

Liturgy, Neither Alone Nor Neutral

By: Rev. Dr. Matthew Richard

“The liturgy, as a true service, is that which aids both the proclamation of and the hearing of the Gospel for the sake of faith, this is true worship.”[1] The liturgy of the Church builds a framework for the worshiper to live the life of faith. The liturgy of the church, as found in the Lutheran Service Book, teaches the full counsel of God because it is based on God’s very Word given in the Scriptures and confessed in the Lutheran Confessions. Vilmos Vajita speaks about liturgy the following way,

Rites and ceremonies indeed form a training school of faith. To this extent, the pedagogical view is true to Luther. While ceremonies cannot create the faith, they can point to it. They are the scaffolding needed for building the church, but must not be confused with the church itself. They can serve to bring the immature (the young and simple folk) in the orbit of the Word and Sacrament where faith is born. As long as man is ‘external,’ such outward orders will be needed for the sake of love, for love and order belong together.[2]

Keep in mind that the liturgy does not simply respond to every blowing wind of culture. Rather, in the formation of the liturgy great care has been taken in choosing its forms, rites, and ceremonies knowing that they either support or hinder true worship.[3]

All of this said, I have found that a common misconception among many American Evangelicals is that practice is

often viewed as neutral, thus it is deemed acceptable to separate doctrine and practice. Otherwise stated, I used to hold that the message needed to stay constant while the method (i.e., liturgy) could be flexible. Methods don’t matter and can change if they are neutral, right? This justification of seeing church practices as being neutral is what leads to the division between doctrine and practice. The division then allows for the de-emphasis of the practice of the liturgy. However, Klemet Preus in his book, *The Fire and the Staff*, states,

Doctrine and practice are more closely related, even interdependent, than is often realized. Doctrine affects practice and practice affects doctrine. The two are so intimately woven together that when you change one, you will inevitably change the other, sometimes without realizing what has happened.[4]

Doctrine is not only a source of knowledge to a person, but practice is also a source of knowledge as well. In fact, they are connected. Furthermore, practice is not neutral, it contains theological presuppositions. While embracing different methodologies, for pragmatic reasons, a church can actually allow the theology of heterodox practices to bleed false truths back into the church’s core theology. Otherwise stated, if practices are altered, inevitably the doctrine will be changed. Conversely, if doctrine is altered, practice will also be affected. This is the

need for preserving sound practice, as well as sound theology.

What of the times when practice is not changed but instead the liturgy and theology are kept separated (e.g., when doctrinal indifference or doctrinal apathy hollow out the liturgy making the divine service vacuous)? Detrimental results will again follow. Regin Prenter comments on this detrimental effect saying,

If liturgy is separated from theology, i.e., if it is no longer in its essence 'theology' or true witness to the revelation of God, it then becomes an end in itself, a 'good work,' performed with the intention of pleasing God. . . . If, on the other hand, theology is separated from liturgy, i.e., if it is no longer seen as a part of the liturgy of the Church, part of the living sacrifice of our bodies in the service of God and our fellow men, it too, becomes an end in itself, a human wisdom competing with and sometimes even rejecting the revelation of God. . . . These two dangers arising out of the neglect of the essential unity of liturgy and theology are, I think, imminent in our present situation in the Lutheran Church.[5]

The understanding that practice is, in fact, not neutral but rather intertwined with doctrine, is foundational to the preservation of right teaching in our churches. Thus, the need is obvious for preserving sound practice of liturgy, neither separating nor believing the liturgy is neutral. This need is met through liturgical catechesis, as well as

through the repetitive, common, and routine use of the Lutheran Service Book.

May the faithful and merciful God fill our hearts with an orthodox practice of liturgy that aids both the proclamation and the hearing of the Gospel for the sake of faith.

[1] Montana District Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, "Theses on Worship," <http://www.mtdistlcms.org/president/papers/> (15 June 2013)

[2] Vilmos Vajta, *Luther on Worship: An Interpretation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004), 175.

[3] AC XXIV, 3 and AP XV, 20.

[4] Klemet Preus. *The Fire and the Staff: Lutheran Theology In Practice* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2004), 14.

[5] Regin Prenter, "Liturgy and Theology," in *Liturgy, Theology, and Music in the Lutheran Church*, edited by Mandus A. Egge (Minneapolis, MN: International Choral Union, 1959), 141.