

The Lutheran Way to Be Catholic:

Martin Luther's Intentional Conservatism in His Reform of the Medieval Mass

1. Rites and ceremonies that are neither commanded nor forbidden by God's Word are, in principle, matters of Christian freedom, so that old usages can be set aside, and new usages can be introduced. But Christian freedom must always be exercised in love for the neighbor: with careful consideration for the weak in faith; and with careful consideration for what best serves the unity of the church, the faithful confession of God's truth by the church, and the liturgical and devotional needs of God's people within the church.

...everyone makes his own order of service. Some have the best intentions, but others have no more than an itch to produce something novel so that they might shine before men as leading lights, rather than being ordinary teachers... ...while the exercise of this freedom is up to everyone's conscience and must not be cramped or forbidden, nevertheless, *we must make sure that freedom shall be and remain a servant of love and of our fellow-man. Where the people are perplexed and offended by these differences in liturgical usage, ...we are certainly bound to forego our freedom* and seek, if possible, to better [them] rather than to offend them by what we do or leave undone. Seeing then that this external order, while it cannot affect the conscience before God, may yet serve the neighbor, we should seek to be of one mind in Christian love, as St. Paul teaches. *As far as possible we should observe the same rites and ceremonies, just as all Christians have the same baptism and the same sacrament [of the altar]* and no one has received a special one of his own from God. (Martin Luther, "The German Mass and Order of Service," *Luther's Works* 53:61)

... I have 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 the fickle and fastidious spirits who rush in like unclean swine without faith or reason, and who delight only in novelty and tire of it as quickly, when it has worn off.* Such people are a nuisance even in other affairs, but in spiritual matters, they are absolutely unbearable. ... But since there is hope now that the hearts of many have been enlightened and strengthened by the grace of God, and since the cause of the kingdom of Christ demands that at long last offenses should be removed from [the kingdom of Christ], we must dare something in the name of Christ. For it is right that we should provide at least for a few, lest *by our desire to detach ourselves from the frivolous faddism of some people, we provide for nobody, or by our fear of ultimately offending others, we endorse their universally held abominations.* Therefore, ...we will deal with an evangelical form of saying mass (as it is called) and of administering communion. (Martin Luther, "An Order of Mass and Communion for the Church at Wittenberg," *Luther's Works* 54:19-20)

2. The Lutheran Church is the continuation of the ancient catholic church, as reformed according to the gospel. The papal church is similarly derived from the ancient church, so that it is like the Lutheran Church in many ways. But the papal church has also departed from the faith of the ancient church in many of its teachings. The Lutheran Reformers identified with the Christian tradition that had been passed down to them, and saw themselves as the legitimate heirs of that tradition.

...they say, "we papists have remained in the ancient and original church ever since the time of the apostles. Therefore we are the true church, for we have come from the ancient church and have remained in it; but you have fallen away from us and have become a new church opposed to us." Answer: "But what if I prove that *we have remained faithful to the true ancient church, indeed, that we are the true ancient church* and that you have fallen away from us, that is, the ancient church, and have set up a new church against the ancient one?" ...

First, ...we...have received holy baptism... ...it is the same ancient baptism instituted by Christ, in which the apostles and the early church and all Christians have been baptized. If then *we have the same baptism as the original, ancient (and, as the creed says, "catholic," that is, "universal") Christian church*, and are baptized in it, then we belong to the same ancient universal church... Second, *...we have the holy sacrament of the altar*, just as Christ himself instituted it and the apostles and the whole of Christendom have since practiced it. ... Third, *...we*

have the true and ancient keys, and...use them...to bind and loose sins... This we do in accordance with Christ's institution and the practice of the apostles and the whole of Christendom until the present day. ... Fourth, ...*we have in fulness and purity the preaching office and the word of God*, that we teach and preach diligently, without adding any new, sectarian, or human doctrine, and in this we do just as Christ commanded and as the apostles and all of Christendom have done. ... Fifth, ...*we...do indeed hold, believe, sing, and confess the Apostles' Creed*, the ancient creed of the ancient church... Sixth, ...*we have the same prayer as the ancient church, the same Lord's Prayer*. ...*we sing the same psalms and praise and thank God with united heart and voice* according to the teaching of Christ, the practice of the apostles and the ancient church, and their command to us to follow their example. ...

...in all these and other things *we are like the ancient church and may truly be called the ancient church* – for these things are not new or invented by us... For *the original and ancient church shines forth once more (like the sun emerging from the clouds behind which it was shining, but where it could not be seen)*... (Martin Luther, "Against Hanswurst," *Luther's Works* 41:194-96, 198)

...the papal church...might say and probably will say, "Why do you depict us shamefully as a new, apostate church, when we have baptism, the sacrament, the keys, the creed, and the gospels, just like the ancient church from which we derive? ... I answer, "It is true, I admit, that the church in which you sit derives from the ancient church as well as we... *...we have received everything from the church before you (not from you)*. ... But we say you do not remain in [the church] but become the erring, apostate...church... (Martin Luther, "Against Hanswurst," *Luther's Works* 41:207)

...the Mass...previously was held to be a sacrifice or work by which one person might acquire grace for another. Instead of such a mass, a godly order of service is observed: the holy sacrament of the body and blood of Christ is distributed in both kinds to each person, according to each person's faith and need. We also abolish the ceremonies of the church which oppose God's Word. We allow the others to be free to be used or not, in accord with love, so that we might not carelessly offend without reason or disturb the general peace unnecessarily. (Martin Luther et al., Schwabach Articles 16-17, *Sources and Contexts of the Book of Concord*, edited by Robert Kolb and James A. Nestingen, 87)

3. Decisions about the use or non-use of rites and ceremonies that are neither commanded nor forbidden are to be made with a conscientious concern for confessing the full truth of God's Word, for advancing the influence of God's Word among God's people, and for cultivating and promoting reverence, peace, and good order in the church. These should always be the reasons that stand behind our liturgical practices, even if the practices themselves are not always the same everywhere.

