

A Doctrinal Approach to Worship: The Traditional Lutheran View

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The traditional approach to worship is not concerned with styles, forms, or practices. It is not occupied with historical liturgies or current worship service trends. The Lutheran answer is to get the doctrine right first and the rest will fall in line. The current crisis in the LCMS is not over forms or what is conveyed by stylistic terms, whether high, low, contemporary, or traditional, but over doctrine. The boundaries of Lutheranism are defined by the authority of God’s written Word—which is the only source of our teaching.

A hindrance to meaningful conversation is the language co-opted by various parties. Most worship language in circulation is not Lutheran in origin. It also tends to be vague and polemical, rather than descriptive. First, we must define worship doctrinally. The public service, including its music, instruments, ceremonies, and liturgy, is not worship. Nor are they a part of worship. This doctrinal assertion is the traditional Lutheran starting point, as stated in one of our synod’s first English agendas:

The emancipation which the religion of Christ has brought to the spiritual life of man embraces the freedom from fixed forms of worship. The ceremonial statutes in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, which were laid down for the Church of the Old Covenant, have no counterpart in the New Testament. The Church of the New Dispensation has no divinely prescribed liturgy and *agenda*. Still, the New Testament abounds in admonitions to the followers of Christ to engage in private and public, individual and joint worship of God. “The true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth; for the Father seeketh such to worship Him” (John 4, 23),—this saying of Christ is the only regulation which the Author and Finisher of faith that saves men has considered it necessary to apply to human acts of worship offered to the true God. The regulation is comprehensive, but it relates to the inward motive and quality of the worshiper rather than to the external expression and features of his worship.¹

While this is the starting point, it is not the end of what Scripture has to say. The purpose

¹Foreward to *Liturgy and Agenda*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), III.

of this conference, I believe, is to foster real dialog with doctrinal clarity. To that end, it is most desirable to avoid the use of pejorative, idiosyncratic, ill-defined, and vague terms, which is the norm for this topic.

What is Worship?

Luther's Copernican revolution was to separate what looks like worship from what actually pleases God. True worship is that worship which God desires and commands. "The very highest worship of God is this that we ascribe to Him truthfulness, righteousness, and whatever else should be ascribed to one who is trusted."² What is usually called "worship" is termed outward, improper, external, or public worship—not the true, proper worship of God. In essence, this is an application of the doctrine of justification.

Is God pleased with anything we do outside of Christ? No, sinners are under His wrath. This includes when we perform religious ceremonies and rites meant to appease God. These then are works, which like all works, do not save. "But if it is of works, it is no longer grace" (Rom. 11:6).³ Even good outward works, including going to church, singing hymns, praising God, and going to Communion do not justify in themselves. Whatever is done outside of Christ is only sin and death.

We are forgiven and reconciled to the Father by the body of Christ crucified for us. What makes an outward work good? Faith alone is true worship, since God reckons this trust in Christ as righteousness. No performance of any liturgy, rite, or gesture justifies before God, since He looks to the heart. As Jesus said, worship is a matter of the gifts of the Spirit and truth, not our works, however pious they may look. "The hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (Jn. 4:23-24).

Faith is the only worship God requires. What most commonly call "worship" is not actually

²Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), *Luther's Works*, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann, 56 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955-86), 31:350. Hereafter cited as LW.

³All Bible passages NKJV.

divine worship or service. They really mean public ceremonies, those external forms needed to gather together in an orderly fashion. The Bible (and therefore God Himself), our Lutheran Confessions, and the oldest teachers of Lutheranism are unanimous: as important as public ceremonies are, they do not justify or please God, nor do they constitute worship. Neither are their particulars a doctrinal topic.

“Divine service,” or *Gottesdienst* in the German, means no less or more than the English “worship,” despite anachronistic attempts to redefine it. The Confessions even speak in the German of the Roman mass as false “*Baal Gottesdienst*” or “Baal Worship.”⁴ Christians do not imply the worship of anything other than God, so adding “divine” to “service” is redundant and a source of some confusion.⁵ But no form in itself is acceptable service to God, apart from faith in Jesus. “For whatever is not from faith is sin” (Rom. 14:23). The only service the Father requires for salvation is trusting that He receives us in Christ. Doctrinally, while we might call a service “divine,” it is man-made and not commanded by God as worship. Technically, only faith in the Gospel is true worship.

Unfortunately, due to a preoccupation with forms, styles, and man-made works, we are in danger of losing sight of what actually saves: the teaching of Jesus. At stake is not just externals, but the very Gospel which Christ died to give the world. This freedom is non-negotiable. However, there is the most contentious problem of how to use this Christian freedom, of which traditional Lutheran theology has much to say.

Public Worship is of the Law

Scripture lays on us no demands for outward worship. Even where various ceremonies are mentioned, they are not laid out as essential burdens. We cannot say merely doing any specific

⁴Ap XXIV, 98; *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), 418; *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 277.

⁵Because “divine service” is used in the hymnal to refer to a Communion service, one may mistakenly think that a service without the Supper is not really “divine” worship. Done as a work, without faith, the Supper harms and leads to “Baal Worship.”

ecclesiastical act, ceremony, or custom saves (outside of faith).⁶ However, there are biblical principles which determine how we use this freedom from ceremonial laws.

The sole purpose of outward worship, since it does not justify, is to keep order. Human ceremonies are works to restrain the flesh, so the Word of God, which alone kindles faith, may work.⁷ Without this order, sinners would impede each other's hearing of the preached Word. So, the public order of worship is a matter of discipline and external governance—a matter of the Law. The most serious problem today might be making man-made rites and ceremonies a matter of the Gospel. This doctrinal error is found equally on both ends of the stylistic spectrum.

If forms and liturgies are erroneously made a matter of the Gospel, how does one use the forgiveness of sins to weigh, judge, vindicate, or condemn them? The Gospel forgives, it does not condemn or discriminate. The natural result is that either anything goes in worship or the Gospel is made a matter of necessary ceremonial works. These extremes are where we, as a church body, find ourselves today, making it difficult to even speak clearly.

