

Embodied Lutheran Theology through Lutheran Worship Practices

Response to Charles P. Arand's
Toward a Theology of Worship: Practical and Theological
Model Theological Conference
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Theology is always embodied. It is not abstract. It is concrete. It is fleshly. Theology is done through the pastoral acts of preaching and reading Scripture, baptizing, celebrating the Lord's Supper. Some might call these "worship practices." These "worship practices" are where Christ has bound himself to be present for us bodily, for our salvation. This is where the salvation story is told, the biblical story, our story, the story of the world. This is where heaven meets earth, where angels and archangels and all the company of heaven join us in communion with the Creator and Redeemer of the universe. This is a cosmic reality, an apocalyptic one, as Christ invades us through word and water, bread and wine. If theology is about God, there is no greater revelation of who God is and what gifts he gives than when we gather around his presence to commune with his flesh. Theology, therefore, can not be separated from the pastoral acts, from the "worship practices" of preaching and reading Scripture, baptizing, and celebrating the Lord's Supper.

Charles Arand entitled his paper "All Adiaphora are Not Created Equal," for when we speak of worship practices as adiaphora we must be careful what worship practices we mean. Dr. Arand warns us that "we should not conclude too quickly that adiaphora means anything goes as long as it does not contradict our theology . . . for we simply not ask what is permissible, but what should we do, *that is how should we act based on who we are.*"¹ The way we worship in the 21st century is an expression of our identity as Lutherans. Our worship announces that our life is defined by Jesus Christ, our Creator

¹ C. Arand, "All Adiaphora are Not Created Equally," I.

and our Redeemer, that our identity is in conformity to his holy life. We would not be having this conference if there wasn't some sense among us that we have lost our Lutheran identity, our connection to the biblical story as it is embodied in our worship.

Lutheran identity is theological, embodied in the pastoral acts, in “worship practices.” This identity must be for a 21st century world, not for the sixteenth or nineteenth centuries. One of Dr. Arand’s criteria for adiaphora is the Gospel, the source of our Lutheran identity. We might like to think we agree on the Gospel, but do our worship practices confess “the same Christ, the same Holy Spirit, and the same sacraments?”² In our Protestant religious culture, “which Jesus, which story?” do we proclaim in our worship? The story of the Lutheran Confessions of Christ’s bodily presence and our bodily resurrection, or another confession, the confession of our Protestant culture defined by the principle, “the finite is not capable of the infinite?” The disembodied Christ of this confession, this escapist story, as Dr. Gibbs called it yesterday, comes to us not in flesh, but in experience, for Christ is not here but in heaven. Are the worship practices that we want to embrace born from the womb of this Protestant religious culture that surrounds us?

Post-moderns tell us that missional churches embody their theology in authentic ways and are connected to the ancient church. The catholic principle, one of the training wheels on Dr. Arand’s bicycle, shapes our identity in the post-modern world as we show our authenticity as “one, holy, catholic and apostolic” church. This encourages us to embrace our liturgical heritage and proclaim the treasures we inherit in our worship life as Lutheran Christians who continue the catholic tradition. And these treasures are

² Ap VII and Ap VIII 10.

innumerable. Any liturgical scholar could list them for you – the historic five-fold shape of our Divine Service, the two pinnacles of the Divine Service – Jesus’ words in the Gospel and Jesus’ word in the Sacrament, the Biblical Ordinaries that surround Jesus’ words as the major hymns of the liturgy, the centrality of preaching centered in Christ and liturgical in character, our hymnody in both its content and its music, as well as our musical tradition with its deep resources to support the flow of the liturgy from beginning to end. The list could go on. And this is not to mention the most important treasure of all – that within this historic liturgy we believe, teach, and confess that Jesus Christ is present bodily offering the gifts of life, salvation, and the forgiveness of sins as we hear his Word and receive his Holy Meal. In the Divine Service we are confident that we have entered heaven itself because Jesus Christ inhabits our worship with his presence. This is a confident liturgy that is embodied in a life of worship that, as Norman Nagel says in the introduction to *Lutheran Worship*, “receives from those who went before and, in making that tradition of *the Divine Service* its own, adds what best may serve in its own day – **the living heritage and something new.**”³

