

THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST IN THE DIVINE SERVICE

With Practical Advice to Clergy and Laity
on Coping with Liturgical Aberration and Irreverent Worship

“Who in the heavens can be compared to the LORD?
Who among the sons of the mighty can be likened to the LORD?
God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints,
And to be held in reverence by all those around Him.”

Psalm 89:7

To hold someone in reverence, according to Mirriam Webster is to have a “profound adoring awed respect” for them.¹ The word has ancient roots. “Revere” comes from the Latin *revereri* which is based on the word *vereor*, meaning to respect, fear, be in dread of, to be afraid.² Both in language and in life, reverence grows out of fear.

The two concepts are so bound together in Biblical thought that Luther finds both words, reverence and fear, in a single word from the Hebrew and likewise from the Greek. And in further explaining the fear of God Luther uses a third and fourth concept which He claims are inherent in the very same word: worship and holiness. And indeed the concepts are linked, one leading right into the other. Filial fear in God’s holy presence elicits reverence. Fear and reverence together constitute worship. The encounter with God’s holiness makes the place itself holy, which in turn leads to a sort of reverence for that place and what happens there. You see the things are all bound up together, so to speak, so that it is difficult to imagine one without the others if the encounter with God is experienced through faith: fear, reverence, holiness, and worship. Hence Luther, in His Lecture on Genesis 22 says: “reverence and fear constitute the true and God-pleasing worship.”³

People speak of feeling reverence, but really reverence is not so much an emotion as it is an attitude. To be reverent is to be humble and respectful before one who is superior or who is in a superior position. One can feel happy or sad, jubilant or mournful, celebratory or depressed, and still be reverent. The attitude is not dependant upon emotions, but exists along side of them, and tempers them. Restraint is exercised where there is reverence, whatever the emotions.

Where there is real reverence the inner attitude finds outward expression. Things are done differently when people are being reverent toward someone. There is a certain protocol that is followed. Things are done in an orderly manner, and that manner is defined not by the people, but by the one being held in reverence.

Take, for example, an encounter with the Queen of England. If you meet the queen there is going to be a certain order to things, an order that is different from your normal behavior. She sets the protocol, not you. And you must follow the rules that her higher position demands, that is if you

¹ *Mirriam Webster Online Dictionary*

² *Concise Oxford Dictionary Online*

³ Luther, Martin, *Luther’s works, vol. 4 : Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 21-25* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964.

are acting reverently and properly. She is to be addressed a certain way, bowed or curtsied to, or, if she chooses, one may shake her hand. Meeting the Queen is not like meeting your aunt at the airport where you might rush up and give her a big hug. The Queen is not to be touched in any way beyond the possible handshake. In fact, there was a bit of a hubbub a few years ago when a Canadian sports star put his arm around the queen's shoulder when having a picture taken with her.⁴ That just isn't done. There is to be a certain decorum, a reverence for the Queen's office.

Being in the presence of God demands reverence too - both in attitude and in action. Twice in Leviticus the Lord commands the Israelites: "You shall keep My Sabbaths and reverence My sanctuary: I am the LORD".⁵ The tabernacle was the place where God had recorded His name and promised to be present among the Israelites and bless them.⁶ His presence demanded reverence in attitude and action. Now lest one consign this to the defunct ceremonial laws of the Old Testament, the command is repeated in the New Testament: "since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire".⁷ The kingdom comes to us when we encounter Christ through His Word and Sacraments. The kingdom is founded on Christ and centered on Him. He comes to us with His grace which we receive with faith, that is, believing with reverence and godly fear. Christ's presence among us then, according to Hebrews, demands reverence just as it did in the Old Testament tabernacle.