The Use of Freedom

Christ gives freedom from the curse of the Law and eternal punishment. This freedom extends to when we gather to worship. We cannot say a specific order is more God-pleasing than another, since Scripture does not, assuming it is not contrary to God's Word. Merely mouthing spiritual words or motioning pious gestures do not justify before God. On the other hand, true freedom is not doing what you want—it is doing what the Father desires.

The Formula of Concord lays out with careful balance this teaching of Christian freedom:

⁶Baptism and the Lord's Supper are works we do externally, but God is doing the real work and never outside of His Word and the Spirit.

⁷"Indeed, as infant boys need beyond all else to be cherished in the bosoms and by the hands of maidens to keep them from perishing, yet when they are grown salvation is endangered if they associate with maidens, so the inexperienced and perverse youth need to be restrained and trained by the **iron bars** of ceremonies lest their unchecked ardor rush headlong into vice after vice. On the other hand, it would be death for them to be held in bondage to ceremonies, thinking that these justify them. They are rather to be taught that they have been so **imprisoned in ceremonies**, not that they should be made righteous or gain great merit by them, but that they might be kept from doing evil and might more easily be instructed to the righteousness of faith. Such instruction would not endure if the impulsiveness of their youth were not restrained." Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), LW 31:375 (emphasis added).

Therefore, we believe, teach, and confess that the community of God in every time and place has the right, power, and authority to change, reduce, or expand such [indifferent] practices according to circumstances in an orderly and appropriate manner, without frivolity or offense, as seems most useful, beneficial, and best for good order, Christian discipline, evangelical decorum, and the building up of the church. Paul teaches how one may yield and make concessions to the weak in faith in such external matters of indifference.⁸

While we are free, we are not free to hurt our neighbor with our freedom. Changes to public ceremonies can be made, but should not be done frivolously. Church orders must be sturdy, consistent, and used rightly or else they are ineffective.

An order is an external thing. No matter how good it is, it can be abused. There it is no longer an order, but a disorder. No order is, therefore, valid in itself—as the popish orders were held to be until now. But the validity, value, and virtue of any order is in its proper use. Otherwise it is utterly worthless and good for nothing.⁹

Lutherans have traditionally made only conservative changes to public ceremonies. Not because they lacked freedom, but because only harm can come from needless changes. Therefore, changes to good ceremonies should only be done in the interest of promoting order, not the Gospel of Christ.

Luther, who is our greatest teacher not recorded in Scripture, was an agnostic in external matters. He was traditional in the sense of preserving the form and character of the Roman order. But not because it was good worship, his preferred style, or especially suited to the Gospel. It was best not to make changes which could not affect the heart, the seat of real worship. Luther kept what could be used correctly in true faith, even if it was not an ideal practice.

True worship is not a matter of orders or liturgies, but of believing Christ's doctrine. Lutherans, for the sake of the weak, kept traditional forms to which the people were accustomed. This was best for order and minimizing offense, which can only harm the teaching of Christ's truth. They could tolerate abused forms and ceremonies, if the truth of Christ was preached. Our Confessions state unequivocally: "the chief worship of God is to preach the gospel."¹⁰ This alone frees from slavery to sin and gives eternal life.

⁸FC SD X, 9; Kolb/Wengert, 637.

⁹Luther, *The German Mass and Order of Service* (1526), LW 53:90.

¹⁰Ap XV, 42; Kolb/Wengert, 229.

The Nature of Christian Freedom

Our freedom in Christ is not to act how we want. Christ offered His life in exchange for our freedom from the guilt of the Law, but not freedom from God, who expresses His eternal will in the Law. Neither are we free to sin or hurt one another with our external actions, which in reality is slavery.¹¹ Instead, we are free in the Spirit to fulfill the Law, which is a matter of love, not being harassed by burdensome regulations. While works do not save, it is an error to pit external works, even the ceremonial, against the Gospel. Order does not justify before God, but it is necessary to keep earthly peace between sinners.

Worship in Lutheran theology deals with the First Commandment, not orders of service.¹² Idols are made and the true God is worshiped in the heart, not by reciting certain words, singing, or occupying a seat in a church.

In true service of God, he himself will be the light and accepts only the worship he has instituted and commanded. . . . And just as little will God tolerate us when we style as divine service what he has not so appointed What else does he presume so to do, but make an idol of God? He imagines him to be of his opinion, and forms in his mind his own God, presuming that God must be delighted with anything he devises.¹³

True “divine service” and worship is faith in Christ which justifies the sinner.

Our freedom is in the conscience, following the Spirit, not in doing what the flesh wants. God is a God of order, so His freedom does not lead to chaos, division, or confusion, but the blessed fruits of the Spirit. Earthly government impedes physical freedom, but does not hinder true faith and peace with God. They are in different realms. Freedom in God is not affected by anything we do lawfully with our bodies, it resides in the new man created by the Spirit. So, earthly orders, done not for justification, but simply for order and the good of the neighbor,

¹¹“Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry” (Col. 3:5).

¹²“The intention of this commandment, therefore, is to require true faith and confidence of the heart, which fly straight to the one true God and cling to him alone.” LC II, I, 4; Kolb/Wengert, 386-87.

¹³Martin Luther, *Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, 7 vol., eds. John Nicholas Lenker and Eugene F. A. Klug (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000; vol. 1-4 published as *Sermons of Martin Luther: The Church Postils*, 8 vol. in 4 vol., 1995; vol. 5-7 published as *Sermons of Martin Luther: The House Postils*, 3 vol. 1996), 3.2:321.

do not conflict with Christian freedom in the least. Like marriage, government, and rules for children, faith is unharmed by external order. In fact, the flesh benefits from this restraint.¹⁴

The Gospel is an internal freedom. It does not overthrow or create tension with the government, authority of parents, a wife's submission to her husband, or even traditional ceremonies.¹⁵ That would make it a fleshly, earthly gospel, not the forgiveness of sins which Christ won for us. Disorder is actually a sign of Satan, not Christ, as I Corinthians relates.

