

Luther's Teaching on Worship and Ceremonies: The Twin Errors of Liturgical Legalism and Disorderly Deprecation

Rev. Philip Hale

St. Paul, Bancroft; St. John, Lyons, NE — halepw@gmail.com

Worship is an unfortunate topic, at least in regard to style or form. Martin Luther stated that case forcefully.¹ His teaching on worship seems to be lost amid “worship wars,” which are not about the proper worship of God, but human forms, orders, and traditions. Both sides miss the point by focusing heavily on externals, even if they have good intentions. Liturgical legalism, which takes away freedom in externals won by Christ, is the wrong reaction to individuals causing disorder by trashing good, sturdy church orders. Only the right biblical teaching of this subject can guide us between these twin errors.

While Luther didn't spend much time on forms or externals, his teaching does put them in the proper place.² Luther's insights, scattered throughout his corpus of work, form a faithful, scriptural teaching. This is not a study of mere historical interest, but it is done under the premise that Luther's teaching is inscribed in the Lutheran Confessions as the eternal truth of God and is therefore the most helpful remedy for us today.

Definitions

Mass confusion abounds over worship beginning at the level of vocabulary. It is not surprising that the terminology most common, such as “liturgy,” “contemporary worship,” and “divine service,” is not precise and even somewhat vacuous. Luther boldly starts with a clear redefinition

¹“Your Grace may comfort yourself with the thought which I comfort myself: ceremonies are not articles of faith. And yet they have always created more and greater fuss in the church than the Word and the Sacraments . . . Therefore I take no other course than this: When the ceremonies are observed, I also observe them (if they are not godless); where they are discontinued, I also discontinue them.” To Prince George of Anhalt (June 26, 1542), *What Luther Says*, ed. Ewald Plass (St. Louis: CPH, 1959), 306.

²“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.” To 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.

of worship as that which is demanded by God and reconciles the sinner. Then he demarcates ceremonies which can support true worship, but are not a part of it:

From these words [Jn. 4:20-24] we understand that there are two kinds of worship: one outward and physical, the other inward and spiritual. It is outward worship when you choose outward places and gestures to express it, as when in the church or before the altar or the sacrament. . . . But in this passage Christ rejects such worship if it takes place with the idea that it is pleasing to God and is enough in itself without any inward spiritual worship, as the Jews maintained.³

All religions have liturgical worship of some sort, but the common definition of worship is one of the law, that is, centered on human action and devotion. “The Lord directs our attention to the subject of faith, overthrowing all their external worship of the Law and of works. . . . For the true service of God consists in faith in Him whom the Father sent, namely, Jesus Christ.”⁴ Any external work, no matter how perfectly done or ancient, cannot commend one to God.⁵ Luther equated that which justifies with worship. Only faith, which is entirely God’s work by the Spirit, is true worship that receives the righteousness of Christ. Using law-oriented worship terminology in a purely evangelical way, or even to synthetically redefine words, has muddied the real issue.

“Liturgy” is not a word with deep Lutheran roots.⁶ The problem is that it carries a vague connotation of the superiority of certain human traditions. Used with the article, “*the* liturgy,” it bestows special status to one stream of liturgical development. The most gross error posits a liturgical shape or form as the work of the Spirit in the church.⁷ This crass Romanism makes human tradition equal to Scripture. Then men are legislating for Christ, without any warrant. Actually, the Church only passively receives, while God is the giver of all good.⁸ There is no

³*The Adoration of the Sacrament* (1523), Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann, 56 vols. (St. Louis: CPH; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955-86), 36:290. Hereafter cited as LW.

⁴Jn. 6:28-29. *Sermons on the Gospel of John* (1530-31), LW 23:22.

⁵“Now where outward worship is all alone, there is downright hypocrisy and actual mockery of God. . . . For there are so many churches and services of divine worship on every hand, and yet there is scarcely one in a thousand who honor God with spiritual worship. Instead they all mock him with the outward, hypocritical worship.” *The Adoration of the Sacrament* (1523), LW 36:291.

⁶“The term ‘liturgy’ was not yet in use at that time [of the AC] nor in the period of orthodoxy.” Friedrich Kalb, *Theology of Lutheran Worship in 17th-Century Lutheranism*, trans. Henry Hamann (St. Louis: CPH, 1965), 4.

⁷“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.” Bo Giertz, *Liturgy and Awakening* (LCMS Commission on Worship, 2003).

⁸James 1:17.

particular liturgical form which pleases God or that can be done to appease His wrath over sin. Maintaining that a particular form of “liturgy” is worship itself obscures the benefits of Christ and elevates doing over believing.

Early Lutherans used “order” instead of “liturgy,” since for Greek church *θεία λειτουργία* [divine liturgy] means a public service with the Lord’s Supper. Church orders (*Kirchenordnungen*) more accurately describe the forms that are not a part of true worship.⁹ However, they are necessary to keep public order, since unbelievers and hypocrites join those who exercise their faith weakly through these external forms. But orders do not directly promote or relay the Gospel, instead they function as “iron bars” for sinners and the unspiritual.¹⁰ “Since the ceremonies or rites are not needed for the conscience or for salvation and yet are useful and necessary to govern the people externally, one must not enforce or have them accepted for any other reason except to maintain peace and unity between men.”¹¹ Thus, while liturgical forms are necessary, they are a matter of the law, not the Gospel.

