ours. Nor are such ceremonies matters of indifference when they are intended to create the illusion (or are demanded or accepted with that intention), as if such action brought the two contradictory religions into agreement and made them one body or as if a return to the papacy and a deviation from the pure teaching of the gospel and from the true religion had taken place or could gradually result from these actions. ...

In the same way, useless, foolish spectacles, which are not beneficial for good order, Christian discipline, or evangelical decorum in the church, are not true adiaphora or indifferent things. ...

Therefore, we believe, teach, and confess that the community of God in every time and place has the right, power, and authority to change, reduce, or expand such practices according to circumstances in an orderly and appropriate manner, without frivolity or offense, as seems most useful, beneficial, and best for good order, Christian discipline, evangelical decorum, and the building up of the church. ...

We also believe, teach, and confess that in a time when confession is necessary, as when the enemies of God’s Word want to suppress the pure teaching of the holy gospel, the entire community of God, indeed, every Christian, especially servants of the Word as the leaders of the community of God, are obligated according to God’s Word to confess true teaching and everything that pertains to the whole of religion freely and publicly. They are to do so not only...
with words but also in actions and deeds. In such a time they shall not yield to the opponents even in indifferent matters, nor shall they permit the imposition of such *adiaphora* by opponents who use violence or chicanery in such a way that undermines true worship of God or that introduces or confirms idolatry.

...the churches are not to condemn one another because of differences in ceremonies when in Christian freedom one has fewer or more than the other, as long as these churches are otherwise united in teaching and in all the articles of the faith as well as in the proper use of the holy sacraments. (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration X:5,7,9-10, 31, pp. 636-37, 640)

*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.*

*(Colossians 3:16, New International Version)*

*Now they who received his word were baptized, and ... they continued steadfastly in the teaching of the apostles and in the communion of the breaking of the bread and in the prayers.*

*(Acts 2:41-42, Confraternity)*

*Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Do not be carried away by varied and strange teachings...*

*(Hebrews 13:7-9, New American Standard Bible)*

*Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe...*

*(Hebrews 12:28, NIV)*

“Everything is permissible” – but not everything is beneficial.

“Everything is permissible” – but not everything is constructive.

*(1 Corinthians 10:23, NIV)*
Lutheran Divine Service in Wittenberg, Germany, 1523, portraying Martin Luther, vested in a chasuble, as the celebrant.
Martin Luther, vested in a surplice, preaching
Martin Luther, vested in a surplice, administering the Lord’s Supper