When a pastor or congregation unilaterally makes wholesale changes to church customs, others are often harmed or at least confused as to what is true, justifying worship. The changes may not be wrong in themselves, but disorder fomented discord and false doctrine, because the emphasis shifts from believing to doing or not doing works. As in liberation theologies, it is easy for the Gospel to be turned into that which overthrows earthly order.¹⁶

While works do not earn salvation, the Law and lawful discipline can wrongly be categorically pitted against the saving Gospel. Luther taught:

There are very many who, when they hear of this freedom of faith, immediately turn it into an occasion for the flesh and think that now all things are allowed them. They want to show they are free men and Christians only by despising and finding fault with ceremonies, traditions, and human laws; as if they were Christians because on stated days they do not fast or eat meat when others fast, or because they do not use the accustomed prayers, and with upturned nose scoff at the precepts of men, although they utterly disregard all else that pertains to the Christian religion.¹⁷

Public orders and ceremonies are not that important, but good order and the prominence of the

¹⁴“In society . . . obedience to the Law must be strictly required. There let nothing be known about the Gospel, conscience, grace, the forgiveness of sins, heavenly righteousness, or Christ Himself; but let there be knowledge only of Moses, of the Law and its works.” Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), LW 26:116.

¹⁵A slave can outwardly submit to a human master, according to the flesh, and still be completely free in Christ. “Bondservants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ” (Eph. 6:5).

¹⁶In his memoir W. A. Visser 't Hooft reflects on the quest for the emancipation from all authority. It started with kings, masters controlling slaves, colonies under another country's rule, and continues on with attacks on male authority in society, commerce, and marriage. He astutely points out the next frontier is the emancipation of children from parental authority, culminating ultimately in the denial of the fatherhood of God. By destroying order, a utopian world is sought, but one where freedom in the Gospel cannot be not heard. *The Fatherhood of God in an Age of Emancipation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982).

¹⁷Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), LW 31:372.

Word argue for not exalting or degrading them—hence Luther’s ceremonial agnosticism.

It is easy to misunderstand the Gospel and make it opposed to order, the Law, discipline, and even love. In fact, “contemporary worship” refers not simply to services devoid of traditional ritual, but signifies a disorderly, constantly changing approach to public worship. It means “of the moment,” yet does not describe any particular style or approach.

“Contemporary” implies that which is opposed to fixed, written, or standardized form. Since it has little positive meaning, it merely digs at traditional forms for their age and assumed lack of relevancy. Order is not a matter of relevancy, but decency and decorum. In fact, forms for public worship are meant to restrain relevancy and the “contemporary” outbursts of the flesh, so that the Holy Spirit may give faith in the external Word.

Luther and his companions conducted an orderly reformation, focusing on the teaching of Christ. This was the approach of Jesus, who as God over all, certainly had total freedom, but refrained from using it only to love Himself.

Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men (Phil. 2:4-7).

Likewise, “we teach that liberty in these matters should be exercised moderately, so that the inexperienced may not take offense and, on account of an abuse of liberty, become more hostile to the true teaching of the gospel. Nothing in the customary rites may be changed without good reason.” The Confessions clearly adopt Luther’s agnostic, begrudging attitude toward ceremonies, because the only thing worse than people misusing ceremonies and works, is no order at all. The Apology continues: “for the sake of love, we will reluctantly observe adiaphora with others, even if such things may prove to be somewhat burdensome.”¹⁸ Luther wisely separated the possession of freedom in faith, from its use in the world: “Those works are free in the eyes of God which you do of necessity in the eyes of men.”¹⁹ This is true freedom, which is not moved in matters free to God, except by love for the neighbor.

¹⁸Ap XV, 51-52; Kolb/Wengert, 230.

¹⁹*On Monastic Vows* (1521), LW 44:310-11.

Love and the Weak

An underappreciated cause of current division over orders is a lack of love. In indifferent matters (neither commanded, nor forbidden in Scripture), referred to by the Greek word *adiaphora*, God's Word is not the judge. Instead, love for our neighbor is to rule and restrict our individual, physical freedom.

It is a common error to think that *adiaphora* are absolutely indifferent. That is not the case. They are indifferent to God, but not to the neighbor. The weak and ignorant are often attached to particular human rites and traditions. While *adiaphora* can be changed, if an indifferent change causes our brother to be confused, to doubt Christ, or to not hear the Word, it is sinful. "For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another" (Gal. 5:13). Even introducing the very worship of heaven to a congregation could be sinful, if it is not done in love—since we have no scriptural command to have any specific worship order. Only Christ's righteousness is necessary. To make even desirable and magnificent *adiaphora* necessary is to bury the only way to salvation.

"The weak" refers to those who believe in Christ, but are not well taught or strong in faith. "Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things" and matters not commanded (Rom. 14:1). "Weak" does not refer to pagans or the disorderly practices that might be appealing to them. "We then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification. For even Christ did not please Himself" (Rom. 15:1-3). The sacrificial love of others, not selfishness or dominance, is the proper use of freedom.

The nature of the Gospel and faith is at stake here. Did Christ suffer and die to free us to do whatever we want, including sin? By no means, we have died to sin and been baptized into Christ's death. Therefore, our freedom is not fleshly or physical.

This is the freedom with which Christ has set us free, not from some human slavery or tyrannical authority but from the eternal wrath of God. Where? In the conscience. This is where our freedom comes to a halt; it goes no further. For Christ has set us free, not for a political freedom or a freedom of the flesh but for a theological or spiritual freedom, that is, to make our conscience free and joyful, unafraid of the

wrath to come.²⁰

Our freedom is not to do what we want, that is, to follow the desires of the flesh. So in things not commanded, we are free in the sense of not needing to act to win God's favor, but free to do whatever is best for the neighbor. We become like God, that is, free, indifferent, and agnostic to things which do not lead away from or to Christ. "For to those who believe in Christ whatever things are either enjoined or forbidden in the way of external ceremonies and bodily righteousness are all pure, adiaphora, and are permissible, except insofar as the believers are willing to subject themselves to these things of their own accord or for the sake of love."²¹ This is an internal and spiritual freedom that allows us to do what is most loving.