“Contemporary worship” is an even more vacuous term. It is much more a polemical weapon, than a descriptive word. It means “of the moment,” yet does not describe any particular style or approach. It alludes to what is current and popular in a context. Since it has little positive meaning, it merely digs at traditional forms for their age and assumed lack of relevancy. While age is no indicator of usefulness, a novel and untested service is not profitable for order or propriety.

To avoid confusion this paper will use “disorderly” to describe the never-ending drive to innovate and change public worship orders. A constantly changing order that cannot be pinned down is no order at all. Order is not a matter of relevancy, but decency and decorum. In fact, forms for worship are meant to restrain relevancy and the “contemporary” outbursts of the flesh, so the Holy Spirit may give faith in the external Word.

Neither of these words point to the real purpose of ceremonies and forms for public worship. Another misused, but more more historically Lutheran term is “divine service.” It is a calque or

⁹J. W. Richard and F. V. N. Painter, *Christian Worship: Its Principles and Forms* (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1892; online: Google Books), 218.

¹⁰*The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), LW 31:375.

¹¹*A Christian Exhortation to the Livonians Concerning Public Worship and Concord* (1525), LW 53:48.

literal translation of the German “*Gottesdienst*.” This word and “divine service” mean no less or more than the English “worship.”¹² The Confessions even speak in the German of the Roman mass as false “*Baal Gottesdienst*” or “Baal Worship.”¹³ Christians do not imply the worship of anything other than God, so adding “divine” to “service” is redundant and a source of confusion. It is misleading to call certain man-made external forms “divine” while other Christian orders are deprived of the designation.¹⁴ No form is in itself acceptable service to God, apart from faith in Jesus. There is only one requirement that makes something done outwardly acceptable to God: faith. “For whatever is not from faith is sin” (Rom. 14:23).¹⁵

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 desires. “The entire service of God is contained in this: Believe in Christ, whom the Father has sent to you.”¹⁶ 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, but their unhealthy promotion or destruction can certainly hinder faith for the weak.

Proper Worship

Worship must be of divine origin—man may not tell God how He should be honored. Self-chosen worship is idolatry, because it is centered on oneself.¹⁷ It is not enough that a practice or liturgical

¹²Artificially redefining worship terms to exclude the inherent difficulties of distinguishing Gospel from law and true worship from external worship is to short-circuit the theological task. There are no pure Gospel words that need no evangelical explication. Human language is legalistic, because man is sinful and self-justifying. Since the law, but not the Gospel, is written on man’s heart, Gospel preaching must reinterpret everything, including vocabulary.

¹³Ap XXIV, 98; *Concorda Triglotta* (St. Louis: CPH, 1921), 418; *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 277.

¹⁴“The words ‘Liturgy’ and ‘Divine Service’ have been plainly bantered about in our church for the past fifteen years, and our title now states what many of us have been saying—that the Liturgy of Word and Sacrament and the Divine Service are one and the same thing.” Arthur Just, “The Ordinaries of the Divine Service: An Interpretation of Liturgical Texts,” *Journal for the Second Annual Conference. Christ’s Gifts in Liturgy: The Theology and Music of the Divine Service*, 2001 (Good Shepherd Institute), 27. Forms themselves cannot worship or serve God in “divine service,” nor can they believe.

¹⁵All Passages NKJV.

¹⁶Jn. 6:28-29. *Sermons on the Gospel of John* (1530-31), LW 23:28.

¹⁷“The fact is that you cannot serve God unless you have His Word and command. If His Word and command are not there, you are not serving God but your own will.” Martin 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*

phrase is mentioned in Scripture.¹⁸ It must be commanded by God or else it is idolatry, if done exclusively as “true” worship—as if human gestures, words, and songs could satisfy God’s wrath over sin. A liturgical form cannot be a part of divine worship, though one may exercise true “divine service” to God in faith while using such forms.

Luther defined true worship as that which is commanded in the law of God. Worship is not external works implied by the latter commandments, but the heart of the very first one:

You see that the First Commandment, which says, “You shall worship one God,” is fulfilled by faith alone. Though you were nothing but good works from the soles of your feet to the crown of your head, you would still not be righteous or worship God or fulfill the First Commandment, since God cannot be worshipped unless you ascribe to him the glory of truthfulness and all goodness which is due him. This cannot be done by works but only by faith of the heart.¹⁹

Man is a worshiping creature by nature. He always trusts, loves, and fears something. Worship is a constant. The question is: to which god is the heart’s incessant worship directed? Worship either tries to win a god over by the law or it knows and receives the true God’s goodness in the Gospel.²⁰ “Faith is that worship which receives the benefits that God offers; the righteousness of the law is that worship which offers God our own merits.”²¹ This does not make the public service unimportant, though. External order and human ceremonies provide opportunity to join at a specific time and place so that God’s Word may be heard. “Through the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments, God creates the only proper form of worship—faith.”²² While a specific order of service is not commanded, order itself is essential if

Luther: The House Postils, 3 vol. 1996), 5:319.

