

“Freedom Shall Be and Remain a Servant of Love”

Luther on Liturgical Diversity and Uniformity as an Exercise in Distinguishing Faith and Love¹

Luther

1. Luther’s approach to questions of liturgical uniformity and diversity was governed by a clear distinction between faith and love, law and gospel – in other words, between our relationship to God (*coram deo*) and our relationship to fellow men (*coram hominibus*). While faith and the gospel govern the former, the latter is governed by love and the law. This is why Luther, in his 1520 treatise *On the Freedom of a Christian*, can summarize the Christian life in these two biblical sentences (AE 31:344): “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” In this bound freedom, the Christian is like Christ (*ibid.*).²

Already in this treatise, Luther applies these foundational insights to matters liturgical. This is significant insofar as this work was penned down three years prior to making practical suggestions for the reformation of the liturgy. The first and most basic application is that faith in Christ’s gospel is not only the Christian’s true freedom from sin, death, and the devil; it also is the highest worship of Christ (350):

... when the soul firmly trusts God’s promises, it regards him as truthful and righteous. Nothing more excellent than this can be ascribed to God. The very highest worship of God is this that we ascribe to him truthfulness, righteousness, and whatever else should be ascribed to one who is trusted.

As faith in Christ’s promise thus alone fulfills the First Commandment by giving glory to Christ alone in all things, especially when it comes to our salvation, faith is thereby also what alone adds God-pleasing luster to our good works. All our works become genuine works of worship precisely when we turn our eyes away from our works to the work of the God-man, Jesus Christ. There is no worship apart from faith, be the work of service offered to God ever so extraordinary. As faith passively receives Christ’s perfect fulfillment of the law by bringing about the soul’s mystical union with Christ, it also is the power needed for the Christian’s active fulfillment of the remaining nine commandments (350-353).

While faith in the promise of the gospel is thus the highest worship of God, it is evidently by no means the only worship man is called to offer to God. Faith is to be distinguished from love. The former does not replace the latter (363):

We do not, therefore, reject good works; on the contrary, we cherish and teach them as much as possible. We do not condemn them for their own sake but on account of this

¹ This paper grew out of helpful remarks posted by Rev. Paul McCain (and others) on his blog, *Cyberbrethren* (http://cyberbrethren.typepad.com/cyberbrethren/2006/04/liturgical_unif.html), and out of the preparation for a conference on Luther’s *On the Freedom of the Christian* held at St. Cloud, MN, in October 2006. An abbreviated version of this piece appeared in *LOGIA XVIII*, 1 (2009):37-44.

² Cf. also the famous passage (AE 31:367f.): “each one should become as it were a Christ to the other that we may be Christs to one another and Christ may be the same in all, that is, that we may be truly Christians.”

godless addition to them and the perverse idea that righteousness is to be sought through them; for that makes them appear good outwardly, when in truth they are not good.

These works are necessary because men do not exist as isolated souls turned toward God, but additionally live in a dual relationship, namely, in relation to their “body,” that is, the old Adam; and in relation to their neighbor. In relation to the sinful self, works have a disciplinary and purging function, driving sinning out of the Christian’s life more and more. In relation to the needy neighbor, works have a serving function. In fact, self-discipline is not a goal in itself; restraining egotism and selfishness is done so as to serve the neighbor better (358f.; 364-366). In other words, good works are necessary for the neighbor’s sake.

This insight leads Luther to a theological reevaluation of the ceremonies of his time that is prior to any practical suggestions for liturgical reform. Since man is justified, saved, by faith in the promise of Christ alone, these works cannot serve the soul *coram deo*. They can only be useful in relation to his body and, chiefly, in relation to his neighbor (*coram hominibus*). Already at this time, Luther detected an abuse of Christian freedom which he perceived as just another form of legalism: whereas people prior to the resurgence of true evangelical freedom were taught to trust in their doing certain works, now they were taught to trust in their *not* doing certain works. Both extremes are wrong and need to be replaced by the middle course Luther charted in his treatise based on God’s word with the clear distinction of faith and love, law and gospel: works are excellent when done by faith in Christ; works are an abomination when done by faith in the works themselves (371-373).

With this paradigm in hand, Luther could find middle ground also when it came to ceremonies: They are good if, and insofar as, no faith is put in them and they instead serve to discipline the old Adam and to aid the neighbor. In relation to the neighbor, Luther made careful distinctions depending on the spiritual state of the neighbor. While the obstinate and vocal works saint, for his good, needs to be offended openly and resisted boldly, the timid and ignorant believer, who is still lacking a full grasp of Christian liberty, needs to be spared (373). Also for his sake, observing ceremonies that are free in themselves is necessary lest he be offended and lose his weak faith in Christ. Drawing on 1 Cor. 8 and especially on Rom. 14, Luther states about a Christian’s duty of love (373f.):

He must yield to their weakness until they are more fully instructed. Since they do and think as they do, not because they are stubbornly wicked, but only because their faith is weak, the fasts and other things which they consider necessary must be observed to avoid giving them offense. This is the command of love which would harm no one but would serve all men. ... observe the laws with the weak so that they will not be offended, until they also recognize tyranny and understand their freedom. If you wish to use your freedom, do so in secret, as Paul says, Rom. 14[:22], “The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God”; but take care not to use your freedom in the sight of the weak.

It is now interesting to see how Luther teaches that ceremonies play an important role in the instruction in the faith. This is how ceremonies serve the neighbor too, namely in the instruction of the young (375):

... the inexperienced and perverse youth need to be restrained and trained by the iron bars of ceremonies lest their unchecked ardor rush headlong into vice after vice. On the other hand, it would be death for them always to be held in bondage to ceremonies, thinking that these justify them. They are rather to be taught that they have been so imprisoned in ceremonies, not that they should be made righteous or gain great merit by them, but that they might thus be kept from doing evil and might more easily be instructed to the righteousness of faith. Such instruction they would not endure if the impulsiveness of their youth were not restrained.