For this reason the Church has established certain liturgical forms and actions around the means through which Christ is present with her. Liturgy and ceremony help lend order to our worship, help focus the one worshipping on the chief things of worship and give proper expression to our reverence toward God.⁸

We must remember, however, that reverence is not outward action alone, but springs from faith. It is an inner attitude of profound respect born of faith in Christ that finds outward expression. Without faith, all outward expressions of reverence are worthless and empty. Beautiful liturgies and ceremonies do nothing if the Gospel is not given and received by faith. This became a problem in the Temple worship of the Old Testament. All of the outward forms were in place, but there was no faith on the part of those performing them. There was a show of reverence, but no inward fear of God. Fear and reverence belong together. And so the Lord said: "Bring no more futile sacrifices; incense is an abomination to Me. The New Moons, the Sabbaths, and the calling of assemblies-- I cannot endure iniquity and the sacred meeting. Your New Moons and your appointed feasts My soul hates; they are a trouble to Me, I am weary of bearing them".⁹

⁴ BBC World News, "Family Snap Breaks Royal Protocol" October 16, 2002

⁵ Leviticus 19:30; 26:2. All Scripture quotations are taken from the NKJV.

⁶ Exodus 20:24

⁷ Hebrews 12:28

⁸ In Psalm 96 the Psalmist speaks of ceremonial action, of worshipping, bowing down and kneeling before God. Three times in the New Testament Epistles, St. Paul speaks in similar fashion about bowing the knee in reverence to God.

⁹ Isaiah 1:13-14

These were the very liturgies and ceremonies God Himself had established. And yet even these without faith are abominable to Him. Likewise in Jeremiah God warns: “Hear the word of the LORD, all you of Judah who enter in at these gates to worship the LORD! Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: ‘Amend your ways and your doings, and I will cause you to dwell in this place. Do not trust in these lying words, saying, “The temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD are these.”’”¹⁰ In other words, don’t just perform the divinely appointed ceremonies and liturgies, but have faith. It is not that God does not want the people to act with reverence according to His command, but that He wants them to do so with faith. And so Jesus chastises the Pharisees of His day: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithes of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, *without leaving the others undone*”.¹¹ Reverent acts of worship done apart from faith have no value whatsoever. Yet faith if it is genuine is bound to perform outward acts of worship in reverence before God.

Real Lutherans confess the Second Person of the Holy Trinity to be present in a local and even physical way in the Divine Service. Through the proclaimed Word of the Gospel, the gracious voice of Christ is heard. Our Lord says to His preachers: “He who hears you hears me” and has promised them “to be with you always even to the end of the age”.¹² Where the Word is rightly preached, Christ is truly and locally present with His grace. In addition to this verbal presence of God the Word among His people, there is also His physical presence in the Holy Communion. He has promised to come to us under bread and wine, and has stated that these are His body and blood. The incarnate Christ deigns to come to us through the stuff of this world again. And we believe His Word. When He says that bread and wine are His body and blood, we believe it. We do not reason away His Word and call these things symbolic, neither do we say that He is only spiritually present in the bread and wine, but we confess Him to be with us physically as He has promised to be.



The presence of God the Son among us in our worship service calls for faith and reverence. Liturgical acts, even when properly done, are not enough. Faith must lay hold on Christ and cling to Him, seeking His promised blessings in the places He has designated. Such faith, as I said earlier, is prone to action. Luther wrote: “Worship [*anbeten*] is not a matter of the mouth, like praying, petitioning, and pleading... It is not a function of the mouth but of the whole body. It is to bow the head, bend the body, fall on the knees, prostrate one’s self, and so forth, and to do such things as a sign and acknowledgment of an authority and power; just as people bow in silence before secular princes and Lords...” He goes on then to say that such outward forms are not enough, but that the heart must truly have faith in Christ. But then he adds: “But where

¹⁰ Jeremiah 7:2-4

¹¹ Matthew 23:23 (emphasis added)

¹² Luke 10:16; Matthew 28:20

worship is offered from the heart, there follows quite properly also that outward bowing, bending, kneeling, and adoration with the body.”¹³ What Luther is speaking about here is the ceremonial that accompanies the liturgy, for he immediately begins to apply this principle to the adoration of Christ at the elevation in the service of the Sacrament.