¹⁸While many historic liturgies are partially scriptural in origin, that is not a valid argument for their use. Certain passages are not identified scripturally for liturgical use, nor are their arrangement into a definite form promoted for public use. Liturgy is simply a public arrangement or order. “Rightly understood, the liturgy is ‘the entire order of service including the sermon.’” Paul Althaus, *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, Quoted in Kalb, 4. A novel form may be fully scriptural in wording and origin, while being entirely unscriptural in content and form. Since God in Scripture gives no forms for public worship to Christians, to say any specific form is scriptural is spurious logic. But the orderliness and dignity of forms is easy to judge. This is the scriptural principle for judging church orders: “Let all things be done decently and in order” (I Cor. 14:40).

¹⁹*The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), LW 31:353.

²⁰“Consciences should be carefully taught to understand the doctrine of the distinction between the righteousness of the Law and that of grace. The righteousness of grace simply does not pertain to the flesh. For the flesh must not be free but must stay in the grave, in the prison, and on the couch. It must be subjected to the Law and be disciplined by the Egyptians. But the Christian conscience must be dead to the Law, that is, free from the Law, and have no business with it.” *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), LW 26:158.

²¹Ap, IV, 49; Kolb–Wengert, 128.

²²Vilmos Vajta, *Luther on Worship: An Interpretation*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958; reprint, Eugene,

faith is to result from the external Word of God.

Public and Private Worship

Although faith is internal and the only true worship, it depends on externals. Faith relies on the promises in the Word of God fulfilled in Christ. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are divinely instituted ceremonies which also deliver the Word of God.²³ But even the performance of these special ceremonies are not a guarantee of the working of the Spirit.²⁴ The Gospel preached and delivered preserves the sacraments.²⁵ Both Rome and the enthusiasts of Luther's time had the ceremony of the Lord's Supper, though not the true Lord's Supper.²⁶

Worship itself cannot be corporate, because one cannot believe for another, though its fruits are tangible. A corporate service can only be called worship by metonymy, since it is where the Spirit creates faith through the Word in preaching and the sacraments. But in itself performing rituals and ceremonies is not the proper worship of God. The public service is an opportunity to do good and sacrificial works for the neighbor, which can only be done in faith.²⁷ These works must be distinguished from the essence of worship: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37).

While ritualized forms are not required for worshiping, publicly, our neighbors need them. Those who are not very spiritual must have them for the restraining the flesh. Here the teaching of *adiaphora*, things neither commanded, nor forbidden by God in Scripture, is key.²⁸ Wearing

OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004), 89.

²³Absolution is the divinely given power of the Word to release and bind sins, not a definite divine ceremony, since no formula or ritual is given in Scripture. This more general promise ("if you forgive" and "whatever you bind") differs from the direct commands of Christ to "do this" and "baptize them in the name." Jn. 20:23; Mt. 16:18, 18:18, 28:19; Lk. 22:19.

²⁴Only the right use or "administration of the sacraments in harmony with the gospel of Christ" is a mark of the church." Ap VII, 5; Kolb-Wengert, 174. Administration does not refer to the physical distribution, but the preached Gospel which informs their use in faith.

²⁵"The preaching and teaching of God's Word is the most important part of divine service." *The German Mass and Order of Service* (1526), LW 53:63-64. The Gospel cannot be ritualized as a set form or encapsulated in liturgical phrases. Instead, it is the right preaching which allows the right use of rote and mechanical customs.

²⁶One had "the greatest and most terrible abomination," while the other had only bread and wine, because they "perverted and changed it according to their own imagination." SA II, II, 1; FC SD VII, 32; Kolb-Wengert, 301, 598.

²⁷Therefore, "human traditions are not acts of worship necessary for righteousness before God." Ap VII, 34; Kolb-Wengert, 180.

²⁸An *adiaphoron* may be insignificant or very important, but as a corollary of justification all *adiaphora* are

pants is an *adiaphoron* to God—one may call upon God, that is worship Him, while bathing. However to exercise that bare freedom in the public service, would impede the exercise of others’ freedom, and is therefore wrong. On earth, love, not God’s Word, constrains our freedom: “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). Christian freedom is not the ability to do whatever one pleases before men; it is to be free before God in the conscience.²⁹ Meeting together requires rules, forms, discipline, and order—all matters of the law. Here ceremonies find their proper place by regulating the meeting of Christians.³⁰

Christians called by the Word naturally seek to join with one another around the preaching of Christ. It is not God, but sinners, who make *adiaphora* and man-made ceremonies essential.³¹ Disorder is a great danger to the working of the Spirit, though useful ceremonies must not be elevated to the level of true worship.

Ceremonies and the Gospel

Hence ceremonies are to be given the same place in the life of a Christian as models and plans have among builders and artisans. They are prepared, not as a permanent structure, but because without them nothing could be built or made. When the structure is complete the models and plans are laid aside. You see, they are not despised, rather they are greatly sought after; but what we despise is the false estimate of them since no one holds them to be the real and permanent structure.³²

Luther neither despised, nor elevated, free externals in worship. The Lutheran church retained not necessary for salvation because they do help justify. For example, dying on the cross is an *adiaphoron* for us, though certainly Christ’s death for us may not be disparaged. The teaching of *adiaphora* is not a practical rule for determining what should be kept or discarded. It states what God has left free for us to possibly do. *Adiaphora* cannot be avoided, just as man-made traditions cannot be avoided.

²⁹“For even though from the viewpoint of faith, the external orders are free and can without scruples be changed by anyone at any time, yet from the viewpoint of love, you are not free to use this liberty, but bound to consider the edification of the common people.” *Christian Exhortation to the Livonians* (1525), LW 53:47-48.