The question is how do we decide on the “something new?” Here is the contextual or missional training wheel on the bicycle. How do we reach out to post-moderns with a Gospel embodied in a worship that is connected to the church of the ages? How do we embody our Lutheran theology in worship practices that are sensitive to reaching out to the post-modern world? Dr. Arand reminds us that “the Augsburg Confession and Apology dealt with Rome” and the later “Formula of Concord addressed intra-Lutheran theological divisions over and against the inroads made by

³ N. Nagel, from the introduction to *Lutheran Worship* (St. Louis: CPH, 1982) 6.

Calvinism” whereas “in our American context, we are dealing with all of contexts at any given time.”⁴ Is there, however, one context more dominant than another? Even Rome’s liturgical life has succumbed to our Protestant religious culture.

Most people today agree that we are not suggesting that the Lutheran liturgy, the Divine Service, Word and Sacrament, the means of grace, are adiaphora? This has never been my experience in talking about Lutheran worship in the church for almost 25 years. So what do the Lutheran Confessions mean by adiaphora? Luther hints at what these ceremonies might be in “An Order of Mass and Communion,” what he calls “external additions of vestments, vessels, candles, and palls, of organs and all the music, and of images.”⁵ My former colleague, Dr. Eugene Klug, in his *Getting into the Formula of Concord* suggests what these ceremonies and church rites might be when he describes the requirements placed upon Lutherans during the Leipzig Interim: “It included recognition of papal authority and Romish ceremonies, for example, in connection with Baptism (sprinkling with salt and exorcism), confirmation by bishops, extreme unction, Corpus Christi processions, and fasting rules.”⁶

Are these what we think of today we when say “adiaphora?” Maybe for some, but, in my experience, they are few. As we look at the liturgical landscape of our church in this Protestant culture, are we not more likely to see as “adiaphora” hymn texts and music, musical and liturgical styles that reflect the Protestant religious culture? What we should be asking today is this: what ceremonies best embody our Lutheran identity that is missional for post-moderns and authentically catholic? Or better said,

⁴ C. Arand, “All Adiaphora are Not Created Equally,” 15.

⁵Luther, Vol. 53, p. 22. It is fair to say, from the tone of the rest of his treatise, that *not considered ceremonies and church rites* are the ordinaries, Introits, collects, Graduals

⁶E. Klug, *Getting into the Formula of Concord* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1977) 62.

how best do we embody Christ in our worship practices of preaching and reading Scripture, baptizing, celebrating the Lord's Supper for a lost and dying world?

Dr. Arand suggests that we do it together, collegially, to confess the faith together. I couldn't agree more. That's the reason for this conference. Such collegial "collaboration, conversation, and accountability"⁷ should begin with the Gospel, particularly our confession of Christ's bodily presence in our "worship practices." The ramifications of the presence of Christ in our worship are mind-boggling. With the modern mindset of the past fifty years, perhaps we as Lutherans have not recognized the very treasure of Christ's bodily presence as we gather to hear his Word and receive his Supper. As modernists, we were caught up in the culture's inability to grasp the mystery of the Creator of the cosmos deigning to humble himself under the means of simple words, simple water, simple bread and wine. With our scientific worldview we lost sight of the miracles that the liturgy proclaims – that with "angels and archangels and all the company of heaven" we here on earth join the worship of heaven in the person of Jesus. This was just too incredible for modern men and women to believe. We thought we wanted more, and catechized by a secular culture bent on entertaining itself to death and a religious culture that exalted experience and feelings, we succumbed. Not recognizing that we already possessed the greatest possible treasure, we settled for something much less, when, in our living Lutheran liturgical heritage, we were being offered heaven itself. Perhaps the "something new" we have to offer the world is something we have had all along.

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⁷ C. Arand, "All Adiphora are Not Created Equally," 14.