"Yet if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died" (Rom 14:15). Man-made orders and even divine things can be used in an unloving way to drive away from Christ.²² But changing the order of the public service cannot help faith or bring one closer to Christ. Ceremonies cannot guarantee, preserve, or promote the Gospel, because man's best works cannot give freedom from the curse of the Law.²³ Only the direct and continual preaching of the Gospel safeguards Christ's teaching.

Ceremonies give no indication of doctrine, since human traditions do not encapsulate the power of Christ's resurrection. They can, however, give a negative confession.²⁴ Where Christ is

²⁰Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), LW 27:4.

²¹Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* (1519), LW 27:161-62.

²²Even the instruments of righteousness, Baptism and Communion, can be used as pure Law to harass consciences and drive to despair and therefore away from Christ by their administration—how they are taught and explained. "Administration" in the Confessions refers to whether they are preached as Gospel promises to be believed, rather than just physically handing out the elements. Both Rome and the enthusiasts had the wrong administration. "Such use of the sacrament, in which faith gives life to terrified hearts, is the New Testament worship, because the New Testament involves spiritual impulses: being put to death and being made alive. Christ instituted the sacrament for this use . . ." Ap XXIV, 71; Kolb/Wengert, 271.

²³The "abomination" of the Roman mass contradicts this opinion: "the liturgy is a guarantee of sound Christian doctrine and therefore of the gospel itself." Olof Herrlin, *Divine Service: Liturgy in Perspective*, trans. Gene J. Lund (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 22.

²⁴"Nor shall they permit the imposition of such adiaphora by opponents who use violence and chicanery in such a way that undermines the true worship of God or that introduces or confirms idolatry." FC SD X, 9; Kolb/Wengert, 637.

denied in doctrine, the very best traditions are worthless and harmful. There are no pure Gospel ceremonies that cannot be abused in their observance. The sinful flesh is easily swindled into ceremonial hypocrisy, which denies the power of God's Word: "For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men . . . All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition" (Mk. 7:8-9). Even worshiping exactly like Christ, washing feet, or dying on a piece of wood, cannot bring righteousness. The only justifying worship is trusting that Christ's obedience is credited to us.

The traditional Lutheran tendency is to make no seismic changes, but allow church orders to evolve naturally, uniformly, and orderly. This is why arguing over subjective anthropological criteria or which order best fits the Gospel are fruitless endeavors. No order or law matches the character of the Gospel, but the unspiritual, weak, and young need a fixed order for the regulation of the flesh.

"For external rites, even though we cannot do without them—just as we cannot do without food or drink—do not commend us to God, even as food does not commend us to him [I Cor. 8:8]. Faith and love commend us to God."²⁵ Our flesh, including our public action in the assembly, does not need the Gospel. Obeying an order does not impact faith—there is absolutely no tension. "But in a matter apart from conscience, when outward duties must be performed, then, whether you are a preacher, a magistrate, a husband, a teacher, a pupil, etc., this is no time to listen to the Gospel. You must listen to the Law and follow your vocation."²⁶ Likewise public, though not spiritual, worship is an outward matter of the Law.

In the realm of church services, the scriptural doctrine frees us from historical archeology and a legalistic approach to ritual. Yet, it also frees us from idiosyncratic and novel ceremonies, which cannot help but be divisive, since the weak do not deal well with changes. The use of this freedom for the weak is a serious doctrinal subject not well articulated within our synod today.

²⁵Luther, *An Order of Mass and Communion for the Church at Wittenberg* (1526), LW 53:31.

²⁶Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), LW 26:117.

A False Antinomian Tension

True worship must be “in spirit and in truth” (Jn. 4:23). Hands may be folded, extended, or raised when praying. But if I am standing right next to someone and to lift up my hands would disturb my neighbor and distract him, it is sinful to pray with raised hands. One may also sing praises to God in the shower in faith—wearing clothes is not commanded by God or necessary for justifying worship. But when joined with other Christians, to exercise this freedom would be disorderly and sinful, despite the fact clothes are *adiaphora* to God.

You are free to use any form to worship that does not deny the truth of God, since worship forms are indifferent. And you may exercise that freedom, as long as others are not offended or division arises. Christ did not die to prevent us from loving others.

Writing home-made, creative liturgies is not the problem—neither is doing liturgical archeology and resurrecting ancient ceremonies. Anyone may do so without sinning and use them to worship God in faith. If done privately, no offense will come and freedom in Christ can be enjoyed in the Spirit. But today’s worship controversy is not over forms, *per se*, but the use of them in public assemblies. Here offense can come from even good and godly orders, if such novelty is unwanted and not the custom of the entire fellowship. Dissimilarity in externals does not mean doctrinal division, but it looks that way to the average person.

We must stop thinking of our own situation, the forms we cherish, or what we think promotes the Gospel. It is not a single pastor’s or congregation’s job to improve or correct our synod’s external worship. When many individuals make such changes, chaos results and we become consumed with styles and man-made forms, not the freedom that is found in Jesus. Practice your freedom in private to your heart’s content. But think carefully as to whether free changes are really free to your neighbor, his congregation, and our synod.²⁷

Changing the location of the offering plates or going from wax to oil candles is not offensive. Wearing a black suit instead of a blue suit is not divisive. But what about wearing a Hawaiian shirt or rapping the Creed? While these are not sinful in themselves, are they done out of love

²⁷Citing Rom. 14:22 Luther chides innovators wanting to show off their creations. “If you wish to use your freedom, do so in secret,” so that no one is harmed. *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), LW 31:374.

for others in our fellowship? Whatever causes people to be directed away from Christ and His salvation, even when due to weakness or misunderstanding, is sinful.

