

REV. DR. C.F.W. WALTHER ON LITURGY

The First President of the Missouri Synod
on Lutheran Identity, Liturgy, Ceremonies,
Continuity, & Being Called *“too catholic!”*



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Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.

Hebrews 12:28-29

Dr. WALTHER: We know and firmly hold that the character, the soul of Lutheranism, is not found in outward observances but in the pure doctrine. If a congregation had the most beautiful ceremonies in the very best order, but did not have the pure doctrine, it would be anything but Lutheran. We have from the beginning spoken earnestly of good ceremonies, not as though the important thing were outward forms, but rather to make use of our liberty in these things. For true Lutherans know that although one does not have to have these things (because there is no divine command to have them), one may nevertheless have them because good ceremonies are lovely and beautiful and are not forbidden in the Word of God. Therefore the Lutheran church has not abolished "outward ornaments, candles, altar cloths, statues and similar ornaments," (AP XXIV) but has left them free. The sects proceeded differently because they did not know how to distinguish between what is commanded, forbidden, and left free in the Word of God. We remind only of the mad actions of Carlstadt and of his adherents and followers in Germany and in Switzerland. We on our part have retained the ceremonies and church ornaments in order to prove by our actions that we have a correct understanding of Christian liberty, and know how to conduct ourselves in things which are neither commanded nor forbidden by God.

We refuse to be guided by those who are offended by our church customs. We adhere to them all the more firmly when someone wants to cause us to have a guilty conscience on account of them. The Roman antichristendom enslaves poor consciences by imposing human ordinances on them with the command: "You must keep such and such a thing!"; the sects enslave consciences by forbidding and branding as sin what God has left free. Unfortunately, also many of our Lutheran Christians are still without a true understanding of their liberty. This is demonstrated by their aversion to ceremonies. It is truly distressing that many of our fellow Christians find the difference between Lutheranism and Roman Catholicism in outward things. It is a pity and dreadful cowardice when a person sacrifices the good ancient church customs to please the deluded American denominations just so they won't accuse us of being Roman Catholic! Indeed! Am I to be afraid of a Methodist, who perverts the saving Word, or be ashamed in the matter of my good cause, and not rather rejoice that they can tell by our ceremonies that I do not belong to them?

It is too bad that such entirely different ceremonies prevail in our Synod, and that no liturgy at all has yet been introduced in many congregations.

The prejudice especially against the responsive chanting of pastor and congregations is of course still very great with many people – this does not, however, alter the fact that it is very foolish. The pious church father Augustine said, "*Qui cantat, bis orat--he who sings prays twice.*"

This finds its application also in the matter of the liturgy. Why should congregations or individuals in the congregation want to retain their prejudices? How foolish that would be! For first of all it is clear from the words of St. Paul (1 Cor. 14:16) that the congregations of his time had a similar custom. It has been the custom in the Lutheran Church for 250 years. It creates a solemn impression on the Christian mind when one is reminded by the solemnity of the divine service that one is in the house of God, in childlike love to their heavenly Father, also give expression to their joy in such a lovely manner.

We are not insisting that there be uniformity in perception or feeling or taste among all believing Christians-neither dare anyone demand that all be minded as he. Nevertheless, it remains true that the Lutheran liturgy distinguishes Lutheran worship from the worship of other churches to such an extent that the houses of worship of the latter look like lecture halls in which the hearers are merely addressed or instructed, while our churches are in truth houses of prayer in which Christians serve the great God publicly before the world. Uniformity of ceremonies (perhaps according to the Saxon Church order published by the Synod, which is the simplest among the many Lutheran church orders) would be highly desirable because of its usefulness. A poor slave of the pope finds one and same form of service, no matter where he goes, by which he at once recognizes his church. With us it is different. Whoever comes from Germany without a true understanding of the doctrine often has to look for his church for a long time, and many have already been lost to our church because of this search. How different it would be if the entire Lutheran church had a uniform form of worship! This would, of course, first of all yield only an external advantage, however, one which is by no means unimportant. Has not many a Lutheran already kept his distance from the [Calvinist] sects because he saw at the Lord's Supper they broke the bread instead of distributing wafers?

The objection: "What would be the use of uniformity of ceremonies?" was answered with the counter question, "What is the use of a flag on the battlefield? Even though a soldier cannot defeat the enemy with it, he nevertheless sees by the flag where he belongs. We ought not to refuse to

walk in the footsteps of our fathers. They were so far removed from being ashamed of the good ceremonies that they publicly confess in the passage quoted: "It is not true that we do away with all such external ornaments"

(Walther, Explanation of Thesis XVIII, D, Adiaphora, of the book The True Visible Church, delivered at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Indianapolis, Indiana, Beginning August 9, 1871, at the 16th Central District Convention, translated by Fred Kramer, printed in Essays for the Church (CPH: 1992), I:193-194).

Another excerpt from Walther's writings:

Whenever the Divine Service once again follows the old Evangelical-Lutheran agendas (or church books), it seems that many raise a great cry that it is "Roman Catholic": "Roman Catholic" when the pastor chants "The Lord be with you" and the congregation responds by chanting "and with thy spirit"; "Roman Catholic" when the pastor chants the collect and the blessing and the people respond with a chanted "Amen." Even the simplest Christian can respond to this outcry: "Prove to me that this chanting is contrary to the Word of God, then I too will call it 'Roman Catholic' and have nothing more to do with it. However, you cannot prove this to me." If you insist upon calling every element in the divine service "Romish" that has been used by the Roman Catholic Church, it must follow that the reading of the Epistle and Gospel is also "Romish." Indeed, it is mischief to sing or preach in church, for the Roman Church has done this also . . .

Those who cry out should remember that the Roman Catholic Church possesses every beautiful song of the old orthodox church. The chants and antiphons and responses were brought into the church long before the false teachings of Rome crept in. This Christian Church since the beginning, even in the Old Testament, has derived great joy from chanting... For more than 1700 years orthodox Christians have participated joyfully in the divine service. Should we, today, carry on by saying that such joyful participation is "Roman Catholic"? God forbid! Therefore, as we continue to hold and to restore our wonderful divine services in places where they have been forgotten, let us boldly confess that our worship forms do not tie us with the modern sects or with the church of Rome; rather, they join us to the one, holy Christian Church that is as old as the world and is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. [C.F.W. Walther, writing in *Der Lutheraner* July 19, 1853, issue, volume 9, number 24, page 163.]