Chapter III

The Lutheran Position on Ceremonial

While radical reformers in the 16th-century Reformation discarded the traditional rites and ceremonies of the church, the Lutheran reformers retained them, except for such changes as the Gospel demanded. The church buildings and ornaments remained as they were and the Mass was retained with the omission of propitiatory features and the addition of the vernacular. Otherwise everything remained practically the same as it was, so that the Lutheran reformers could say that no perceptible changes had been made.

The Lutheran Church's position is that she accepts without reservation 1. the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the written Word of God and the only rule and norm of faith and of practice, and 2. all the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church as a true and unadulterated statement and exposition of the Word of God, to wit, the three ecumenical creeds (the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed), the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Smalcald Articles, the Large Catechism of Luther, the Small Catechism of Luther, and the Formula of Concord. These Confessions of the Lutheran Church, to which every congregation, pastor, teacher, and member is solemnly pledged, are clearly on the side of the traditional rites and ceremonies of the church. While they condemn everything that is contrary to the Holy Scriptures and the use of ceremonies for propitiatory purposes, and while they designate rites and ceremonies as adiaphora, except when involved in
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a state of confession, they retain and uphold the traditional ceremonial of the church as good and useful in the Lutheran Church.

To make the Lutheran position clear, we give the following quotations from the Lutheran Confessions:

Usages not contrary to Holy Scriptures are to be observed: “Of Usages in the Church they (Lutherans) teach that those ought to be observed which may be observed without sin, and which are profitable unto tranquility and good order in the Church.” (Art. XV, Augsburg Confession)

The old ceremonies are not abolished: “For it is a false and malicious charge that all the ceremonies, all the things instituted of old, are abolished in our churches.” (Art. XXI, Augsburg Confession)

The Mass is not abolished: “Falsely are our churches accused of abolishing the Mass; for the Mass is retained among us, and celebrated with highest reverence. Nearly all the usual ceremonies are also preserved.” (Art. XXIV, Augsburg Confession)

Ceremonies of past retained: “Forasmuch, therefore, as the Mass with us has the example of the Church, taken from the Scripture and the Fathers, we are confident that it cannot be disapproved, especially since public ceremonies, for the most part like those hitherto in use, are retained.” (Art. XXIV, Augsburg Confession)

Nothing but Catholic ceremonies admitted: “Only those things have been recounted whereof we thought that it was necessary to speak, in order that it might be understood that in doctrine and ceremonies nothing has been received on our part against Scripture or the Church Catholic.” (Conclusion of the Augsburg Confession)

Goodly ceremonies and church customs maintained: “From this condition of the churches it may be judged that we diligently maintain church discipline and goodly ceremonies and good church-customs.” (Art. XV, Apology of the Augsburg Confession)

The Mass celebrated every Sunday with usual ceremonies: “At the outset we must again make the preliminary statement that we do not abolish the Mass, but religiously maintain and defend it. For among us Masses are celebrated every Lord’s Day and on other festivals in which the Sacrament is offered to those who wish to use it, after they have
been examined and absolved. And the usual public ceremonies are observed, the series of lessons, of prayers, vestments, and other like things.” (Art. XXIV, Apology of the Augsburg Confession)

Ceremonies have vital purposes: “. . . ceremonies ought to be observed both to teach men Scripture, and that those admonished by the Word may conceive faith and fear of God, and obtain comfort, and thus also may pray, for these are the designs of ceremonies.” (Art. XXIV, Apology of the Augsburg Confession)

The above statements are official, they are binding on Lutherans, and they clearly show that the Lutheran Church is a liturgical church which has retained, and is bound to, the traditional rites and ceremonies of the universal church.

It is important to bear in mind that the continuity of the universal church was in no way broken by Lutherans in the Reformation. Not only in doctrine but also in the liturgy, including ceremonial, this continuity was preserved. A study of the Lutheran Confessions, the writings of Dr. Martin Luther, and the liturgies of the 16th-century Lutheran Church make this conclusion clear. It must also be observed that Dr. Luther and the other Lutheran reformers, including the authors of the Lutheran liturgies, were men thoroughly acquainted with the ceremonial in use in the Western church. When they conducted the church’s divine services, they naturally continued the traditional ceremonies to which they were accustomed insofar as they did not conflict with the Holy Scriptures. If we keep these facts in mind, we shall not be surprised that these writings contain very few explicit directions as to how the liturgy is to be performed. It was simply taken for granted that both clergy and laity would know what to do and would continue the practice of the same ceremonial which they had before the Reformation. In other words, when no directions were given, the traditional rites and ceremonies would be continued.