The irony is that as the synod plunges into chaotic, ceremonial diversity, we are more culturally uniform than we have ever been. Do we really think worship style needs to be different in an urban setting than in the rural areas? Do not the same news, entertainment, language, and culture penetrate across the footprint of the LCMS? In the 17th century, uniformity was strictly enforced within church districts, though orders varied significantly between districts. Advances in technology and transportation have brought us very close together. But LCMS churches blocks away from each other have completely different orders, vestments, and music. The sad irony is that so much time is spent creating and defending ceremonial diversity that the prime worship of preaching is neglected, so that it is almost thought of as ritualistic story time.

Rebellion against order is perpetrated by a misunderstanding of the freedom the Gospel grants. One proponent of liturgical change claims that there was an “unmistakable tension which existed between liturgical order and freedom in the sixteenth-century Reformation churches.”²⁸ This alleged “tension” implies that freedom in Christ and doing good works in love are in some way not compatible. True freedom “does not seek its own.” Rather it “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (I Cor. 13:7).

We must separate the order and form of public worship from the true worship of God. To not do so is doctrinal error. Even the most rigid and orderly forms allow the freedom to worship God freely in the Spirit. “Within these formularies for molding the worship of the believers there has been ample room given to the fervor of every sentiment which the heart may seek to express in worship.”²⁹ Ceremonies serve the Gospel the same way air conditioning in summer does, by preventing fleshly distractions to the Word. Unfortunately, ceremonies, because they are necessary when sinners assemble, are much more dangerous to faith and more widely trusted as a way to righteousness. Man-made religious ceremonies serve the Gospel in the same way the U.S. tax code promotes the righteousness of faith and Robert’s Rules of Order serve grace.

²⁸James Waddell, *The Struggle to Reclaim the Liturgy in the Lutheran Church: Adiaphora in Historical, Theological, and Practical Perspective* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2005), 64.

²⁹*Liturgy and Agenda*, III.

Sinners need this order and it does not conflict internally with faith, but human ceremonies are a form of Law which only serve the Gospel in the most negative, perilous, and incongruous manner.

The Gospel demands no change to external order. To say the Gospel demands external changes to *adiaphora* is to make Christ into a new legislator or law-giver. Love demands that an order will evolve conservatively, not by an individual alone, but by broad consensus. While it cannot be the basis for fellowship, uniformity should be highly valued.³⁰ What we do out of love, order, and good works does not hinder the Spirit, rather these provide opportunity for the Word of God to create living faith, which results in true freedom.

Ceremonialism

The traditional practice is to maintain order and good ceremonies, but warn in preaching against trusting in them as God-pleasing worship. It is Lutheran to preach against ceremonies, especially the ones most cherished. There is no church order that makes God happy with us or forgives sins. Even the divinely appointed sacrifices of the Israelites failed to appease the Father.³¹ The Saxon Order of 1580 exhorts:

The pastors and ministers shall diligently instruct their parishioners and hearers in sermons as often as opportunity allows, that such external ordinances and ceremonies are not in themselves divine worship, nor a part of it, but that they have been appointed in order that the worship of God, which is not in the power of man to change, may be held at a proper time and place and without troublesome disorder.³²

Christian worship is spiritual, not ritualistic. While we perform ritual, as all religions do, our teaching preserves Christ's righteousness alone as the way to salvation. No ritual without faith

³⁰“Therefore, I pray all of you, my dear sirs, let each one surrender his own opinion and get together in a friendly way and come to a common decision about these external matters, so that there will be one uniform practice throughout your district instead of disorder—one thing being done here and another there—lest the common people get confused and discouraged.” Luther, *A Christian Exhortation to the Livonians* (1525), LW 53:47.

³¹“‘To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices to Me?’ Says the LORD. ‘I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed cattle. I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs or goats’” Is. 1:11.

³²Quoted in J. W. Richard and F. V. N. Painter, *Christian Worship: Its Principles and Forms*, (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1892; Online: <http://books.google.com/books?id=t1IrAAAAYAAJ>), 213.

saves—even Baptism and Communion.³³ These can be trusted in as human works of obedience, not divine promises and works which sustain faith. “For every ceremonial act, no matter what kind, seems to be an achievement on the part of man after all.”³⁴ Lutherans traditionally do historic, man-made rites, while ascribing no particular significance or meaning to them. Ritual, by definition, is done by custom without thinking.

Even the best ceremonies do not teach or proclaim forgiveness—that is not their purpose. Neither do rituals deliver or proclaim grace.³⁵ Sin is not confronted in symbolic ritual, nor is the Gospel driven home by cultic action. Their value is symbolic and their interpretation depends on confessed doctrine.³⁶

In a rather sophisticated view, the Confessions recognize that traditional customs and practices, like art, do not have inherent meaning: “One action can have several purposes.”³⁷ Lutheran Reformers, instead of changing questionable ceremonies and antagonizing the weak, reinterpreted them by teaching. “We gladly keep the ancient traditions” and “interpret them in the best possible way, by excluding the opinion that they justify.”³⁸ Only the Word of God can abolish idolatry of the heart which naturally trusts in devotional works. In accepted customs indifferent to God, the Eighth Commandment should be applied, so that the best construction is put on questionable religious ceremonies. It is more evangelical to preach a better use than to change traditional practices.³⁹ Luther was willfully agnostic in his estimation of ceremonies.

³³“He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” (Mk. 16:16).

³⁴Friedrich Kalb, *Theology of Lutheran Worship in 17th-Century Lutheranism*, trans. Henry Hamann (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965), 28.

³⁵“The language of the primary [i.e., liturgical, not doctrinal] theologian . . . more often consists in symbolic, metaphorical, sacramental words and actions which throw flashes of light upon chasms of rich ambiguity.” Aidan Kavanagh, “Response: Primary Theology and Liturgical Act,” *Worship* 57 (1983): 323.

³⁶The liturgical movement partakes in a “tremendous overvaluation of the expressive value of formal liturgical language.” Friedrich Flemming, *Die treibenden Kräfte in der lutherischen Gottesdienstreform* (1926), quoted in Kalb, *Theology of Lutheran Worship*, 81.