The use of the historic liturgy is not a guarantee that true worship and reverence will take place. There will always be those who do all of the right actions without faith, or who confess the right things, but do the liturgy in a sloppy or unthinking manner, that is, without reverence. The historic liturgy, however, is designed to promote faith in Christ and reverence for His presence in the means of grace. How does the historic liturgy promote faith? It does so by restating the Gospel story, often using the very words of God, through fixed liturgical texts. It begins in the Old Testament in anticipation of Christ’s coming, proclaims His incarnate arrival, reveals Him through its confession, adores Him in His passion, and proclaims His death and resurrection. These fixed liturgical texts also happen to follow the structure of the Creed.¹⁴

The liturgy does more than simply tell the story of the Gospel, however. As it tells the story it also points directly to the places where the story finally comes to us. Nearly every liturgical text and ceremony that is used is intended to direct the worshipper to Christ who is present in the means of grace, either in preparation for receiving Him or in reflection upon having just received Him. It is not just that there is an ordered way of doing things, it is that the order is centered on the local presence of Jesus among the assembly. When the liturgy is done properly and reverently especially when done with a full historic ceremonial, people will see, hear, smell and finally taste where Jesus is to be found. And because Jesus is present all is heightened. Common speech and action are put away and replaced with the best and most reverent that can be offered.

Now to make a very long introduction short: if we really believe that Christ is present in a local way and not just in an omnipresent or spiritual sense, then we must first of all believe Him and cling to Him, and secondly worship Him reverently. The signers of the Augsburg Confession made a bold claim about their worship before the Emperor Charles V: “Without boasting, it is manifest that the Mass is observed among us with greater devotion and more earnestness than among our opponents.”¹⁵ Can that still be said by Lutherans today?

¹³ Luther, Martin, “On the Adoration of the Sacrament” *Luther’s works, vol. 36 : Word and Sacrament II* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.) 292.

¹⁴ For a fuller treatment of these two points, see the author’s book *About Our Liturgy: Meaning, History and Practice*, especially the chapter “Liturgy, Creed, and the Life of Christ.”

¹⁵ CA XXIV:1. The Latin states: “Our churches are falsely accused of abolishing the Mass. Actually, the Mass is retained among us and is celebrated with the greatest reverence.” Likewise Ap XXIV:1 states: “[W]e must repeat the prefatory statement that we do not abolish the Mass but religiously keep and defend it. . . We keep traditional liturgical forms, such as the order of the lessons, prayers, vestments, etc.” This section also addresses the use of ceremonial acts: “The purpose of observing ceremonies is that men may learn the Scriptures and that those who have been touched by the Word may receive faith and fear and so may also pray. Therefore we keep Latin for the sake of those who study and understand it, and we insert German hymns to give the common people something to learn that will arouse their faith and fear. This has always been the custom in the churches. Though German hymns have varied in frequency, yet almost everywhere the people sang in their own language. No one has ever written or suggested that men benefit from hearing lessons they do not understand, or from ceremonies that do not teach or admonish, simply *ex opere operato*, by the mere doing or observing. Out with such pharisaic ideas!”

The problems facing the Missouri Synod and other confessional Lutheran bodies today concerning worship are manifold. It cannot be denied, I think, that one of the chief and central problems is faith in the real presence of Christ in the Divine Service. It is not enough to make a confession on paper of Christ's presence and work through the means of grace. Such a confession must also be made through our actions, that is, through the way we worship. The underlying problem with both so-called contemporary worship on the one hand and the liberal liturgical renewal liturgies on the other hand is that in practice they both deny the centrality of Jesus' presence to the worship service. In both forms the focus of the service is not Jesus, but the congregation. Jesus is spoken of and celebrated to be sure, but His verbal and sacramental presence is ignored or minimized.