Because ceremonies force us to practice the self-disciplined, humble life in relation to the First Table of the Ten Commandments, Luther called them “models”³ for the Christian life of self-sacrificial service as a whole.⁴ These “plans” are first to be set aside when the building, this life, itself is completed. This, however, Luther did not expect to happen on earth. Ceremonies and their “iron bars”⁵ therefore “are not despised, rather they are greatly sought after” for Christians of all ages. First in the life of the world to come there will be no more need for such “models and plans” (375f.). For the time being, the order of the worship service on Sunday trains the Christian for ordered, vocational service of the neighbor during the remainder of the week by exercising him in both the passivity of faith and the activity of love.⁶ Ceremonies are thus a prominent example of how works rightly understood serve the dual purpose of disciplining our impulsive youthful (and that is sinful) selves, the old Adam, and of serving our neighbor, the former purpose being a necessary precondition for the latter.

While Luther here clearly rejects any notion of self-justification by works, his use of forceful metaphors – “iron bars,” “bondage,” “imprisoned” – suggests that he is not advocating constant liturgical change and experimentation, lest people, especially the young, become accustomed, not to self-discipline and perseverance, but to change itself. Since the purpose of the liturgy is to teach the faith, also in a practical, hands-on way, what Luther said about catechism instruction might well be added here (SC Pref. 7):⁷

In the first place, the preacher should above all take care to avoid changes or variations in the text and version ... but instead adopt a single version, stick with it, and always use the same one year after year. For the young and the unlearned must be taught with a single fixed text and version. Otherwise, if someone teaches one way now and another

³ The Latin original has “praeparamenta,” preparations, cf. *Martin Luther: Studienausgabe*, ed. H.-U. Delius (Berlin: Ev. Verlagsanstalt, 1982), 2:308, Inn. 8, 14. Thanks to Rev. Paul Strawn, Spring Lake Park, MN, for making this edition available to me.

⁴ If liturgy is not about selfless service, but all about self-aggrandizement, then it is militating against its essence, cf. Ap XXIV, 80. It then becomes dysfunctional in the Church of the humble Servant of all. True liturgists are true servants; true servants are true liturgists.

⁵ For Luther, the Second Table of the Ten Commandments in particular represents God’s iron bars around our neighbor; this understanding reflects Luther’s biblical anthropological realism that did not have to deny the raging beast in fallen man, cf. A. Peters, *Kommentar zu Luthers Katechismen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990), 1:90f.

⁶ Cf. below on Luther’s 1526 catechism proposal in the *German Mass*.

⁷ Quotations from the writings contained in the 1580 Book of Concord are taken from *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. R. Kolb, T. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

way next year – even for the sake of making improvements – the people become quite easily confused, and all time and effort will go for naught.

While Luther clearly saw the beneficial necessity of ceremonies, he also saw that they as well as all law can and, in fact, will be abused by man's sinful nature for the purpose of self-justification. This is so due to man's sinfulness and because one is confirmed in this reliance on works by the legal ways in which life on earth is organized. The possible and real abuses of the law (and of ceremonies) obviously did not lead Luther to abolish the law, but to look to God to teach the truth of the gospel into the people's hearts (376f.). As seen, this happens also and, in fact, chiefly by means of good ceremonies.

2. It would now be interesting to see how Luther applied this basic position to the theological challenges in the years to come. Suffice it to say that it served him well to combat ritualists, iconoclasts, revolutionaries, and antinomians. Yet it also served him well to address the emergent exuberance of liturgical creativity and its pastoral problems. To this struggle we now turn due to its proximity to the situation in the early 21st century.

As seen already in the 1529 *Preface to the Small Catechism*, in addition to his concern for the weak believer's conscience Luther also cared about the weak believer's heart and mind, so to speak. Change in the basic catechetical texts – and considering what Luther wrote already in 1520 we do well to include the liturgy here – is to be avoided because it is confusing and prevents what is taught from shaping, or taking root in, one's heart and mind.

3. This concern is evident already in his 1523 Latin *Order of Mass and Communion (Formula Missae)*. By way of preface, Luther stated here that he first only taught the people concerning the difference between faith and love, law and gospel in order to wean them from their false trust in ceremonies. He wrote (AE 53:19) that he refrained from innovations

partly because of the weak in faith, who cannot suddenly exchange an old and accustomed order of worship for a new and unusual one, and more so because of the fickle and fastidious spirits who rush in like unclean swine without faith or reason, and who delight only in novelty and tire of it as quickly, when it has worn off. Such people are a nuisance even in other affairs, but in spiritual matters, they are absolutely unbearable.

Change confuses the weak and encourages fickle spirits who are only after novelty. It does not build the church by implanting the word of faith in the heart. However, after teaching has taken place and root, it needs to be reinforced by evangelically used ceremonies, that is, by the ancient order of the mass purged of recent abominations (20ff.). It is important to see how Luther went through the liturgy he had inherited from the church of the past and basically develops the liturgy out of the Supper first observed by Christ and his apostles. The Lord's Supper, understood as gospel (22), thus provided him with the standard, according to which he retains especially the oldest parts of the mass but excises younger additions that contradict the gospel. In other words, Luther reforms the traditional liturgy with God's word in hand; he does not start from scratch by casting aside 1500 years of additions that were not all bad; indeed, there was an "ancient purity"

in the mass (21). In fact, first “when everyone felt free to add or change at will” (21), abominations like the canon of the mass were added.⁸

While he thus combated change for change’s sake and retains much of the ancient order, he continued to emphasize that even a liturgical order with such a noble pedigree and with Luther as author cannot be made into a conscience-binding law for Christians who are, after all, children of the free woman (30f.).