³⁷Ap XXIV, 74; Kolb/Wengert, 271. This does not mean that all *adiaphora* are equally appropriate in a specific context. The connotations which come to our minds when hearing certain music, not the music itself, may make it entirely inappropriate for public worship today. We cannot call it sinful or say that it will be inappropriate in 500 years or in a different context, because God in Scripture does not.

³⁸Ap XV, 38; Kolb/Wengert, 229.

³⁹The elevation of the Sacrament is such an example: “it’s of little consequence to us. We don’t care if it’s abolished or not, provided the abuse—that is, the adoration—is not there. Some churches have

I confess that I am not favorably disposed even toward necessary ceremonies, but that I am opposed to those that are not necessary. . . . It easily happens that ceremonies become laws, and after they are established as laws, they quickly become snares to men's consciences. Meanwhile pure doctrine is obscured and buried, especially if those who come after are indifferent and unschooled folk who are more concerned about ceremonies than they are about mortifying the lusts of the flesh.⁴⁰

Indeed, St. Paul did not say to take heed to free ceremonies, but "to the doctrine . . . for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you" (I Tim. 4:16).

Lutherans should not value anything based on antiquity or tradition, because in itself tradition is not an authority. Liturgical phrasing which quotes or paraphrases Scripture is not more holy than any other man-made creation which does so. Most so-called "contemporary" liturgies use more Scripture than the services in our hymnal. But that does not make them scriptural, Christian, or edifying as orders. The issue is what God commands in Scripture as worship, not what we think are the best external rites. Reciting many Scripture verses does not make a sermon or ceremony godly or scriptural. We should stop saying traditional ceremonies are scriptural mainly due to their historical provenance or ancestry.

The word "liturgy," much like "contemporary" is fraught with difficulties. It was not a historically Lutheran slogan, as it is today.⁴¹ "The term 'liturgy' was not yet in use at that time [of the Augsburg Confession] nor in the period of orthodoxy."⁴² The problem is that today it carries a vague connotation of the superiority of certain human traditions from the romanizing liturgical movement. Originally, in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, it referred to a service with the Lord's supper. Used in a Lutheran way, liturgy is simply a public arrangement or order without any odor of elevating tradition.⁴³ "Rightly understood, the liturgy is 'the entire order

seen that we have dropped the elevation [in Wittenberg] and have imitated us. We are pleased with that." Luther, *Table Talk* (1543), LW 54:462.

⁴⁰To Prince George of Anhalt (July 10, 1545), Theodore Tappert, *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, in *Library of Christian Classics*, vol. XVIII (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960; reprint, Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2003), 312.

⁴¹In a word study on "mass," the Apology notes: "The word 'liturgy' [*leitourgia*] in Greek means sacrifice, they say, and the Greek church calls the Mass the liturgy. . . . This word does not properly mean sacrifice but rather public service." Ap XXIV, 79-80; Kolb/Wengert, 272.

⁴²Kalb, *Theology of Lutheran Worship*, 4.

⁴³"Anyone who reads the Greek authors can find examples everywhere of how *leitourgia* meant public duties or services." Ap XXIV, 83; Kolb/Wengert, 273.

of service including the sermon.’”⁴⁴ Actually, any change to an order, renders it a completely different liturgy. Any public order is technically a liturgy, not just those with deep historical roots. Only something completely unscheduled and spontaneous, like Pentecostals waiting for the Spirit to move them, is a-liturgical. Our question should be whether liturgies in our church body have any consistency across services in its congregations, that is, are they used for order or disorder.

Used with the definite article, “*the* liturgy,” this term bestows special status to a stream of liturgical development. Some imply that a liturgical shape or form is the work of the Spirit in the church: “The deepest significance of liturgy lies in the fact that it is a form which the Spirit Himself has created to preserve and deepen the life which He has awakened in the church.”⁴⁵ But that elevates human tradition to the level of Scripture, and therefore God Himself. Actually, the Church only passively receives, while God is the giver of all good.⁴⁶ Uplifting one strand of liturgical development as correct and best gives authority to human tradition and also inveighs against Scripture, our sole divine authority.

Maintaining that a particular form of “liturgy” is itself worship obscures the benefits of Christ. It elevates doing over believing and outward discipline over the forgiveness of sins. This encapsulates the Roman error:

For the kingdom of the Antichrist is a new kind of worship of God, devised by human authority in opposition to Christ, just as the kingdom of Mohammed has religious rites and works, through which it seeks to be justified before God. It does not hold that people are freely justified by faith on account of Christ. So also the papacy will be a part of the kingdom of the Antichrist if it defends human rites as justifying. For they deprive Christ of his honor . . . especially when they teach that such rites are not only useful for justification but even necessary.⁴⁷

Thus, while liturgical forms are necessary, they are a matter of the Law and order, not the Gospel or true worship. The issue is not the ceremonies which man has historically called “worship,” but the proper worship that saves in Christ.

⁴⁴Paul Althaus, *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, quoted in Kalb, *Theology of Lutheran Worship*, 4.

⁴⁵Bo Giertz, *Liturgy and Awakening* (LCMS Commission on Worship, 2003).

⁴⁶James 1:17.

⁴⁷The Apology continues: “Daniel 11 indicates that new religious rites will be the very form and constitution of the kingdom of the Antichrist.” Ap XV, 18-19; Kolb/Wengert, 225.

Real freedom in things indifferent to God is shown by neither arbitrarily abolishing or introducing church customs.⁴⁸ Pointing towards Christ's works, not man's works, is our charge. "We are obligated to do nothing at all for God, except to believe and love."⁴⁹ The Word of God alone frees from sin and must influence our use of rituals, ceremonies, and orders, which are not done for God, but for our fellow man.⁵⁰

Adiaphora

We cannot defend our external worship on the basis of Scripture. The New Testament mentions ceremonies, but no single order of public worship is commanded, or even detailed: "So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ" (Col. 2:16-17). Though Scripture is the source of some liturgical phrases, that does not make an order more scriptural. Not everything mentioned in Scripture must, or should, be done—only what God directly commands in His Word.⁵¹ It is a false statement to say that any one liturgy is scriptural worship, though it may be partially derived from Scripture. The divine ceremonies required by God are few and not of a legalistic nature.⁵² "For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them" (Mt. 18:20).⁵³ The real question is not what traditions are *adiaphora* but how Christ's freedom is to reign over them.

