

(Draft—not for publication or citation)

Worship and other practices of Lutheran congregations

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Worship

The Christian church celebrates liturgy or worship to remember the resurrection of its Lord and King. They essentially make it on Sunday and on days of feast. Worship is a service that goes in both ways and in which God and the Christians are the actors.

The German term used for worship translates its double meaning: “Gottesdienst”, “Gottes Dienst”, service by God for the humans, service by the humans for God. More precisely, there is worship because God allows us, human beings to use our human manners to have a dialogue with Him, giving us an incomparable dignity. While coming to us through liturgy, He gives us the opportunity, the freedom to answer to his love.

God acts through the Gospel and the sacraments, offering salvation to his people, edifying them in the faith and filling them with his blessings. The Christians answer God by praising and worshipping Him, by confessing their faith, and prayer. During worship, the proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments are framed by liturgical elements that are also acts of adoration.

The Lutheran church is a liturgical Church. It means that it celebrates its liturgy in a well definite setting, according to a precise arrangement. “Liturgy” comes from two Greek words that mean “service of the people” or “common service”. It expresses everything that encloses the predication of God's words and the sacraments.

In its Confessions of faith, the Lutheran church expresses its attachment to the appearances, shapes and the importance they have. The Augsburg Confession states that liturgy **doesn't** mean a sacrifice but rather a public service, which fits to the church's doctrine, with a minister who preaches the gospel and administers the body and the blood of the Lord to the believers (Article XXIV, 79-81). The Confession of Augsburg specifies that the Lutheran church has kept the ceremonies and rituals in order to build up the church and keep the good order there (Article XXIV).

But why liturgy? Because liturgy shows the catholicity of the church. The Lutheran church wanted to establish contacts with the Universal Christian church. Luther didn't behave like a sectarian innovator, trying to create a new Church. He and his followers confessed their solidarity with the apostolic church and the church Fathers. They found that much of the tradition inherited from the past are rich of content, useful and were important for the edification of God's people. Therefore, they did not want to reject them. They also thought they didn't have the right to deprive the church from the tradition. It was not a legacy belonging only to the Catholic Church but to all Christians of the world, including the Lutherans.

The Lutheran church is a Church rich in liturgy because it's an Orthodox Church. All the elements in worship and liturgy are biblical and are evangelical in their content. It's a liturgy that proclaims the doctrine of the Scripture, the main articles of the Christian faith, the Triune God, the person and the work of Christ, Sin and Grace, etc. as many truths that Christians experience when they pronounce every Sunday the Creed or the Symbol of Nicée, when they confess their sins and receive forgiveness, and when they sing the Kyrie, the Gloria Excelsis in, the Sanctus and the Dei Agnus. The liturgical year with all its feasts, the texts and the predication

and everything that is particular to every Sunday allow them to know God's will. The Scripture as a whole is to instruct, exhort them and to build them in faith and in the piety. Liturgy is meant to focus the believers' attention on the Scripture rather than on their feelings or their emotions. For that purpose, we read the apostle Paul: "*Let the words of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God*" (Colossians 3.16). Also, Luther writes: "It is to this effect that the places of worship have been founded, that hours have been fixed, that some people have been ordained, that the whole divine service has been instituted and that the public service is celebrated" (Big Catechism I, 94).

The liturgy of the Lutheran church is rich because of its teaching. It preaches God's Words in its purity, while distinguishing the Law and the Gospel, and administers the Sacraments according to the Institution of the Lord. These are not simple symbolic acts by which the believers express their faith and their attachment to Christ, but real Sacraments, the means of grace in which God acts in his power. The Lutheran doctrine of the Baptism and the Holy Communion finds its richness in the meaning of its liturgy according to the principle: "*Lex orandi, lex credenda*", "we pray as we believe" worship is the mirror that reflects what the church teaches, believes and confesses.

The Lutheran church is of liturgical feature because it is not a sect rejecting everything that is not produced by itself. It is a church that confesses its faith in the Universal Church and has kept everything that is beautiful and edifying during all centuries. In that way, the liturgical richness resulting from the Lutheran Reform is cantered on a biblical and rich doctrine of the Sacraments.

The liturgy is something solemn and beautiful. The place where the church celebrates its worship is also beautiful. Not necessarily rich; it is beautiful because of its soberness and because it reflects dignity. It is the house of the Lord, a holy place where all contribute to the glory of God and his people's edification. All artistic gifts that the Lord gives to people are put into the service. In all Lutheran churches, there is an altar surmounted by the cross representing the divine Redeemer, some candles, the pulpit, the lectern, the baptismal fonts, etc. The liturgical colors situate every Sunday in the year, the pastor wears the liturgical clothes.