³⁰There is no tension between good public order and the private exercise of faith, because they operate in different spheres. “Those works are free in the eyes of God which you do of necessity in the eyes of men.” Chemnitz, *Loci*, II, 609. In contrast, one theologian incorrectly claims that there was an “unmistakable tension which existed between liturgical order and freedom in the sixteenth-century Reformation churches.” James 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.

³¹“Since we cannot live our lives without ceremonies and works, and the perverse and untrained youth need to be restrained and saved from harm by such bonds; . . . each one should keep his body under control by means of such works.” *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), LW 31:374.

³²*The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), LW 31:375-76.

most ceremonies they inherited, except those that were contrary to God's Word. Yet, it is not enough to say they retained them. The motivation, reason, and theology are more material than the historical fact, which is not binding on us. "Universal rites are kept for the sake of tranquility," the Confessions state, not because they must be kept.³³ Luther states the same: For the laity "we retain the vestments, altar, and candles until they are used up or we are pleased to make a change. But we do not oppose anyone who would do otherwise."³⁴ All good ceremonies were willingly retained in freedom, not due to any law or divine necessity.³⁵ Although Lutherans may not be distinguished by appearance from the Roman church, the use and justification of those traditions is radically different.³⁶

Ceremonial *adiaphora* are free, because the Gospel and salvation do not depend on them. Worship in its essence is simple and free of ritual, but sinners need a structured service because they so easily hurt others by abusing Christian freedom.³⁷ Luther himself did not care for elaborate ceremonies and complicated rubrics. Yet, people at that time were accustomed to them, and changing externals cannot change the heart, where God is worshiped or an idol made. Despite the transitory nature and dubious origin of many Roman ceremonies, the opposite error was an even greater danger. The hasty destruction of ceremonies and traditions was of Satan,

³³Ap VII, 34; Kolb–Wengert, 180. "It is not now nor ever has been our intention to abolish the liturgical service of God [cultus dei] completely, but rather to purify the one that is now in use from the wretched accretions which corrupt it and point out an evangelical use." *An Order of Mass and Communion for the Church at Wittenberg* (1523), LW 53:20. The use of forms in faith is far more important than the forms themselves.

³⁴Luther continues with a suggestion: "In the true mass, however, of real Christians, the altar should not remain where it is, and the priest should always face the people as Christ doubtless did in the Last Supper. But let that await its own time." *The German Mass and Order of Service* (1526), LW 53:69.

³⁵Luther saw no harm in disregarding the liturgical tradition. What matters is how it is done. Offenses, not works of love, create "wars" as we have today. "Therefore all those have erred who have helped and consented to abolish the mass; not that it was not a good thing, but that it was not done in an orderly way. ... For it was done in wantonness, with no regard for proper order and with offense to your neighbor." *Invocavit Sermons* (1522), LW 51:73.

³⁶"We observe the Lord's day, Christmas, Easter, and similar holidays in a way that is completely free. We do not burden consciences with these observances; nor do we teach, as did the false apostles and as do the papists, that they are necessary for justification or that we can make satisfaction for our sins through them. But their purpose is that everything be done in the church in an orderly way and without confusion, so that external harmony may not be disturbed; for in the spirit we have another kind of harmony." *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), LW 26:411.

³⁷"But it is also useful to note that God gave Adam Word, worship, and religion in its barest, purest, and simplest form, in which there is nothing laborious, nothing elaborate. For He does not prescribe the slaughter of oxen, the burning of incense, vows, fasting, and other tortures of the body. Only this He wants: that he praise God, that he thank Him, that he rejoice in the Lord, and that he only obey Him by not eating from the forbidden tree. We have remnants of this worship, since Christ has restored it in some measure amid the weakness of our flesh." *Lectures on Genesis* (1542-44), LW 1:106.

Luther proclaimed.³⁸ It does not promote faith or Christ, yet it hinders the weak who are attached to externals and judge by appearance. No good can come from inconsistent or disorderly services.

“There should be external discipline in assemblies, that all things may be done decently and in order, according to I Cor. 14:40. But those who neglect these matters indicate that they believe nothing and despise God and the church. For in an ecclesiastical assembly we should not conduct ourselves as if we were in a tavern. Some dignity is required here.”³⁹

Like breathing oxygen (an indispensable *adiaphoron*), ceremonies cannot be avoided, yet even the most orderly ones must be preached against, because man inherently trusts in his own perceived righteousness in using them.⁴⁰ “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.”⁴¹ Since ceremonies, even the blessed sacraments, are external acts, they remain dangerous to fleshly Christians ignorant of true worship. As the Apology asserts: “This ungodly opinion about works always clings to the world.”⁴² Because even the best ceremonies are misused as instruments of self-justification, every external work done outside of love for the true God must continually be preached against. Then the proper use of everything external in faith can be taught.

³⁸“It is true that [images] are dangerous, and I wish there were none of them on the altars. But we cannot prove it right to mutilate and burn them instead of tolerating them. . . . They will point out that women and wine are also dangerous things and are being misused, and what is there that is not being misused? . . . So we must be wise in our struggle with the petty devil. We must permit images to remain, but preach vigorously against the wrong use of them.” *Receiving Both Kinds* (1522), LW 36:259.