God's Word is the treasure that makes everything holy. By it all the saints have themselves been made holy. At whatever time God's Word is taught, preached, heard, read, or pondered, there the person, the day, and the work is hallowed, not on account of the external work but on account of the Word that makes us all saints. ... *Places, times, persons, and the entire outward order of worship have therefore been instituted and appointed in order that God's Word may exert its power publicly.* Because so much depends on God's Word that no holy day is sanctified without it, we must realize that God wants this [third] commandment to be kept strictly and will punish all who despise his Word and refuse to hear and learn it, especially at the times appointed. Therefore this commandment is violated not only by *those who grossly misuse and desecrate the holy day*, like those who in their greed or frivolity neglect the hearing of God's Word or lie around in taverns... It is also violated by *that other crowd who listen to God's Word as they would to any other entertainment*... (Martin Luther, Large Catechism I:91-92, 94-96, *The Book of Concord*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, 398-99)

...a council has no power to impose new ceremonies on Christians, to be observed on pain of mortal sin or at the peril of conscience – such as fast days, feast days, food, drink, garb. ...*a council has the power to institute some ceremonies*, provided...that they are useful and profitable to the people and show fine, orderly discipline and conduct. Thus *it is necessary*, for example, *to have certain days, and also places where one can assemble; also certain hours for preaching and for the public administration of the sacraments, for praying, singing, praising and thanking God, etc.* – as St. Paul says, I Corinthians 14, "All things should be done decently and in order." Such items...serve...the people's need, profit, and order. In summary, *these must and cannot be dispensed with if the church is to survive*. But if someone is occasionally hindered by some emergency, sickness, or whatever it may be from observing this, it need not be sin. (Martin Luther, "On the Councils and the Church," *Luther's Works* 41:130-31)

I also wish that we had *as many songs as possible in the vernacular which the people could sing* during mass... For who doubts that *originally all the people sang these which now only the choir sings...*? ... But poets are wanting among us, or not yet known, who could compose *evangelical and spiritual songs*, as Paul calls them, *worthy to be used in the church of God*. (Martin Luther, “An Order of Mass and Communion for the Church at Wittenberg,” *Luther’s Works* 54:36)

...even if different people make use of different rites, let no one judge or despise the other, but every man be fully persuaded in his own mind. *Let us feel and think the same, even though we may act differently*. ... 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. Faith and love commend us to God. (Martin Luther, “An Order of Mass and Communion for the Church at Wittenberg,” *Luther’s Works* 54:31)

4. The safest and best approach in most circumstances is to preserve historic and familiar ecclesiastical usages, when those usages are still able to serve their proper purpose as teaching tools, and as aids in the confession of the pure gospel and in personal and corporate Christian devotion. This is not to be done in a way that would bind consciences to these usages as such, but it is to be done with respect for the good examples that have been set for us by our fathers in the faith, and with a humble willingness to honor and learn from the wisdom of those fathers.

The service now in common use everywhere goes back to genuine Christian beginnings, as does the office of preaching. But as [the office of preaching] has been perverted by the spiritual tyrants, so the [service now in common use] has been corrupted by the hypocrites. As *we do not on that account abolish the office of preaching, but aim to restore it again to its right and proper place, so it is not our intention to do away with the service, but to restore it again to its rightful use*. (Martin Luther, “Concerning the Order of Public Worship,” *Luther’s Works* 53:11)

It is not now nor ever has been our intention to abolish the liturgical service of God completely, but rather to purify the one that is now in use from the wretched accretions which corrupt it *and to point out an evangelical use*. (Martin Luther, “An Order of Mass and Communion for the Church at Wittenberg,” *Luther’s Works* 54:20)

Let the chants in the Sunday masses and Vespers be retained; they are quite good and are taken from Scripture. However, one may lessen or increase their number. (Martin Luther, “Concerning the Order of Public Worship,” *Luther’s Works* 53:13)

We permit [vestments] to be used in freedom, as long as people refrain from ostentation and pomp. (Martin Luther, “An Order of Mass and Communion for the Church at Wittenberg,” *Luther’s Works* 54:31)

Luther was the guest of Duke John of Anhalt... The Duke asked: “Herr Doctor, how can it be that you have ordered it so that the priests do not wear the cope while preaching in the church?” The doctor answered: “I have not ordered that and *I would wish that it was yet the custom* – especially in the smaller cities and villages where *the poor priests are wearing clothes so worn that one cannot tell who is the priest, a citizen or farmer*. There *I would wish that the priest had a cope on [so] that he might be taken for a different and higher person*.” (Peder Severinson, *The Proper Communion Vestments*)

I only desire to have the conscience free and to have all Christians *make the sign of the cross against a faith which believes that the pope is right in his rule*. For such a faith destroys faith in Christ and drowns the whole world in nothing but sin and destruction. (Martin Luther, “Answer to the Hyperchristian, Hyperspiritual, and Hyperlearned Book by Goat Emser in Leipzig,” *Luther’s Works* 39:202)

“If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.”
– Bert Lance

“Don’t ever take a fence down until you know the reason why it was put up.”
– John F. Kennedy (paraphrasing G. K. Chesterton)

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