All this outward aspect is symbolical and has a message to convey. So, the Lutheran church recognizes itself because of its teaching as well as its worship.

Critics to Lutheran worship

We cannot but recognize the riches, the dignity, the beauty of the Lutheran liturgy. We are convinced that we owe all that to God because of his holiness, his sovereignty and because He is the Almighty God. His gifts and his blessings also lead us to praise, to be grateful to Him.

Still, I think there are questions which need to be discussed and answered. How do people live our liturgy? Are all groups of people feel welcome when they worship in a Lutheran church? Are their needs answered? Are they empowered when they attend a service or after the worship? Each of us surely has something to suggest and to share. My contribution concerning critics to the Lutheran liturgy is based on this one point: God, to the service of people.

Worship/liturgy: God, to the service of people: the gift of salvation

The meaning of worship was one of the central subjects at stake of the Reformation.

Luther opposed the understanding of the cult as “*beneficium*” (as gift) to the one of the “*sacrificium*” of the Catholic Mass. The worship expresses the gift of salvation by God in Christ who was incarnated, who died and raised from death. The Christian worship, whatever its shape is centered and founded in the life, the death and in resurrection of Christ.

Liturgy is about all Christian life and salvation concerns the whole human being: spirit, mind and body. Biblically, salvation is holy- it refers both to physical and spiritual. God saves and redeems the whole person. He does not save only the “souls”. Jesus’ ministry is to answer the needs of the whole person as we see in Matthew.9.35: “*And Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people*”. In Luke.9.10-17, he was feeding the hungry. At once, the church should look if people who come to church to worship experience this holy ministry of God. The church is a serving community, imitating what Christ did. He came to serve not to be served. One way to live this holy ministry is to serve, to help those who are needy. The Christian community is caring for others and receiving care

We have to see if much attachment to the doctrine on our part blocks us from seeing the needs of people. We are concerned about order when we worship, following what is written in the altar book that people’s hopes and hurts are hidden to us. And we forget what is essential in God’s eyes- the human being. Martin Luther stated that “Christian freedom must be on the service of the love for the neighbor” (Martin Luther, Complete Works, Labor & Fides, T. 4, p. 209).

Another issue is the question of Christian freedom. Our liturgy is rich and beautiful, every part and element is well structured. The question is, can people live freely this liturgy when they worship? What about a human response to a gracious God, a God who pours his blessings in fullness. There are Christians who want to express their joy, their gratitude to a loving God, who want to praise God but the order for liturgy does not give them space to do so.

In fact, it is liturgy that should give us the words to renew our faith to God. Example, Mary in the “*Magnificat*” sings her happiness, her gratefulness, her answer to God who has chosen her to be the mother of the Lord. The evangelist Luc shows that Mary borrowed something from the liturgy of her time.¹ But at the same time, she composed freely her hymn. She took over the liturgy of her people and it becomes her (Lk 2:46-55).

The Lutheran church has to have a critical eye on how we worship. Maybe for some, it is just a ritual, an automatism repeated every Sunday, which creates passivity to people.

A solution might be that we make our liturgy spontaneous and liturgical at the same time. When people worship, they encounter the sovereign and holy God. But as God’s children who come to their Father’s house, they feel they are at “home”, they can find themselves, where they can express themselves freely.

Another suggestion is: tradition and change can be mingled in the liturgy. The tradition is a legacy and is precious to us. We also need to change something by borrowing from other churches. As Christians, we have to offer to one another, we need one another: “Dignity Vs Excitement”, Pastoral nature of liturgy.² “Spontaneous/liturgical”, “change/tradition” from the

¹ It uses a Jewish language based on the OT to express how God is worthy of praise.

² Musa D. BIYELA, in Spirit and truth: liturgy in dialogue with Pentecostalism.

Pentecostal churches can help us having a more flexible liturgy. New Pentecostal movements/ Pentecostals or Renewal movements/ charismatic movements are God's gifts that inspire our church and help us experience changes in our liturgy for the benefit of God's people. Other churches or denominations who share to one another are a great heritage and blessings for one another.

Liturgy is not a Gospel. Consequently, we can think about changes or some reformulation. In the NT, there was no precise indication about the organization of the worship. Liturgy is composed of 4 pillars: the teaching of the apostles and fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayers (Acts.2.42) Teaching of the apostles, that means predication of God's Words, Baptism, Holy Communion and prayers made the essential of the Christian worship, a common worship which shows fellowship that unites the believers. It is also known that it has inherited from the synagogue.