³⁹*Lectures on Genesis* (1542-44), LW 6:231.

⁴⁰“Since human nature and natural reason, as it is called, are by nature superstitious and ready to imagine, when laws and works are prescribed, that righteousness must be obtained through laws and works; and further, since they are trained and confirmed in this opinion by the practice of all earthly lawgivers, it is impossible that they should of themselves escape from the slavery of works and come to a knowledge of the freedom of faith.” *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), LW 31:376.

⁴¹*An Order of Mass and Communion for the Church at Wittenberg* (1523), LW 53:31.

⁴²Ap IV, 206; Kolb–Wengert, 151. In series of provocative analogies, Luther states: “In brief, as wealth is the test of poverty, business the test of faithfulness, honors the test of humility, feasts the test of temperance, pleasures the test of chastity, so ceremonies are the test of the righteousness of faith. . . . Yet a man must live in the midst of wealth, business, honors, pleasures, and feasts, so also **must he live in the midst of ceremonies, that is, in the midst of dangers.** 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. *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), LW 31:375. [emphasis added]

Adiaphora and Freedom

“Having any given liturgy itself is *adiaphora*.”⁴³ However, *adiaphora* means that something is indifferent to salvation and God—not to your fellow man. A misunderstanding of Christian liberty exists on the two extremes of the worship wars.

Christ did not die to free us from rules in civil or ecclesiastical government. Just as earthly laws do not justify or hinder coming to God, neither do church orders. One side takes away, by binding consciences to historical forms, while the other side exercises fleshly freedom in the abolition of what faithful Christians have done respectfully for generations.⁴⁴ *Adiaphora* cannot bring one closer to God. They only serve the cause of order and edification.⁴⁵

A Christian is completely free to worship in any particular fashion in the Spirit. In fact, he is so free he becomes agnostic to the form as long as it does not contradict the truth in which he worships. Christ’s death is alone sufficient for justification, so no ceremonial works are laid on man as duties to appease God. But the spiritual innovators of disorder are not content to exercise their freedom without causing Church-wide unrest. They desire to foist their “spiritual creations” on the church.⁴⁶ In doing so they show their ignorance and disregard for Christ’s sheep.⁴⁷

⁴³ “Of course, liturgy is inevitable.” Daniel R. Hyde, “Lutheran Puritanism?: *Adiaphora* in Lutheran Orthodoxy and Possible Commonalities in Reformed Orthodoxy, *American Theological Inquiry*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (2009), 62. The slogan “The Divine Liturgy is not *adiaphora* (indifferent things)” contains sloppy logic. Gottesdienst: The Journal of Lutheran Liturgy, Accessed June 29, 2012. <http://www.gottesdienst.org/>. There can be no public service without a liturgy or order of some kind. But external order is not salvific—it is of the law. No specific order or liturgy is given by God in His written Word. Therefore it is technically an *adiaphoron*. A liturgy is not “divine” by historical origin (though that seems to be implied by “the”), but by being used for the worship of a divinity—as if there is another kind of worship. A misunderstanding of the teaching of *adiaphora* reveals a deformity of the doctrine of justification.

⁴⁴ “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.” *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), LW 27:4.

⁴⁵ “If [traditions] are not put forth with the understanding that they are necessary for worship to earn merit but solely to serve order, decorum, and edification and do not conflict with Christian liberty, a decision can be made concerning them according as it appears to be conducive to the edification of the church.” Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis: CPH, 1978), I, 306.

⁴⁶ Luther chides such arrogance over externals: “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.

⁴⁷ Contrary to Galatians 5:13-14, such a person thinks “that when the Law says, ‘You shall love your neighbor,’ it is a matter of liberty for the regenerate whether he wants to do this or not.” Martin Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici*, 2 vols., trans. J. A. O. Preus (St. Louis: CPH, 1989), II, 440.

Freedom is in Christ's teaching, which releases men from sins, not in sloughing off physical duties or earthly obligations. True freedom means that a good conscience can be had in Christ while doing works in freedom before the Lord.⁴⁸ The disorderly crowd wants to show how spiritual they are by overturning man-made rules and traditions, instead of using Christ's Word and exercising Christian love.⁴⁹ "These customs, however, as well as all things external and not of faith, are powerless to render one righteous and pious before God. Neither do they hinder justification. Faith may exist equally well with all classes of persons, differing not with any custom and distinctions."⁵⁰ Omitting customs foments disorder and chaos without bringing anyone closer to Christ.⁵¹

Despite the fact that Christian freedom is seldom used correctly, the opposite reaction is to take away Christ, by saying that trusting in Jesus' flesh is not enough to save. "For those who devise and ordain universal customs and orders get so wrapped up in them that they make them into dictatorial laws opposed to the freedom of faith."⁵² The right teaching must set ceremonies in their proper place, because "ecclesiastical statutes" are "only ropes [with which to hang] consciences, regardless of whether they are observed or abolished."⁵³

Reverse Romanism: A Form of Antinomianism

The reaction to Romanism is a cure as bad as the disease. If ceremonies are indifferent to God, then certainly they can be allowed without harm to faith. However, the disorderly emphasis is not on Christ, but on how Christians must use as little ritual and orderly ceremony as possible. "Our reformers overthrow the order. For they begin with shoes and clothing and neglect what is superior and more important."⁵⁴ "The Enthusiasts stress [the spiritual and internal] exclusively

⁴⁸True freedom never *must* be exercised before men, unless it is for their good—as if God's command to love is a free matter! See Chemnitz, *Loci* II, 610.