From these facts we can deduce this principle: If no specific rubrical directions are given in the Lutheran liturgical books, then what is missing should be supplied by the usage of the Western church at the time of the 16th-century Reformation. This principle would apply to everything included in the ceremonial of the church, the church building and its ornaments, as well as the manner in which the services are conducted.
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The rubrical directions in the Lutheran service books are not, and never have been, detailed and explicit. They require interpretation and supplementing according to the broad principle stated above. Behind the rubrics that are given is the traditional ceremonial of the Western church of, and prior to, the 16th century. We have to fall back on these ancient customs when the rubrics need interpretation and when no directions are given.

If this principle were carried out today, we would have a distinctly Lutheran ritual and ceremonial. Arthur Carl Piepkorn says, "The sixteenth century saw the beginning of extensive innovations in Roman ritual and ceremonial. In general, these had not reached northern Europe by the time the Reformation began. Consequently they exerted only slight influence on the historic Lutheran rite. Where the historic Lutheran rite has been retained or restored, it generally reveals a purer and older form of the Western rite than the reformed Roman Catholic rite of today exhibits. This is significant. It gives us a denominationally and confessionally distinctive rite to which we have historic title and which we have not lately borrowed from alien sources. It gives us a rite which is an invaluable symbol of the antiquity, historic continuity, and the thorough Catholicity of the Church of the Augsburg Confession. At the same time it gives us a rite which is both older than, and significantly and recongnizably different from, the present Roman Catholic rite." ¹

Adiaphora

In the Lutheran Confessions rites and ceremonies are called adiaphora. But when we use the term adiaphoron, we do not mean something that is indifferent. Today the word "indifferent" may have the meaning of unimportant, not mattering much, and rather bad. Rites and ceremonies, however, are not indifferent matters in the sense of being unimportant or rather bad. They may be very important and matter very much, as was the case in the Adiaphoristic Controversy. At that time the Romanists demanded the restitution of discontinued ceremonies on pain of persecution and violence. This brought up the following issue of the controversy: May Lutherans under such circumstances submit to

the demand of the Romanists without sanctioning the errors of the Roman Church and without giving offense to the enemies and friends of the Lutheran church! ² Here rites and ceremonies were not "indifferent," but very important.

An adiaphoron, therefore, is not a thing that is indifferent. It is only something that is not essential. For many reasons it may be important and very good, but it is not essential.

Adiaphoron is not to be applied to the word liturgy, for, as stated above, liturgy refers to everything belonging to the church's worship, including its essential as well as unessential features. The Eastern church, for example, calls the Holy Communion Service the Divine Liturgy, and the Holy Communion Service is certainly not an adiaphoron. Our fathers who wrote the Book of Concord were very careful not to apply the word adiaphoron to the liturgy but to human rites and ceremonies.

Uniformity

Absolute uniformity in ceremonial is not necessary for the unity of the church. Our Lutheran Confessions clearly state: "To the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is, rites and ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike" (Art. VII, Augsburg Confession). "We believe, teach, and confess also that no church should condemn another because one has less or more external ceremonies not commanded by God than the other, if otherwise there is agreement among them in doctrine and all its articles, as also in the right use of the holy Sacraments, according to the well-known saying: Disagreement in fasting does not destroy agreement in faith." (Art. X, Formula of Concord, Epitome)

It is only proper, however, that all congregations belonging to a church denomination should adhere to the orders of service given in their church's official or authorized and approved service books, such as The Lutheran Hymnal, the Lutheran Service Book and Hymnal, The Lutheran Liturgy, The Lutheran Agenda. Such conformity applies not only to the order for the celebration of the Holy Communion Service, the chief

² See Concordia Triglotta (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), Historical Introduction, pp. 107—112.
service of the church, but also to minor services and occasional offices—
the Preaching Service without Holy Communion, Matins, Vespers, the
Confessional Service, the Service for Opening and Closing Christian
Schools, Holy Baptism, Marriage, the Burial of the Dead, dedications,
ordinations, installations, and all other authorized rites and ceremonies.

While the ceremonies used in carrying out these services may vary
according to the size, ability, and usage of a congregation, it is becoming
that the orders themselves and their recognized varieties should be left
intact. One of the general rubrics in The Lutheran Hymnal, p. 4, states,
"Congregations are urged to let the basic structure of the Service remain
intact. The wide choice permitted in the Rubrics makes it possible to
have the Service as simple or as elaborate as the circumstances of each
congregation may indicate." Such conformity is desirable according to
the law of love and the spirit of loyalty and fellowship. Luther, in his
"Exhortation to the Christians in Livonia Concerning Public Worship
and Unity," said: "Even if the external regulations in the services—
such as masses, singing, reading, baptizing—do not add anything to
salvation, nevertheless, it is unchristian to be disunited over such things
and thereby confuse and unsettle the common people, and not the rather
to consider the edification of the people to be more important than our
own thoughts and opinions. . . . For, as has been said, even if the
external uses and regulations are free and, taking the faith into con-
sideration, may with good conscience be changed at all places, at all
hours, by all persons, still, taking love into consideration, you are not
free to use such liberty, but are in duty bound to consider how matters
may be made bearable and better for the common people, as St. Paul
says, 1 Cor. 14:40, 'Let all things be done orderly and honorably among
you;' and 1 Cor. 6:12, 'I have power over all things, but all things do
not profit;' and 1 Cor. 8:1, 'Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies.'"