4. Two years later, in 1525, liturgical diversity and theological confusion had grown even more. Luther addressed this issue in his famous letter to Christians in Livonia “concerning public worship and concord.” At the beginning of this writing, Luther described the situation in this Baltic territory thus (AE 53:45f.):

I have heard from reliable witnesses that faction and disunion have arisen among you, because some of your preachers do not teach and act in accord, but each follows his own sense and judgment. ... This causes confusion among the people. It prompts both the complaint, “No one knows what he should believe or with whom he should side,” and the common demand for uniformity in doctrine and practice.

As in *On the Freedom of the Christian*, Luther then outlines the two spiritually perilous extremes to be avoided – ritualism and liturgical *laissez-fair* – to chart a middle course, which he significantly introduces thus (46): “I hope that you still hold pure and unblemished the teachings concerning faith, love, and cross-bearing and the principal articles of the knowledge of Christ. Then you will know how to keep your consciences clear before God.” Provided that the distinction and connection between faith and love is clear, everything else would fall into place. This was Luther’s hope, and this is why he, just like in 1520, introduced Christ’s servanthood based on Phil. 2 as the decisive paradigm for the Livonians, so that they too would make themselves true liturgists, true servants of all.

Luther went on to exhort the preachers first of all that they not seek personal glory as Satan delights in this kind of selfishness. Applied to the issue at hand, Luther therefore admonished them thus (47):

It is un-Christian to quarrel over such things and thereby to confuse the common people. We should consider the edification of the lay folk more important than our own ideas and opinions. Therefore, I pray all of you, my dear sirs, let each one surrender his own opinions and get together in a friendly way and come to a common decision about these external matters, so that there will be one uniform practice throughout your district instead of disorder—one thing being done here and another there—lest the common people get confused and discouraged.

⁸ Cf. also Luther’s 1544 remarks (AE 38:318): “There is no church on earth where there are so many differences and customs in worship and in churches as in the Roman Church. Not only experience shows this but also the books on canon law, of which there would indeed be fewer if more uniformity had remained in the Roman Church. But it proved beneficial to the pope that much or everything was taking place in a dissimilar way, if only they would be alike in regarding him as the head of all Christendom.” Liturgical diversity, even confusion, fosters the rule of men in the church, according to Luther’s reading of church history.

For to quarrel over such things betrays a serious confusion of faith and love, of law and gospel. Luther explained this all-important point in this way (47f.):

... even though from the viewpoint of faith, the external orders are free and can without scruples be changed by anyone at any time, yet from the viewpoint of love, you are not free to use this liberty, but bound to consider the edification of the common people, as St. Paul says, I Corinthians 14 [:40], "All things should be done to edify," and I Corinthians 6 [:12], "All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful," and I Corinthians 8 [:1], "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." Think also of what he says there about those who have a knowledge of faith and of freedom, but who do not know how to use it; for they use it not for the edification of the people but for their own vainglory. Now when your people are confused and offended by your lack of uniform order, you cannot plead, "Externals are free. Here in my own place I am going to do as I please." But you are bound to consider the effect of your attitude on others. By faith be free in your conscience toward God, but by love be bound to serve your neighbor's edification, as also St. Paul says, Romans 14 [15:2], "Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to edify him." For we should not please ourselves, since Christ also pleased not himself, but us all.

... This I said to the preachers so that they may consider love and their obligation toward the people, dealing with the people not in faith's freedom but in love's submission and service, preserving the freedom of faith before God. Therefore, when you hold mass, sing and read uniformly, according to a common order – the same in one place as in another – because you see that the people want and need it and you wish to edify rather than confuse them. For you are there for their edification, as St. Paul says, "We have received authority not to destroy but to build up" [II Cor. 10:8]. If for yourselves you have no need of such uniformity, thank God. But the people need it. And what are you but servants of the people, as St. Paul says, II Corinthians 2 [1:24], "We are not lords over your faith, but rather your servants for the sake of Jesus Christ."

The same argumentation we observed in Luther's *On the Freedom of the Christian* is applied here to a concrete conflict in one area where some pastors enthusiastically mistook their freedom *coram deo* to be freedom *coram hominibus*, thereby damaging their congregations and Christian unity.⁹ As Luther pointed out based on Christ's example and the apostle's exhortation: Not so! Let faith be free toward God; let love be servant toward the neighbor. And let therefore one preacher consider the confusion he is causing in his neighbors' congregations. The practical solution is, as suggested above, the joint adoption of a common, edifying, serviceable order of service by the pastors of the area. Remarkably, Luther considered this *ministerium*-based practice to be the opposite of individual pastors lording it over the church.

⁹ This application is less clear in a 1524 letter to Nicholas Hausmann (AE 49:90f.), where Luther still thought a congregational volunteerism in liturgical matters could exist while "the unity of the Spirit [w]ould be preserved in faith and in the Word." By the following year, when he had to write the letter to the Livonians at hand, Luther had come to realize that such volunteerism unbridled by love undermined the unity of the Spirit. This resulted in a more consistent application of the teachings on faith and love already set forth in *On the Freedom of the Christian* in a foundational way.

Here as always, Luther taught that the gospel does not abrogate the law but rather causes people to relate to it properly. The law, to be sure, cannot alter man's state before God; but it does order our external dealings with one another, even in the Christian congregation. And, not unimportantly, Luther points out that external, ceremonial uniformity does express and maintain the unity among Christians which is by faith (48). For Satan is cunning enough to use even liturgical diversity to sow his seed of doctrinal disunity, as Luther observed based on how heresies have emerged during the history of the church (46).¹⁰

5. The same argument is made by Luther also in his 1526 *German Mass*. There is freedom, but this is the spiritual freedom of the gospel which must not be confused with carnal license. Luther writes (AE 53:61):

... while the exercise of this freedom is up to everyone's conscience and must not be cramped or forbidden, nevertheless, we must make sure that freedom shall be and remain a servant of love and of our fellow-man.