⁴⁹Omitting the "external worship of God" can be sinful by "causing offense" in a matter completely free to the Christian. AC XXVII, 41; Kolb–Wengert, 80.

⁵⁰*Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, 3.2:291.

⁵¹"Otherwise, if we try to tear [ceremonies] away too suddenly their weak consciences may be utterly shattered and confused, and consequently they end up with neither faith nor works." *Treatise on Good Works* (1520), LW 44:37.

⁵²*Christian Exhortation to the Livonians* (1525), LW 53:45-46.

⁵³Philip Melancthon, Letter to Luther, LW 49:378-79.

⁵⁴*Lectures on Genesis* (1542-44), LW 6:232.

without considering that men live within creation and not through a spirituality divorced from creation.”⁵⁵ It has come to the point where an “openness to change” is considered love, and perhaps even the sum of the Gospel itself.⁵⁶ But God is a God of order (I Cor. 14:33). The Gospel as the sole principle and judge of order is actually disorder, since the Gospel makes a poor law or norm.⁵⁷

What does the radical proponent of up-to-date disorderly services and the hardened Romanist have in common? They both focus on the same thing: externals, which are free in Christ. Change in worship forms is permissible, but if that change causes another to question his faith in Christ, it is sinful, no matter how salutary it seems.⁵⁸ When one person or congregation, even an enlightened pastor, introduces unnecessary change by tearing away accepted forms, they are taking faith in Christ for granted.⁵⁹

As long as ceremonies are not made necessary for salvation, they can be observed in freedom.⁶⁰ Christ is not torn from heaven by doing works, nor by opposing works—faith alone justifies. “In circles where people seek to live without any forms new forms nevertheless constantly take shape,” though they are more flimsy and idiosyncratic than the older, tested ones.⁶¹ Change should be

⁵⁵Vajta, 140.

⁵⁶“Openness to change in such things as the order of worship . . . will reveal the congregation’s eagerness to embrace all people in the love of Christ.” CTCR, *Racism and the Church* (February 1994), 40.

⁵⁷The question of whether a certain form delivers or matches the Gospel is mostly a red herring. Except in the case of false doctrine, it ignores the primary purpose of a church order: to maintain order in the assembly.

⁵⁸Love 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.” C. F. W. Walther, *Essays for the Church*, 2 vols. (St. Louis: CPH, 1992), II, 60. Fellowship and love demand that 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.” Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 3 of 4, trans. T. Engelder, J. T. Mueller, and W. W. F. Albrecht (St. Louis: CPH, 1953), 283.

⁵⁹“So also at the outset a new form of worship has a wonderful effect, and it seems most certain and the truth itself and appears to be pure nectar (for the sectarians are accustomed to promise and boast that there is nothing more certain, nothing better or more outstanding), yet in the end we experience that it was pure darkness, errors, and ignorance.” *Lectures on Genesis* (1542-44), LW 6:229-230. This likewise applies to ancient forms thrust on people as new. This can be just as divisive and offensive as a disorderly approach. It is especially dangerous and sinful when one external worship form is implied as more acceptable to God. There are no Lutheran forms of worship, because Scripture gives none to us. Lutheran worship is not about forms or liturgies, but Christ and His works which give life.

⁶⁰The use of tradition does not imply a doctrinal stance, contra this false and uncharitable logic: “The ‘liturgical repristination’ position is hobbled by its own theological and methodological inadequacies; for example, its manipulation of historical sources to ‘prove’ the orthodoxy of its position, the scurrilous and mean-spirited ways in which the discourse is so often engaged, and the self-secure reluctance even to engage the conversation on liturgy.” Waddell, 4. Most tradition and ritual is done without thinking, simply because it is custom.

⁶¹Giertz, *Liturgy and Awakening*.

orderly and by mutual consent, not just one sinner's impulsive whim.⁶² Freedom of Christ is in the conscience, not in external actions of a congregation.

While *adiaphora* are indifferent to God, we are not God. Neither do we live a vacuum where we can exercise our freedom without consideration of others.⁶³ Entirely "spiritual" corporate worship must ignore and disregard the neighbor who is earthly and physical.⁶⁴ This is contrary to the religion of Christ, who died for all (John 13:34). Luther saw the anti-Romanists becoming latent hyper-Romanists.

In short, it is irksome to God and to men that we begin our Christian life with external matters and pass over that which is really inward. We try to prove ourselves evangelical by receiving the sacrament in both kinds and in our own hands, by pulling down images, by devouring meat, by abstaining from prayer and fasting, and that sort of thing. But nobody will lay hold of faith and love, which alone are essential, and in which alone there is any power. Not one of these externals is necessary. But this emphasis upon externals is an enticement of the devil which he uses to mislead the people, so that they leave the pope and yet do not come to Christ. They are neither papist nor Christian, but continue to hang on to external things as much as the papists do.⁶⁵

Liturgical Legalism

In reaction to churches and pastors creating disorder, there is often an over emphasis on liturgical traditional. The only binding prescription for worship is that it be in the Spirit and truth (John 4:24).⁶⁶ But in making free externals serious business or a matter of the Gospel, Christ's freedom is distorted.⁶⁷ As in disorderly services, the priority of preaching God's Word is lost, if ceremonies are done for their own sake.