While a service should not be unscriptural in content, there are no absolute prescriptions given, except to worship in "Spirit and truth"—which is simply to believe in Jesus' name.

Hence that [third] commandment has properly ceased; yes, all as far as perfect Christians are concerned, since the law is not made for the righteous. The ancient church

⁴⁸"No novelty has been introduced that did not exist in the church in the days of old." AC XXIV, 40; Kolb/Wengert, 72.

⁴⁹Luther, *Against the Heavenly Prophets* (1525), LW 40:127.

⁵⁰"After [faith in the Son] follow the external good works toward your neighbor, and this is a service also demanded of you by God. This service to man will not fail after we first render God the service we owe Him." Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John* (1530), LW 23:27.

⁵¹While Jesus carried a cross and tells us to also (Mt. 16:24), He did not mean a physical piece of wood on a geographical route.

⁵²While Baptism, the Lord's Supper, prayer, and singing are commanded, and therefore not *adiaphora*, they are not necessary elements of every worship service.

⁵³The name of Jesus includes His proclamation and doctrine.

retained holy days from the necessity of ministering the Word of God to the weak; for the truly righteous is so godly that, as God is indifferent to all days, places, persons, so every day is a holy day to him too. But the weak, who are not yet mortified as to the old man, have need of being engaged with certain duties, days, customs, vigils.⁵⁴

St. Paul calls observing “days and months and seasons and years” as true worship, turning “again to the weak and beggarly elements” and away from life in Christ (Gal. 4:9-10). But we are free children of the promises fulfilled in Christ, so that every day is equally holy and sacred to God—whether a public service is being conducted or not.

So all ceremonies, ritual, tradition, and liturgies cannot be worship itself. Properly speaking, worship excludes all human works. Roman worship is called “the greatest and most terrible abomination,” because the people trusted in their religious devotion.⁵⁵ Lutherans kept many of their ceremonies, even down to this day, but the use of them was vastly different. While outwardly our worship might look Roman, we preach an entirely different view of faith and works, and therefore have a better worship.

If our “worship” is to be pure, faith in the Word must be made necessary, while all *adiaphora* are kept free. Whenever circumstances suggest a change, do so orderly and carefully. But first consider others, including those in your fellowship. It is love by which Christ’s disciples are recognized—not common ceremonies. Use your freedom freely in love.

So, it is with good reason Lutherans have not traditionally made drastic changes to public ceremonies. John Gerhard shows how delicately *adiaphora* should be handled: “The true church does not insist upon accepting or rejecting *adiaphora* for *the sake of its commandment*, but rather only for the sake of order and decency so that order may be maintained and offense avoided. So long as this principle is not violated, the church will foster freedom of conscience.”⁵⁶

There is no “Lutheran liturgy,” just as there is no Lutheran haircut, architecture, vestment, or church polity. In things not sinful, offensive, or dictated by God in Scripture, history cannot create any binding tradition. Scripture alone is our authority and common doctrine is enough for

⁵⁴Luther, *Decem praecepta Wittenbergensi praedicata populo* [*The Ten Commandments Preached to the People of Wittenberg*] (1518), WA 1, 436, 33ff; trans. in Kalb, *Theology of Lutheran Worship*, 62.

⁵⁵SA II, II, 1; Kolb/Wengert, 301.

⁵⁶Quoted in C. F. W. Walther, *Essays for the Church*, 2 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), II:259.

fellowship. “And it is enough for the true unity of the church to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions, rites, or ceremonies instituted by human beings be alike everywhere.”⁵⁷ It is not what Scripture mentions in passing that makes worship, but what Christ explicitly instituted. But how often do we judge based on externals and incidentals, not doctrine?

Freedom is no excuse for lacking order or love.

Now when your people are confused and offended by your lack of uniform order, you cannot plead, “Externals are free. Here in my own place I am going to do as I please.” But you are bound to consider the effect of your attitude on others. By faith be free in your conscience toward God, but by love be bound to serve your neighbor’s edification For we should not please ourselves, since Christ also pleased not himself, but us all.⁵⁸

Following the biblical pattern, C. F. W. Walther says that there is no single liturgical order, but that order in abstract is God-pleasing: “‘Let all things be done decently and in order’ (I Cor 14:40) is the only standard according to which a pastor can make outward things a matter of conscience for a congregation, for this is God’s express command.”⁵⁹

Whether an order be plain and simple or full of elaborate ritual, it should be fixed and orderly over time. A major problem is the craving for disorder and novelty in externals. The itch for more or less ceremony is not spiritual and thus is a grave danger to the old Adam. Lasting change will only occur following the pattern of Luther:

Until now I have only used books and sermons to wean the hearts of people from their godless regard for ceremonial; for I believed it would be a Christian and helpful thing if I could prompt a peaceful removal of the abomination which Satan set up in the holy place through the man of sin. Therefore I used neither authority nor pressure. Nor did I make any innovations. For I have been hesitant and fearful, partly because of the weak in faith, who cannot suddenly exchange an old and accustomed order of worship for a new and unusual one, and more so because of fickle and fastidious spirits who rush in like unclean swine without faith or reason, who delight only in novelty and tire of it quickly, when it has worn off.⁶⁰

⁵⁷AC VII, 2-3; Kolb/Wengert, 43.

⁵⁸Luther, *A Christian Exhortation to the Livonians* (1525), LW 53:48.

⁵⁹Walther, *Essays*, II:269.

⁶⁰*An Order of Mass and Communion for the Church at Wittenberg* (1523), LW 53:19.