Where the people are perplexed and offended by these differences in liturgical usage, however, we are certainly bound to forego our freedom and seek, if possible, to better rather than to offend them by what we do or leave undone. Seeing then that this external order, while it cannot affect the conscience before God, may yet serve the neighbor, we should seek to be of one mind in Christian love, as St. Paul teaches [Rom. 15:5–6; I Cor. 1:10; Phil. 2:2]. As far as possible we should observe the same rites and ceremonies, just as all Christians have the same baptism and the same sacrament [of the altar] and no one has received a special one of his own from God.

Luther's "as far as possible" is qualified in an important way: those who already have sound orders of service need not adopt the one Luther here is publishing. All of Germany needed not have one order. Yet this too is again qualified regionally (62):

... it would be well if the service in every principality would be held in the same manner and if the order observed in a given city would also be followed by the surrounding towns and villages; whether those in other principalities hold the same order or add to it ought to be a matter of free choice and not of constraint.

This practically meant in the 16th century that the average churchgoer would always be exposed to the same orders of service because people at the time were far less mobile than they are today. And one can safely assume that this demographic fact was the background for Luther's concession for some regional liturgical diversity which, in the course of the 16th and 17th centuries, did develop in Lutheran Germany and Scandinavia: Each town and principality in evangelical freedom had its own orders of service, with significant similarities between them; but within these regional entities, there was liturgical uniformity. However, while Luther wanted

¹⁰ Cf. Luther's 1544 observation (AE 38:317): "... where it can be done without sinning and endangering the conscience or without giving offense, it is indeed fine for the churches to agree in external matters, which are in any case voluntary, even as they agree with one another in the Spirit, in the faith, in the word, and in the sacrament; for such agreement makes a fine impression and pleases everyone. Agreement is also good because such dissimilarity, since it is unnecessary, looks very much like a schism or disunion and discord. For from the time the church first began, ceremonies have caused much offense in the churches; so, for example, the dispute about the Easter festival caused such a commotion that few churches were in agreement with one another about the matter."

pastors to reach such uniformity,¹¹ in later years the prince, as *summus episcopus*, laid hold of the *jus liturgicum*.¹²

Interestingly, Luther ends this order of service with an “expiration date:” this order he intended to be used only as long as it was serviceable for the promotion of faith and love. As soon as it failed to do so, it is “dead and gone” (90). Then a new order would have to be devised in a churchly fashion.

From experience Luther knew that simply attending church often remains a superficial matter. Unlike Zwingli and later Pietists, this experience did not lead Luther to declare the whole outward ceremonies of the church useless. Instead, he called for a German catechism that was to help drive home the proclamation that took place in the public services of the church. This catechism he, based on the classic catechetical texts of the church, structures according to faith and love. Catechetical preaching and hearing delivers and receives God’s word under the heads of faith and love. Faith is subdivided in law and gospel: we believe us to be sinners and we believe Christ to be our Savior from sin based on God’s word, law and gospel. Love is subdivided in actively serving the neighbor according to God’s holy will and passively enduring hardships sent by God’s fatherly will (64-67).¹³

6. A final aspect of Luther’s teachings on liturgical uniformity and diversity in the context of faith and love needs to be mentioned. In his 1525 letter to the Livonians, Luther briefly commented on the ancient practice of councils deciding liturgical matters regionally or even for all Christendom. The problem was that “these rulings and canons became snares for the soul and pitfalls for the faith” (AE 53:46, cf. 49:90). As seen above, this danger is, due to the spiritual constitution even of the Christian, a constant one and cannot ultimately be eliminated in this life. God’s grace is always needed for even the correct teaching to be understood properly. And,

¹¹ Not without good reason does Luther, in his letter to the Livonians, appeal to pastors to devise a joint liturgy. Since liturgies are proclamation of God’s word in law and gospel, the incumbents of the public ministry are the *iure-divino* men to write public evangelical liturgies, cf. AC XXVIII, 53-56 and H. Lieberg, *Amt und Ordination bei Luther und Melanchthon* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962), 294f., esp. n. 127.

¹² Cf. O. K. Olson, *Matthias Flacius and the Survival of the Lutheran Reformation* (Wolfenbüttel: Herzog August Bibliothek; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2002), 156-160, 313. Viewed from Luther’s perspective, it seems that what was at stake during the Adiaphoristic Controversy was not so much whether princes could regulate the church’s worship, but whether they could do so magisterially or only ministerially, under God’s word taught by faithful pastors. It was by no means only Melanchthon who taught the prince’s *custodia utriusque tabulae*. Luther did that too. Yet Luther added that the prince was to exercise this duty according to God’s word, not human reason, lest his *custodia* become self-contradictory and he an agent of the devil (cf., e.g., AE 13:194-197, also LC I, 141f., 150, 167f.; Peters, 1:24-29, 188, 198f. shows that Luther held this view from early on). The controversy, framed in Luther’s terms, was thus one, not on how the state was to relate to the church, but on how, more broadly, human reason related to God’s word. – As seen above, Luther by no means regarded ceremonies as merely external matters that could be instrumentalized to maintain outward peace in the world. Melanchthon’s humanism, on the other hand, seems to have moved him on occasion to value outward peace higher than theological and liturgical integrity. As will be seen below, the confessional writings of Master Philip do emphasize outward peace and order as a benefit of ceremonial uniformity; but they also clearly teach that ceremonies teach the faith and therefore cannot be subjected to political strategizing. Not surprisingly, these writings assign the duty to make evangelical ceremonies to the bishops / pastors.

¹³ Cf. Peters, 1:33-38, where he discusses various reasons why Luther, despite this proposal, did not structure his catechisms according to “faith and love.”

indeed, Luther's advice to the Livonian pastors practically amounted to a conciliar or synodical way of establishing liturgical uniformity and order in one area.