⁶² "Such matters of indifference should be permitted because they are harmless customs and are inoffensive. Moreover, if a change is desired, it should not be undertaken by one man alone but by the considered judgment of all the lords and clergy." To Prince George of Anhalt (April 5, 1543), *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, 309.

⁶³ "Nothing in the customary rites may be changed without good reason." Ap XVI, 51; Kolb-Wengert, 230. This is matter of order, not God's command.

⁶⁴ "We poor men, living as we do in our five senses, must always have along with the words at least one outward sign to which we may cling and around which we may gather . . . in order that through the external we may be drawn into the spiritual." *Treatise on the New Testament* (1520), LW 35:86. Luther implies that the sacraments are given on account of our weakness and inattention to the Word.

⁶⁵ *Receiving Both Kinds* (1522), LW 36:262.

⁶⁶ "God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

⁶⁷ "Our side also retains many ceremonies and traditions" as "external worship of God." AC XXVII, 40-41; Kolb-Wengert, 80.

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.⁶⁸

Luther summarized the Roman error:

If these things had been left as child’s play for youth and young pupils, so that they would have had a childlike image of Christian teaching and life, as one must give children dolls, puppets, hobby-horses, and other kinds of children’s toys, if things had gone no further . . . they would confuse no consciences. [But they take them] as an article of faith, so that it must be a sin and must torment the conscience of anyone who does not venerate such child’s play—that is the devil himself!⁶⁹

This may sting many who hold their liturgies dear, but man-made forms do not embody Christ.⁷⁰

Extolling forms and rubrics is loving the shell of the law: outward discipline.⁷¹

Rituals, by definition, do not teach.⁷² Their value is symbolic, not inherent, and their interpretation depends on ingrained doctrine.⁷³ Lutheran Reformers, instead of changing questionable ceremonies, reinterpreted them by teaching.⁷⁴ They even demanded obedience to man-made forms, but only by human authority and for purposes of decency, decorum, and outward unity. In this way the Gospel reigns and the weak and still worldly are not unduly antagonized.

⁶⁸ *The German Mass and Order of Service* (1526), LW 53:90.

⁶⁹ *Exhortation to All Clergy Assembled at Augsburg* (1530), LW 34:59.

⁷⁰ The “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. Only the continual preaching of the Gospel safeguards Christ’s teaching.

⁷¹ Sadly, despite a great emphasis on the Supper today, it is not necessarily because of a love of the Gospel. The Supper today is made into a “quiet” “learning by doing,” in opposition to hearing an overbearing “avalanche of oral proclamations.” Herrlin, 33-34. It is perverted into a work of man, not a promise to be believed.

⁷² “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*. Vol. 57 (1983), 323. Sin is not confronted in symbolic ritual, nor is the Gospel driven home by cultic action.

⁷³ The liturgical movement partakes in a “tremendous overvaluation of the expressive value of formal liturgical language.” Friedrich Flemming, *Die treibenden Kräfte in der lutherischen Gottesdienstreform*, Quoted in Kalb, 81.

⁷⁴ “We gladly keep the ancient traditions” and “interpret them in the best possible way, by excluding the opinion that they justify.” Ap XV, 38; Kolb–Wengert, 229. The 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 seen that we have dropped the elevation [in Wittenberg] and have imitated us. We are pleased with that.” *Table Talk* (1543), LW 54:462.

Great comfort is taken by some in the antiquity and sensuality of liturgical niceties.⁷⁵ But even the sacraments are easily turned into works, where the mere use of them is said to be God-pleasing.⁷⁶ The sacraments can be dangerous and misused ceremonies, not because of their nature, but due to the fact that man finds rest and comfort in his own works, rather than Christ's.⁷⁷ Luther's own practical conservatism did not negate Christian freedom or cause undue offense.

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.⁷⁸

It is love for the neighbor that should motivate us to keep ceremonies that are widely cherished—not a love of God, since He has not expressed that command in Scripture.

Twin Errors

Both sides try to make church order a matter of the Gospel. Proponents of disorder say that Christian freedom demands change and novelty to make the Gospel relevant.⁷⁹ Liturgical legalists, on the other hand, claim that their pet historical forms convey the Gospel best, instead of

⁷⁵Augustine's dictum is helpful: "If we are to look back to long custom or to antiquity alone, then also murders and adulterers, and similar persons can defend their crimes in this way, because they are ancient." Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, I, 307. Their origin and history, even if known, do not determine whether rituals are used in faith or for order.

⁷⁶It is not enough to emphasize the sacramental elements in preaching, they must be proclaimed as part of a promise for faith to rest on. Otherwise, an *opus operatum* is implied and faith buried. "If you accord less honor to the words than to the sacrament, it is a sure sign that you do not properly understand the sacrament. . . . For that reason it is highly important to lead people back from the sacrament to the words, and to accustom them to pay much more attention to the words than to the sacrament; then it would be easy to preach about the honoring the sacrament." *The Adoration of the Sacrament* (1523), LW 36:277-78.

⁷⁷"For every ceremonial act, no matter what kind, seems to be an achievement on the part of man after all." Kalb, 28. "In this way even a sow could be a Christian, for she has a big enough snout to receive the sacrament outwardly." *Invocavit Sermons* (1522), LW 51:91.