On the other hand, we must avoid lifting up tradition or any ceremonial practices as true worship. It is not doing much or little ritual that matters to God. Extolling ancient customs or rubrics is spotlighting the shell of the Law: outward discipline. While we should not deny the role of ceremonies in preserving order, they do not grant freedom in Christ. They exist as a schoolmaster for children and the unspiritual, not those who are ruled by the Spirit, since “the law is not made for a righteous person, but for the lawless and insubordinate, for the ungodly and for sinners” (I Tim. 1:9).

The supposed catholicity and universality of certain traditions, rites, and worship forms are touted, but works invented by man carry no authority, no matter how widely practiced. Nor do they have saving power. Rather their embellishment and unhealthy promotion opposes the saving doctrine of Christ, recorded plainly in Scripture, which is not about man’s works or authority.

Man-made customs and traditions can be done in freedom, but should not be lifted up or turned into spiritual things, since they do not bring Christ. The Confessions state *adiaphora* are of very limited value and should not be romanticized or spiritualized:

[The holy fathers] observed these human rites on account of their usefulness for the body, so that people should know at what time they should assemble, so that they may have an example of how all things in the churches might be done decently and in order, and finally, so that the common people may receive some instruction. (For the different seasons and various rites are valuable in admonishing the common people.)⁶¹

This bold claim asserts that there is not one correct stream of liturgical traditional, or at least that was not the original intent. It may seem historically dubious, but theologically it is correct and it charitably assumes that ancient Christians had godly motivations—that they were not legislating new worship for the holy God, which would be a different, and therefore false, Gospel (Gal. 1:6-7).

Doing a historic order does not constitute worship. The liturgical movement’s elevation of doing over preaching is dangerous. As an example, the Sacrament can be lifted up for the wrong reason:

In an age when men have grown tired under an avalanche of oral proclamations, many have found religious reality in the quiet, intimate celebration of the Lord’s Supper,

⁶¹Ap XV, 20; Kolb/Wengert, 226.

and have derived more power for their inner lives from this than from the typical preaching service.⁶²

Conversely, in traditional Lutheran theology, “Where there is no preaching, there is no worship.”⁶³ Only through the Word, which creates faith, can any work be pleasing to God.

Conclusions

Corporate worship, or better yet, a public order of service, is what is usually meant by “worship,” not the proper worship of God that He instituted. “The entire service of God is contained in this: Believe in Christ, whom the Father has sent to you.”⁶⁴ It is human ceremonies, which are incapable of advancing salvation or the right worship of God, which sadly occupy our attention. Man-made ceremonies, no matter how salutary, cannot promote the Gospel. Instead, their unhealthy promotion or destruction can certainly hinder faith for the weak, which is sinful.

The role of ceremonies in relation to the Gospel is perhaps the key issue we should address. One side is convinced that ornate, formal, rigid, and burdensome ceremony, which appeals to tradition, helps promote the Gospel. The opposite side is sure that disorderly, uncertain, and frivolous ceremony, which appeals to the flesh and the spirit of the age, helps promote the Gospel. Both of these camps rely on fleshly reasoning and human authority, rather than the Word of God. In reality, both suffer from the same doctrinal error of not recognizing that outward works invented by man do not touch the new man, which is nourished by the Spirit in God’s Word. Human ceremonies only negatively “help” the Gospel by burdening the flesh and allowing earthly peace. Only the explicated and proclaimed Gospel helps faith, which alone receives Christ’s righteousness and God’s peace.

Forms and ceremonies are not the true problem or solution. It is easier for the lazy and fleshly to change external forms, rather than changing hearts by the Gospel. Love should motivate us

⁶²Olof Herrlin, *Divine Service: Liturgy in Perspective*, trans. Gene J. Lund (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 33-34.

⁶³Dennis Ngien, “Worship as Radical Reversal in Martin Luther’s *Theologia Crucis*,” *Reformation* 12.1 (2007): 10.

⁶⁴Jn. 6:28-29. Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of John* (1530-31), LW 23:28.

to uniformity in the stated forms, whether or not they are ideal.⁶⁵ As long as the preaching remains pure, God is working salvation.

Love is not to be restricted to only the local congregation as if a change cannot affect others outside. “For the true characteristic of sectarianism is that one has his eye above all on his own little community, even if the kingdom of God must suffer as a result.”⁶⁶ Fellowship and love demand that all others be considered. “A local congregation will, as far as feasible, conform to the customs in surrounding congregations of the true faith in order thus to avoid confusing members who transfer from one congregation to another.”⁶⁷ No matter our stylistic bent, spiritual unity, and even outward uniformity, is of greater importance than our personal tastes.

There will be no progress made on these issues until we agree on how to use the Holy Scriptures as an authority. Until faith is recognized as the only true worship, we will argue over man-made forms and use flawed anthropological arguments. But will we find time to preach sin and Christ’s forgiveness and how to use ceremonies properly in faith?

If the doctrinal issues are settled, accepting one another in love should be possible. But diversity in public orders is merely a symptom of deeper problems: disagreements over the nature of Christ’s freedom given to us, the role and purpose of works, the Scripture’s authority contra tradition, and justification in Christ. While divisions must arise, let us not in reaction deny the Gospel by making human traditions law, failing to obey the 8th commandment, or cease to be loving.

I have no particular opinions to share on external worship. But we as a synod are not a blank slate when it comes to public orders. While not binding, our common tradition is a good starting point. And for the sake of our fellowship, we may have to restrain our impulses to innovate, lest love be harmed. Above all, we must not stubbornly emphasize a style or form, so that the Word of God is even more buried by things that do not please God or save sinners. Get the doctrine right first and the ceremonies will fall in line.

⁶⁵Vilmos Vajta, *Luther on Worship: An Interpretation*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958; reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004), 177.

⁶⁶Walther, *Essays*, II:60.

⁶⁷Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 3 of 4, trans. T. Engelder, J. T. Mueller, and W. W. F. Albrecht (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 283.

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