He took these thoughts up again in 1539, in his writing *On Councils and the Church*. After enumerating the chief duties of a council, namely, the defense of the old, biblical faith and love in changing times, Luther also wrote (AE 41:131):

Tenth, a council has the power to institute some ceremonies, provided, first, that they do not strengthen the bishops' tyranny; second, that they are useful and profitable to the people and show fine, orderly discipline and conduct. Thus it is necessary, for example, to have certain days, and also places where one can assemble; also certain hours for preaching and for the public administration of the sacraments, for praying, singing, praising and thanking God, etc. – as St. Paul says, I Corinthians 14 [:40], "All things should be done decently and in order." Such items do not serve the bishops' tyranny, but only the people's need, profit, and order. In summary, these must and cannot be dispensed with if the church is to survive.

While this duty is thus not among the first duties of a true council, Luther still considered it to be essential for the very survival of the church. In light of what has been seen above, this is certainly no overstatement or surprise. And while the Reformer of course allowed for Christian freedom here (human regulations cannot be made binding on conscience), he also stated that a Christian would freely observe these godly ceremonies: Though not bound by any law, "he would want to do and would prefer to do more than such a law demands."¹⁴ A non-Christian, on the other hand, according to Luther, is the person "who haughtily, proudly, and wilfully [sic] despises it." His advice for dealing with such a faithless and thus loveless individual is to "let him go his way, for such a person will also despise a higher law, be it divine or human." Liturgical "laws," freely devised by the church, are thus training grounds to break sinful man's quest for autonomy and school the Christian in humble obedience in life toward man and God. This too resonates well with everything Luther wrote on ceremonies some 19 years earlier in his *On the Freedom of a Christian*.

Who should attend such a council, and how should it function concretely? Luther hints at it when he rhetorically asks (AE 41:132): "How could one assemble a council if there were no pastors or bishops?" As Luther sees it, councils are emergency courts applying the law of Holy Scripture to the church (133). They spring into action only when local orthodox pastors and theological teachers, who are the regular judges in their congregations, are overwhelmed by a heresy (ibid.). This is why Luther, in seeming contradiction to what has been said above, also says that "[c]eremonies ought to be completely disregarded by the councils and should be left at home in the parishes, indeed, in the schools so that the schoolmaster, along with the pastor, would be 'master of ceremonies'" (136f.). It is the pastors and teachers, "the lowly but daily, permanent, eternal judges" (134), who deal with the young sinners who, like young trees, are still malleable, while the council, "being a great judge," deals only with the old and hardened sinners (134f.). In

¹⁴ Cf. also the remarks in Luther's famous 1544 sermon preached during the dedication of the Castle Church at Torgau where he comments in a similar context (AE 51:339): "we are always obliged in our whole Christian life to use our liberty in these external things in love and for the service of our neighbor." Such matters should be handled "in harmony and conformity with others."

light of the above, this should not be used as an argument for liturgical parochialism but as an argument for liturgical reform and renewal from below, from the individual parishes up, as Luther's liturgical reform in the early 16th century clearly illustrates: it was started locally but not without loving concern for the church at large.

Luther's teaching on the liturgical duties of pastors and councils thus provides a more detailed version of what Luther hinted at in the *Smalcald Articles* some time earlier. Luther writes there about evangelical church government (II, IV, 9): "The church cannot be better ruled and preserved than if we all live under one head, Christ, and all the bishops – equal according to the office (though they may be unequal in their gifts) – keep diligently together in unity of teaching, faith, sacraments, prayers, and works of love, etc." The church is thus preserved in truth and unity not only by agreement in the faith, but also by agreement in "prayers and works of love."¹⁵

Confessional Verification

1. Luther's *Smalcald Articles* are a good transition into this next section. As is to be expected, the 16th-century Confessions of the Church not written by Luther faithfully follow his biblical lead also when it came to liturgical uniformity and diversity. They too teach faith in the promise as the highest worship (AC XXI, 3). They too reject the notion that performing ceremonies is a meritorious work (AC XXVIII, 50-52). They too value ceremonies according to their usefulness for teaching the faith and maintaining outward discipline and order, even concord (AC XXIV, 2-3; Ap XV, 20. 51). They too maintain that ceremonial uniformity is not necessary for church fellowship (AC VII, 2-3). Yet they too, as emphatically as Luther, assert that unnecessary diversity and change – and that is, change that is not warranted for the sound theological reasons enunciated by Luther – should be avoided as confusing "the inexperienced" (Ap XV, 51-52). It should be noted that the formula "faith and love" is not applied to the liturgical question in this body of writings.

2. Article X of the *Formula of Concord* deserves special attention since it is time and again adduced to justify liturgical diversity in the church. First of all, the self-understanding of this confession needs to be kept in mind. Its authors did not wish to teach anything that had not been taught in the *Augsburg Confession* which they understood to be a summary of Luther's biblical teachings (SD Pref. 4-5; RN 5). This is important. Sentences in the Confessions thus are not suspended in empty space; they have a context that goes even beyond the writings included in the 1580 *Christian Book of Concord*. The Confessions thus contextualize themselves; we need not do that for them. Considering Luther's and Melancthon's teachings on liturgical matters in the context of the distinction between faith and love, freedom and service, this means concretely that it would be surprising to find advocacy for liturgical congregationalism in the *Formula of Concord*.