Again, in his "German Mass and Order of Service," Luther states:
"It would be well if in every jurisdiction public worship were uniform
and neighboring towns and villages observed the same ceremonies as
the city."  

3 Works of Martin Luther (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman Co., 1931), Vol. VI,
p. 147.
4 Ibid., p. 171.
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The very idea of liturgy excludes individualism and self-will. In private worship every person may follow his individualistic way of worship. But in public or corporate worship this is impossible. There the congregation can only worship in a common and prescribed form. And a group of congregations, a synod, and a larger church body should show its unity of faith by adhering to common rites and ceremonies. If a congregation uses a rite different from the church's service books, it is generally the result of the personal preference of its pastor or some of its members who have imposed this on the people. Fortunately, such stubborn individualism on the part of some pastors and individual laymen is not as common today as it once was.

Orders of service usually admit some variations in the rite itself and a variety of expression in its ceremonies. Such alternate materials and rubrics may be recommended by the church and printed in the service books. But the rite itself, or its recognized varieties, should be adhered to. Private fancy and the desire to be wiser than the church are not becoming. Those who desire changes should seek to obtain them in the regular way through the liturgical commission or board of the church denomination. Luther advised that the same rites and ceremonies should be followed at least on a provincial basis. If that was recognized as desirable in his day, when most people lived and died within a few miles of their birthplaces, how much more important it is in our day of much traveling and changing of residence.

But while we plead for careful adherence to the church's authorized forms and their recognized varieties, we believe that considerable liberty may be permitted in nonliturgical worship, private prayer, and group devotions. In the opening and closing devotions of meetings and Bible classes, song services, and the like, every pastor may be free to exercise his skill in ordering the service. Even if some of the brethren, in their zeal by all means to save some, and their inclination to indulge in free prayers and revival songs, seem to go altogether beyond the bounds of doing everything "decently and in order," we may well trust that Lutheran consciousness will gradually correct such excesses. The important thing is that the principle be observed: individualism, if needed, in the nonliturgical devotions, but uniformity in the liturgy ac-
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cording to the usage of the Lutheran Church as prescribed in her Confessions and in her official service books.

Evangelical Attitude

Our attitude toward human rites and ceremonies is evangelical, not legalistic. Rubrics and directions do not proceed from the Law but from the Gospel. We do not want conformity on the basis of legal compulsion, but on the basis of our new life in Jesus Christ by which we are made free from the curse of the Law and are enabled by the Holy Spirit to live more and more in Christian love and liberty. In this new life we respect everyone's conscience and freedom. We live by the principle that everything which is neither commanded nor forbidden by God is a matter of Christian liberty. And since human rites and ceremonies are neither commanded nor forbidden by God, we do not criticize or condemn one another for using more or fewer of them.

Neither do we feel constrained by any force of resolution, compulsion, or law — except the law of love — to adopt any particular human ceremony for ourselves or to force it on others. To decide by a majority vote that certain human rites and ceremonies may not be done can be just as much a violation of the law of Christian love and liberty as to decide that certain ceremonies must be done, or better be done by everyone who does not want to be criticized. Rather than to make an issue of these things in a congregation by bringing them up for a majority vote, it would seem to be more praiseworthy if pastors and laymen would simply follow the traditional rites and ceremonies which the Lutheran Church retained in the Reformation. In other words, let them follow the Lutheran service books, and when these lack directions, conform to the usage of the Lutheran Church as professed in her Confessions. If, for example, the question comes up as to how often the Holy Communion service is to be celebrated, it is becoming to answer it, not on the basis of a majority vote, but according to the usage of the Lutheran Church as it is clearly stated in Article XXIV both of the Augsburg Confession and the Apology of the Augsburg Confession. In case the Lutheran Confessions do not give an explicit answer to a question, the advice of a Lutheran liturgiologist may be obtained. In our opinion, because of human weakness, it would be better for the good of order
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and harmony in the congregation not to make an issue of adiaphoristic matters and finally forcing a decision by a majority vote.

The Lutheran position in human ceremonial is evangelical and not legalistic. We do not say, this or that must or must not be done, but, "we beseech you by the mercies of God" to do or not to do so-and-so.