

Model Theological Conference on Worship

Paul Grime — Response to Mason Beecroft

12 January 2010

Pastor Beecroft, thank you for the whirlwind tour of matters that mean a great deal to you and to all of us. Since I can't begin to address all of the points that you've raised, I'm going to focus on just one topic: the matter of reverence.

During one of the table talks yesterday, the good folks at Table 8 where I am seated began an initial conversation on this subject. It actually came up when Martha asked if we had noticed all of the noisy conversation that had ensued during the prelude before the opening service in the sanctuary. (I must confess that I was one of the talkers as I caught up with someone whom I hadn't seen in over a year.) Recognizing that that service was at the beginning of a special event where lots of folks are getting reacquainted, we proceeded to talk briefly about how our congregations addressed the issue of reverence. In certain contexts, such gregarious discourse would be offensive to some, a hindrance to their preparation for worship. In other contexts, *not* acknowledging one other prior to worship might be considered nearly as offensive. How can we not acknowledge fellow members of the body of Christ, especially since we are about to join together to receive his gifts and to return our thanks and praise for his mercy and grace?

One of the points of contention in the worship debate is certainly over the matter of reverence. So, for example:

- Does it matter how we fold our hands, or need we fold them at all?
- Must we dress in our Sunday finest, or will any clothes do?
- Must the pastor vest? What about the choir? And how revealing dare the liturgical dancers' attire be?
- Are children's sermons acceptable? Puppets? Clowns?

- Ought we genuflect?
- Is it okay to show video clips?
- Dare we smile ... or even laugh?

You understand the problem: what's considered reverent by one person may be viewed as irreverent by the next. And what's reverent to that person may be viewed as snobbery by the other. The spectrum is wide and seems to become more so all the time.

So who decides? That really is at the heart of our dilemma. Is there a one-size-fits-all answer that should be applied across the board? And who would make that decision? The pastor? The district president on behalf of all the congregations in the district? The synodical president speaking for the whole Synod? Do you think that would settle the matter?

Who decides? That question gets asked on a host of levels. What style of music is acceptable in worship? If we show video clips, what limits will we set? PG? PG-13? R-rated movies? Who decides?

Under the rubric of "misery loves company," I have some good news for you. We're not the only church body wrestling with this debate. While the parameters are slightly different from one denomination to the next, the truth is that this dispute is experienced in a host of non-Lutheran churches in our country. Baptist, Methodist, Episcopalian, Roman Catholic—they're all to some degree experiencing these tensions.

But our company of misery is even extends beyond this. We have the church from ages past from whom we can learn. The time was the mid 1520s in Livonia, which is part of present-day Latvia. The Reformation had reached this area fairly quickly and, like in other areas, questions arose as to how best to put the Reformation teaching into practice. A newcomer to the city, Melchior Hoffmann, claimed direct revelation from God and gathered supporters who demanded radical changes in worship. Hoffmann was ordered by the city authorities to seek letters of recommendation before causing anymore unrest. He appealed directly to Luther, who

in response sent an open letter to Livonia. Interestingly, Luther never he mentions Hoffmann by name; so much for a letter of recommendation.

What's interesting about Luther's response, which you can find in Vol. 53 of the American Edition of *Luther's Works*, is how he applies the principles from an earlier writing, his 1520 *The Freedom of the Christian* to the issue of worship. Listen to a few passages from Luther:

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. And I almost believe this; for we must remember that it will not be any better with us than it was with the Corinthians and other Christians at the time of St. Paul, when divisions and dissension arose among Christ's people.¹

Luther certainly gets that one right. We really shouldn't be surprised that Satan uses an issue like this to divide us. Of course, that's not an excuse for perpetuating the disagreement. But as the church has been called to do in years past, we can address this issue with confidence that the Lord of the church will sustain his flock by the power of his mighty Word, establishing peace and unity where Satan would sow discord and strife. Back to Luther:

Therefore, we will deal with factions in our time as St. Paul dealt with them in his. He could not check them by force. Nor did he want to compel them by means of commands. Rather, he entreated them with friendly exhortations, for people who will not give in willingly when exhorted will comply far less when commanded. Thus he says in Philippians 2 [:1–4]: “So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing through strife or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” Then he adds the example of Christ, who in obedience to the Father made himself the servant of all.²

Count others better than ourselves? That's a hard one, and certainly not the way of the world.

Luther continues with further advice on how to treat one another:

¹AE 53:45.

²AE 53:46.

In praise and thanksgiving for all these gifts, let them so conduct themselves that they establish and preserve unity of mind and spirit among themselves. They should be on their guard lest the devil sneak in through vainglory, which is especially dangerous and chiefly attack competent men who hold the office of the Word. There is no better way to do this than for each not to take himself too seriously and to think little of himself, but very highly of the others, or—as Christ teaches in the Gospel—to seat himself in the lowest place among the guests at the wedding.³

I could continue quoting, but you can read Luther for yourself.

Returning to my earlier question “who decides?” I think it safe to say that none of us has all the answers to the questions that perplex us. I know, that’s hard for many of us to acknowledge. But the reality is that we are all going to lay the dividing line of what is or is not acceptable (or preferable) in worship in slightly different places. What concerns me are those who are persuaded to lay the line on the edges, suggesting on the one hand that almost anything goes in worship and on the other, that practically nothing should be allowed. Clearly, what is needed is constant conversation on these matters, exploring the issues together and challenging one another. That conversation should occur at many levels: within the congregation between pastor and people, among brother pastors in a variety of formal and informal settings, as well as in more formal settings at the district and synodical level. As Luther advises, in all these matters the principle of love will guide our deliberations. Make no mistake, however, as to the purpose of those deliberations. It is for the sake of the Gospel, that Christ may be preached fully and faithfully and that faith may be engendered and nurtured.

³AE 53:47.