In order to understand FC X properly, the question of what kind of "ceremonies" are in view has to be answered correctly. As SD X, 1 states, this article is about such as "are neither commanded nor forbidden in God's Word but have been introduced into the church with good intentions for

¹⁵ Cf. Luther's comments in *On Councils and the Church* (AE 41:164) regarding public prayer and praise as one of the seven marks of the holy church which sets it apart from other assemblies because by means of this mark too the Spirit works true holiness among his people.

the sake of good order and decorum or to maintain Christian discipline.”¹⁶ For good historical reasons (the Interim and the Adiaphoristic Controversy it sparked), “forbidden” is defined more carefully in these important respects (X, 5; cf. X, 16):

... 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 ...

Appearances do matter, and ceremonies are important ecclesial and confessional markers,¹⁷ not because they are necessary for church fellowship (they are not), but because they, as Luther taught some 50 years prior to the *Formula of Concord*, so well express the unanimity of faith among Christians. In other words, where there are differences in the faith, these ought to, and will, express themselves liturgically. This should caution against a practice that, based on human reasons, liturgically borrows from church bodies that are not united with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the confession of the gospel in all its articles (X, 31).

First now follows paragraph nine where it is indeed rightly affirmed that

the community of God in every time and every 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.

Every congregation of God has this liberty because all Christians by faith in Christ are free. So far, so good. And normally quotations stop here. Yet, in light of Luther’s exegetical foundations for liturgical love, the following sentence needs to be included:

Paul teaches how one may yield and make concessions to the weak in the faith in such external matters of indifference with good conscience (Rom. 14[:1-23]), and he demonstrates this with his own example (Acts 16[:3] and 21[:26]; 1 Cor. 9[:10]).

If these biblical references mean anything, then they serve to give the entire paragraph a decidedly “conservative” slant. As seen in Luther, the “weak” are the ones clinging to rites that might seem outmoded to the strong in the faith. Here the strong are thus called to forego their freedom without harm to their conscience and yield to the weak in love. But also the first part of

¹⁶ According to Luther’s reconstruction of the history of the mass alluded to above, adiaphora included everything except the words of institution and the distribution of the consecrated elements. Only when we see how vast he considered his freedom to be, can we begin to fathom how great the loving constraint was that he imposed upon himself for his own body’s sake and for the sake of the needy neighbor.

¹⁷ Walther, in his *Pastoral Theology*, designates some ceremonies as “confessional ceremonies,” *Bekennnißceremonien* (*Americanisch-Lutherische Pastoraltheologie*, 3rd ed. (St. Louis, 1885), 56f.).

this paragraph, in light of Luther and the earlier confessions, certainly will not help to support a liturgical “everybody for himself” attitude: offense was given, disorder was created, when congregations and pastors moved unilaterally, without theological consultation, without seeking uniformity with their sister congregations. To be sure, this offense was practically nonexistent where great distances separated the churches, but unilateral change within one “mobility area” certainly would have caused offense because it would have been seen as disruptive of the bond of peace and love, especially if “useful” came to be seen more in the illusionary and convenient sense rejected in paragraph five. Usefulness, again, is to be measured by how well a given “innovation” teaches the unchanging faith and fosters unity and good order in the church; and to be justified, it should achieve the goals mentioned in paragraph nine better than what was there before the change took place. There is thus no reason to doubt that the authors of the *Formula of Concord* had the conciliar-synodical practice of Luther (and Melancthon), or variations thereof, in mind, when it came to how liturgies should be changed “in an orderly and appropriate manner.”¹⁸ Certainly, the teaching of 17th-century Lutheranism on how public ceremonies of the church ought to be changed confirms this reading.¹⁹

Some Applications

1. After this historical-systematic part, some present-day applications are in order. Decisions concerning worship practices are, in the LCMS, made by the synodical convention. This is good Lutheran practice. Reviewing the last synodical resolutions concerning worship in light of Luther and the Confessions yields interesting results. We take a look at the last three, the 1998, 2001, and 2004 Conventions. Resolution 2-10 (1998)²⁰ starts with an impressive preamble that in a few paragraphs comes close to summarizing what we have unfolded here in greater detail. Law and gospel are clearly distinguished. The traditional Lutheran appreciation for useful historic church rites is made explicit, while ceremonial uniformity is correctly rejected as a precondition for church fellowship; loving concern for the weak in the faith is addressed as well as the distinguishing character and the “unifying force” of commonly used church rites among those who confess the same things, especially in light of significantly increased mobility of church members.

Articles VI and III of the LCMS Constitution are referenced as being reflective of “the balanced approach of our confessional understanding.” They, on the one hand stipulate as a condition for congregational membership the “exclusive use” of doctrinally pure hymnbooks and agendas. On

¹⁸ The study of 16th-century church orders by M. Harrison, “Liturgical Uniformity and Church Polity in the Augsburg Confession and the Formula of Concord: the Church Orders as Hermeneutical Key,” *Lutheran Theological Journal* 76, 2 (2000): 71-83 (online at http://cyberbrethren.typepad.com/cyberbrethren/files/liturgical_uniformity.pdf, accessed October 11, 2006), confirms this nicely, even if Harrison’s assertion that “Gemeine” in SD X, 9 means “territorial church” remains unconvincing to me. In my mind, SD X, 9 speaks about what is *iure divino*, not what is *iure humano* (church orders); this agrees with Harrison’s correct exegesis of AC XXVIII, 53-55 where bishops and parish pastors are mentioned as having the power to alter church ceremonies; as stated above, this power seems to be an outgrowth of their power to proclaim God’s word publicly. Church orders, as concrete forms of Christian love, then set limits (*iure humano*) for individual pastoral discretion, as Harrison rightly points out.

¹⁹ Cf. F. Kalb, *Theology of Worship in 17th-Century Lutheranism*, tr. H. P. A. Hamann (St. Louis: CPH, 1965), 112-116.

²⁰ See <https://www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/2004%20Convention/1998conventionproceedings.pdf> (accessed October 10, 2006).

the other hand, they encourage congregations to “develop an appreciation of a variety of responsible practices and customs which are in harmony with our common profession of faith,” while at the same time striving for “uniformity” in ceremonies.