⁷⁸*An Order of Mass and Communion for the Church at Wittenberg* (1523), LW 53:19.

⁷⁹As if Scripture and its preaching is not enough to win people for Jesus.

just proclaiming the Gospel. In both cases, the Gospel is reduced to a specific form or demolition of form, even though Christ freed us from levitical worship. They are two sides of the same deformity. Doing external forms is not proper, internal worship. “Where there is no preaching, there is no worship.”⁸⁰

True spiritual spontaneity is an illusion this side of heaven.⁸¹ Meeting at the same time and day is an orderly ritual.⁸² But even the best and most desirable forms are “weak and beggarly elements” before God, sin and Satan.⁸³ The truly free Christian can live with most any form, so long as Christ’s Word is delivered rightly.⁸⁴

The Gospel as a principle for corporate worship inevitably leads to legalism or disorder. The forgiveness of sins makes a poor rule or law for judging worship style. It allows public worship to be a free-for-all where anything goes, so forgiveness is made fleshly. Freedom then becomes a matter of rebellion and deriding external customs which matter to other Christians. But then even the Word of God and sacraments are deprecated, along with other Christians who are not as “free.” Or man-made commands and traditions are instituted as necessary acts of worship thereby wrecking consciences and faith.

If the Gospel takes root, externals will easily change, because people will only care about Christ and the good of their neighbor. But in-fighting over forms and the insatiable itch to innovate liturgically or disorderly can only harm the Church.⁸⁵

⁸⁰Dennis Ngien, “Worship as Radical Reversal in Martin Luther’s *Theologia Crucis*,” *Reformation*, Vol. 12.1 (2007), 10. Gathering in Jesus’ name, which includes His teaching, is sufficient (Matt. 18:20).

⁸¹This is precisely why we need order: we don’t concern ourselves with God’s Word, pray, or sing, without prompting from orders. Now hypocrites and the natural inclination of the flesh dominate others, though in heaven no sin will need to be retrained by laws or external order.

⁸²Even the Quakers who seek refuge from external forms have a Liturgy of Silence. There is no worship with other fleshly men, without some external order.

⁸³Galatians 4:9. “If the Law of God is weak and useless for justification, much more are the laws of the pope weak and useless for justification. I do not intend to reject and condemn his laws altogether; for I say that many of them are useful for external discipline, to keep everything orderly in the churches and to prevent quarrels and hatred, just as the imperial laws are useful for the administration of the commonwealth.” *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), LW 26:407-8.

⁸⁴“Now even though external rites and orders—such as masses, singing, reading, baptizing—add nothing to salvation, yet it is un-Christian to quarrel over such things and thereby to confuse the common people. We should consider the edification of the lay folk more important than our own ideas and opinions. 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.” *Christian Exhortation to the Livonians* (1525), LW 53:47.

⁸⁵“For it is a human freedom when laws are changed without effecting any change in men, but it is Christian

Conclusion

The solution to our problems is not to focus on external worship, either forms or styles. If only these were the issue, and not serious misunderstandings of freedom in Christ. Jesus did not say that laws or right practices mark us, but “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). “It is love that keeps a communion from being torn to shreds.”⁸⁶

Even as we defend traditional ceremonies, we must do so lovingly and with a sound theological basis. Ceremonies should be diligently maintained, but separated from true worship. Man-made liturgical rituals cannot be our cause or banner, because Christ can be had without them.⁸⁷

Order and the inculcation of discipline are important, especially for the training of youth. For outsiders and the weak, uniformity is especially desirable, lest disharmony in externals lead to disagreement in love or doctrine. Yet, these are training wheels for faith and should not be romanticized or clung to as spiritual things, but used simply in an orderly way that Christ’s word may have preeminence.⁸⁸

While externals are not insignificant, weightier matters must take precedence:

At all events, since the end is close at hand, it does not seem to me that it is necessary . . . to be too concerned about introducing ceremonies, making them uniform, and fixing them permanently by law. The one thing that needs to be done is this: the Word must be preached often and purely, and competent and learned ministers must be secured who are concerned above all else that they be of one heart and mind in the Lord. If this is achieved, it will undoubtedly be easy to secure uniformity in ceremonies, or at least tolerate the differences.⁸⁹

freedom when men are changed without changing the Law. Consequently, the same Law that was formerly hateful to the free will now becomes delightful, since love is poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5). *Lectures on Galatians* (1519), LW 27:326.

⁸⁶Walther, II, 56.

⁸⁷In a 1544 note, Luther wrote: “With regard to the elevation in the duchy of Rochlitz, this is how we consider you should proceed. Because such ceremony is acknowledged as free, and in it is no danger to the Christian faith (as long as no bad addition is made), so let lie what has already fallen. If the next one falls after it, so may it also lie. But one should not restore it unless there were to happen a special need, which in this case is not easily to be suspected, as there is nothing in the elevation itself.” Jayson S. Galler, “Martin Luther’s *De Elevatione*,” Themes in the Theology of Martin Luther: Sixteenth Century Studies Conference (2003), 4.

⁸⁸“Liturgical” preaching may be interpreted as “man-made, order, or law-based” preaching. Orderly behavior suffices; liturgical matters do not need to be pointed out and highlighted—Christ’s Word, though, does.

⁸⁹To Prince George of Anhalt (July 10, 1545), *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, 312.