Conclusion

S. Anita Stauffer writes that the Christian roots of the Christian worship are common to the whole Christian church, the "Catholic church..." So there is neither Lutheran worship nor Lutheran liturgy. There is a worship celebrated by Lutherans, a liturgy practiced by Lutherans... What is essential is the Words and the Sacraments which are at the heart and common to all the churches of all times and all places... (Culte et culture en dialogue, FLM, 1995, p.12). This statement of Anita Stauffer is simply confirms what the Scripture says: "*So, we are, who are many, are one Body in Christ, and individually, we are members of one another*" Rom. 12.5.

There is a diversity of worship and liturgy in the NT. The essential is that they worship God with one heart, with one Spirit while pronouncing: "our Father".

The richness of the liturgy can be lived in varied ways: with outward, creating new symbols, a more flexible liturgy, etc. Of course, everything that comes from the human mind is not necessarily appropriate to the celebration of worship. The Gospel invites us to have a critical look on the world. The Gospel calls us to transform us and to transform the world. It is important to remember that when we prepare the worship, it must be adapted to the cultures, meaningful for all who celebrate it in any place. The essential is that we must not lose the center, which is Christ, otherwise, we will be cut from our roots (S. Anita Stauffer, Culte et culture en dialogue, FLM, 1995, p.14).

In the New Testament, the words carry the Gospel in a "basket" which is open but not in a "box" that is locked. The Lutheran church has to keep its basic elements as Luther puts it: "For Christians, all in the worship is performed because of the Word and the Sacraments" (Martin Luther, complete Works, Labor & Fides, T. 4, p. 221), but it should make the liturgy an open basket so that it can have a richer and varied liturgy. It will not be a modern liturgy but a renewed liturgy,

II. Practice of Lutheran congregation: the Malagasy Lutheran Church

Introduction

The Malagasy Lutheran Church (or FLM) is founded by the Norwegian Missionary Society (NMS) in 1876. The FLM's liturgy consequently is a tradition from the Church of Norway. It went through 8 reforms from its birth till now.

Only ordained pastors can enter the altar during worship service and administer the Holy Communion.

The FLM is quite rigid as far as liturgy is concerned. In theory, any change is allowed except concerning the Intercession.

The children cannot partake in the Holy Communion.

There are 2 types of liturgy on Sunday worship: when there is a pastor and the pastor is absent.

The order for Worship with Holy communion in the Malagasy Lutheran Church

- Introit (sung by the choir or the assembly)
- Salutation
- Prayer by a catechist or a lay person
- Confession of Sin
- Kyrie eleison
- Gloria in excelsis
- The collect prayer of the Day
- Reading from the OT
- Hymn
- Reading from the epistles
- Hymn
- Reading from the Gospel
- Credo (The Apostle Creed)
- Hymn before the sermon
- The Sermon (the preacher says a brief prayer)
- Hymn
- Prayer: intercession
- Announcements
- The offerings
- The Holy Communion
- Hymn before the Communion

- The thanksgiving and the Words of Institution
- The Lord's prayer sung by the pastor
- The Words of Institution
- The Eucharistic meal
- Conclusion and blessing
- Closing hymn
- Prayer by the catechist or a lay person
- The bell rings 9 times

The Revival movement and the Ministry of empowerment

The Shepherd ministry is characteristic of the Awakening movements in the Malagasy Lutheran Church. Theologically, the movement is adapted to the tradition of MLC. It is understood as the strength of the MLC.

The Ministry of empowerment holds an important place in the liturgy of the church. In some congregations, it is included in the Sunday worship. In other congregations, it occurs after the worship service. Much discussion has been done about it. Theologians, pastors who do not accept that the ministry of empowerment included in the liturgy argue that it is equal to the sacraments. On Sundays where there is no Holy Communion, the congregation held the Ministry of empowerment performed by the shepherd members. It is to be noted that the congregations which include the ministry of empowerment into the liturgy are growing fast).

It is a very strong lay ministry.

The Ministry of empowerment held a worship everyday or every two days, etc. according to the needs of Christians in their locality.

Liturgy of the Ministry of empowerment

Hymn

Prayer

Four texts read by 4 shepherds: Jn.14.12-17; Mar.16.14-20; Mat.18.18-20; Jn.20.21-23

A short message of exhortation based on the predication during the worship service

Exorcism

Laying hands on people who come to the shepherds: empowerment by Words and by Prayer

Hymns sung by the assembly while shepherds lay hands.