It seems that here two contrary movements are brought into one sentence: one movement is centripetal (uniformity); the other is centrifugal (variety). Both goals, it appears, may best be accomplished in practical terms by having some congregations explore the variety-side of the equation, while others focus more on striving for uniformity. It is difficult to see how this squares with Luther’s and the Confessions’ (and the early Missourians’) constant urging of uniformity; they did not feel the need to encourage diversity because that was what they encountered as given, what they strove to push back.²¹

There are numerous “Resolved” items developed out of this preamble, many of them are good and fair. Yet it is perhaps telling that the one Resolved referencing the abovementioned conditions for membership omits the word “exclusive,” so that it now can be read to mean simply that member congregation use (among other materials) also doctrinally pure hymnals etc. This is, so to speak, liturgical and doctrinal synergism: the one is done but the other is not necessarily left undone. Without this *particula exclusiva*, however, the sentence is basically meaningless, just as a doctrine of justification without the pertinent *particulae exclusivae* would be meaningless.

This then sets the stage for the Resolved in which the Commission on Worship is charged to prepare a guide which now gives every congregation permission to evaluate hymns etc. from non-LCMS sources (an earlier Resolved the same commission had been charged to assemble people to work toward consensus). This makes the condition for membership concerning the *exclusive* use of doctrinally pure hymnbooks and agenda fully obsolete; now everybody is their own doctrinal supervisor and can pick and choose from whatever source seems good to them. Congregations now merely need a “goal of using doctrinally pure worship materials” – and while sound “worship *materials*” simply are not the same as sound “hymnbooks,”²² goals more often

²¹ The 1854 Constitution of Synod reads in Ch. IV (“Business of Synod”), A. 5: “Striving for the greatest possible uniformity in ceremonies” (cf. *Moving Frontiers: Readings in the History of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod*, ed. C. S. Meyer (St. Louis: CPH, 1964), 151). Interestingly, here the responsibility for said uniformity rests with the Synod at large. When “striving for greatest possible uniformity” is delegated to the individual congregations by the current Constitution (Art. III, 7), albeit with the encouragement of Synod, then this signals a change in the understanding of what Synod is all about and how congregations relate to it. This change seems to move toward congregationalization. A more elaborate statement of “old Missouri’s” appreciation for ceremonial uniformity is found in Th. Engelder et al., *Popular Symbolics: The Doctrines of the Churches of Christendom and of Other Religious Bodies Examined in the Light of Scripture* (St. Louis: CPH, 1934), 20f.

²² To understand the difference between pure *books* and disjointed pure *materials*, cf. Walther, 57 (my own translation): “The preacher, who nonchalantly looks on and lets his congregation sing out of hymnals and lets its children be taught out of schoolbooks which contain the soul poison of false doctrine, undoubtedly is, not one who cares for souls, but one who kills them.” In other words, if a book contains false doctrine it is impure and must not be used, even though it might not be false through and through. Pure doctrine is a body of teaching subdivided by its individual *articuli*, joints; one error affects the whole *corpus doctrinae*. Walther’s is thus a corporate, “canonical” approach: pure books are accepted; impure books are rejected. He believed, e.g., that the bible is God’s word. The modern approach is a more atomistic, “literary-critical” one: all human writings contain good and bad; we only use the good. Modernists believe, at best, that the bible contains God’s word and that ultimately everybody should decide for themselves which is which. Those who want to be Waltherians when it comes to the bible and doctrine, but Modernists when it comes to materials for worship or bible study, are at least inconsistent. – It is perhaps telling

than not are missed. Walking together in faith and love is not necessary anymore. The centrifugal forces have won out despite the good preamble. Adding a fine Luther-quote concerning giving up one's own opinions as the last Resolve then appears to be no more than window dressing.

2. Moving on to 2001, Resolution 2-05A,²³ one sees in the title of the resolution, "To Continue to Foster Discussion on Worship" that the expectations are lower than in 1998 when the goal was still "To Build Consensus on Worship." Yet as we said, goals more often than not are not reached. If we cannot reach a consensus, then we can at least continue to foster talking about worship. Accordingly, the preamble, while noting a clear "desire to work toward a consensus," still acknowledges a *dissensus* "on a number of crucial issues." It summarizes the good preamble of the 1998 resolution by stating that, while the Confessions reject "rigid uniformity in all rites and ceremonies," they do teach that "rites and ceremonies" are useful. Whether these need to be uniform or common "rites and ceremonies" this summary does not say.

Interesting is the following sentence: "While unity of faith is not dependent on a uniformity of practice, it is greatly strengthened when there is broad agreement concerning both our theology and practice of worship." It seems that there is a difference between "uniformity of practice" and "broad agreement concerning both our theology and practice of worship," especially when the latter is made a matter of indifference for the unity of faith (it merely strengthens it). The Livonian pastors rebuked by Luther might have had a "broad agreement" concerning their worship life, but people were still angered and confused by its practical diversity. In keeping with the preamble, one of the Resolved now charges various officers and synodical institutions with "building greater understanding of our theology of worship and fostering further discussion of worship practices that are consistent with this theology."

Here is the move from uniformity to theological consistence where the only stipulation reminiscent of love's call to uniformity is that individual parishes do their own liturgical thing circumspectly. Now a great number of diverse "worship practices" employed by "groups with diverse viewpoints" is possible, even desirable, so long as they are consistent with Lutheran theology. Now there is no "striving for uniformity" anymore. It seems the authors of this resolution finally realized that Art. III of the LCMS Constitution is trying to put a square peg through a round hole. Obviously, no one denies that there is more than one theologically sound Lutheran liturgy; just as there is more than one way of explaining the chief parts of the catechism. Yet what is actually the theological rationale for throwing overboard the historic Lutheran, and historic LCMS, insistence on love's concrete form, liturgical uniformity? Is it the churchly thing to do to give "diverse" congregations simply the tools – united by the trademarked logo of a human organization – to develop for themselves the "worship practices" that work for them? Is loving concern for the spiritual well-being of the brother and sister replaced by an affirmation of the individual's autonomy and responsibility?

that Marcion was among the first practitioners of this "modern" literary criticism when he "edited" the Gospel of Luke to suit his needs (cf. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* III, 14:4).

²³ See <https://www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/2004%20Convention/2001convproceedings.pdf> (accessed October 10, 2006).

3. Finally, on to the last act, the 2004 Resolution 2-04.²⁴ Its title is already telling, “To Affirm Responsible Use of Freedom in Worship.” It seems that we have arrived at a “consensus” or at least a “broad agreement” concerning worship practices. And that agreement is to use freedom in worship, but to use it responsibly. Here again the seat of responsibility is not the church collectively and jointly but the individual congregation. Not surprisingly, only Art. III of the Constitution is referenced, in the interpretation of which the centrifugal forces have already won the day. Art. VI is left out completely. It is also not surprising when, at the 2004 Convention (Res. 2-03A), the *Lutheran Service Book*, Synod’s new official hymnal, is now called “an official service book and hymnal of Synod,” implying that there will be other “official” worship materials put out by the church. The “responsible use of freedom in worship” obviously does not mean to be content with the liturgical diversity incorporated in the new hymnal which offers almost 150 pages of diverse orders of service.

Acknowledging therefore “diverse viewpoints in our Synod concerning what is appropriate and salutary in corporate worship,” the first Resolved reads, in part: “to affirm respect for diversity in worship practices as we build greater understanding of our theology of worship and foster further discussion of worship practices that are consistent with that theology.” This sounds like a truce between the poles of “traditional” and “contemporary” worship forms; but perhaps Synod is merely looking for some more time to formulate a theology of worship that is broad enough to reconcile its diverse worship practices. For in the last Resolved, the Commission on Worship is charged to “initiate a process leading toward the development of diverse worship resources for use in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.”

This process has been started in February 2006, when a committee nominated by the Commission on Worship was formed, which will develop these “diverse worship resources.” According to a March 2006 *Reporter* article, the committee, according to one member, is “leaning toward providing some kind of annotated, doctrinally sound resource list – Web-based, rather than hard-copy. We’re exploring elements including hymns and songs, visual and sound enhancements like projectors and electronic devices, drama, dance – you name it.”²⁵

Conclusion

“You name it,” has thus been the last word of Synod so far on the question of freedom and love in matters liturgical. “You are not free to use this liberty” was Luther’s stern admonition to the creative Livonian pastors who threatened the survival of the congregations in their area. One year later he added: “freedom shall be and remain a servant of love.” Luther was certainly a champion for the freedom of the gospel, but at the same time he denied the “logical” confusion of faith and love. Christian freedom is exercised *coram deo*, not *coram hominibus*. Ceremonies fall into the general rubric of love and law; and as every “law” they also have a coercive character in relation to the sinful, youthful self of the old Adam. Here we see that Luther had a keen understanding of the power of sin even in the Christian; this power needed to be tied down by all the means God had put at the church’s disposal, if something good was to come about. Luther was thus not a liturgical antinomian, one who, in other words, teaches that because the law and ceremonies are not necessary for salvation they need not be of great concern to the

²⁴ See <https://www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/2004%20Convention/DCS.pdf> (accessed October 10, 2006).

²⁵ Available at <https://www.lcms.org/pages/internal.asp?NavID=9771> (accessed October 10, 2006).

Christian. Luther also had a keen understanding of the tender bond of love between Christians within a congregation and between congregations. This again led him to teach in a painfully specific way that our love for the fellow believer also consists in following a common form of liturgy that, to be sure, will change from time to time and from area to area, but that still is to be a means by which Christians render an important service to our neighbor, be he weak or young or new to the faith. In this, he appreciated sturdy liturgical forms as a priceless school for selfless service in one's daily vocations and, besides being confessional markers, as a bulwark against the tricks of the devil.

Clearly, Luther's was a collective understanding of the church: not everybody under some organizational umbrella doing their own thing (and then also being responsible for it before God and man), but doctrinally united churches jointly moving along in love. This he saw as humble pastoral service and stewardship, quite the opposite of individual pastors or "worship committees" lording it over Christ's free bride, one congregation at a time. While this understanding doubtlessly characterizes the Confessions and the early Missouri Synod, this cannot be said anymore of the present-day LCMS. "Freedom" now is more and more, not our freedom *coram deo*, but our freedom *coram hominibus*, that is, our ability and liberty to do things as they suit us best, with little or no concern for the neighbor who might be offended by our exercise of liberty or who might at least not be truly served thereby. Faith and love are thus confused. Correspondingly, the concern regarding opening the gates for false, faith-destroying doctrine by encouraging liturgical diversity is paling as well as any understanding of ceremonies as common public confessions of the faith. In other words, it seems that a political understanding of liberty unchecked by love has found its way into God's church and is dominating the discussions in which countless "leaders" or groups wrangle for their "rights and privileges." Given these circumstances, unity will have to be expressed more and more by the versatile tools corporate marketing offers, not by churchly means such as a uniform liturgy.

Liturgies borne out of this spirit are not true liturgies at all anymore, even if some of the old words and forms are embedded in them. Lacking uniformity as an essential feature, they are in principle inconsistent with the theology of worship taught by Luther and the Confessions of the Christian Church. Far from being places of Christ-like self-denial, submission, and service, they have become vehicles of self-affirmation. Ceremonies and the law are being abused by sinful man once again. We experience here the truth that only God's grace keeps his church with Jesus Christ in the true understanding of his word and worship. For this grace we pray also in this generation.

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