Worship practices that are focused on the desires of the people rather than on the presence of Christ through His gifts reverse the fundamental rules of reverence. Indeed it is the people who are revered in such "worship". There is a subtle idolatry taking place in such worship (an idolatry that is now being expressed through the not-so-subtle question often posed by pastors to one another about church attendance "How many do you worship?") What happens in worship is *for* the people, not *of* the people. It is not their desires, emotions, and whims that are to be honored, but Christ's institutions, presence and grace. The question for the Missouri Synod is "Do we really believe in the presence of Christ among us?" If we do then we must be reverent in our worship. Faith knows of no other way to behave before Him.

Now to practical matters: What about when you are in a parish that does not use the historic liturgy of the Church or that does so irreverently? First I would like to address the pastors who are here. It is incumbent upon you to lead your flock in the proper direction in all things, including their manner of worship. I realize that it is not easy to make liturgical changes in a parish and that it may not be wise to do so quickly. But you have the office of teaching and preaching in the stead of Christ. Use it! Teach Bible Classes on the topic of worship. Catechize the children under your care on the meaning and practice of the liturgy. Incorporate the liturgy into your preaching. Use the liturgy in your own devotional life and in the devotions you lead in the various settings of your congregation. And above all be bold to confess and lead. Revere Christ rather than men. And protect your flock from those who would lead them astray, warning them of what they will find elsewhere and showing them to avoid it.

Enough about the pastors, though. It is the laity I think that have often have the harder struggle, who are forced to suffer the poor leadership of ignorant and weak pastors and the bad decisions of those who lead in the wrong direction. What can you do as lay people? There are several things I encourage you to do.

First, educate yourself on the Lutheran liturgy. Attend the classes that your church conducts about worship. Get your hands on books and articles that explain the purpose of the liturgy and its ceremonies, that unfold the meaning of what we do in Church each week. Nowadays there are lots of opportunities for you to learn theology outside of your own parish, at conferences like this one, at the upcoming Liturgy for the Laity lectures held at Pastor Preus's congregation, at the Good Shepherd Institute at our Fort Wayne Seminary, and the like. If you are going to try to defend the historic liturgy, you have to understand it and be able to articulate that understanding to others.

Second, speak with your pastors about worship issues in your congregation. To often people avoid talking with their pastors. I've been told that folks are afraid to confront their pastor about a problem they perceive. This has always baffled me. I can't understand for the life of me, why someone would be afraid of me. And I think most pastors love to talk with their parishioners and want them to come to them with any problems or issues they might have over their doctrine or practice. Moreover, we are commanded to honor those whom God has placed in authority over us. There is a sort of reverence for the pastoral office that requires you to speak to your pastors about any issues you may have with their decisions and leadership. And there is a responsibility to do so. For it is up to the laity to make sure that they are listening to one who preaches and practices faithfully.

Third, get involved and make your voice heard. Attend the various meetings of your parish and don't be afraid to raise difficult issues or make your opinion known (provided you've spoken with your pastor already about it). Be willing to take up a position of leadership if your able, or participate on your congregation's board of elders or worship board. Help with Altar guild, join the choir, get involved in the worship life of your congregation and be a positive voice for faithful and reverent liturgy and practice.

Sometimes the problem is not found in one's local congregation, but in another parish one has visited. What should one do when one visits another congregation? First of all do your homework ahead of time. Ask your pastor about the congregations in the area you are planning to visit. Get on the internet and visit the congregations' webpages, or check for a listing of liturgical congregations in that area. Call the congregation ahead of time and ask about the worship opportunities they provide. I think many an unpleasant Sunday could be avoided if people would just think ahead.

But what should you do when you suddenly find yourself in one of those uncomfortable services where you know things are not being done properly? Well, you have several options, and you are left to your own piety in choosing what to do. Some choose simply to observe the service rather than participate. There is nothing wrong with visiting a church and just watching what is done. In some ways it can be very educational to observe the way others do things, and can help reinforce an appreciation for good liturgy and ceremony. Others participate only in the parts they feel comfortable about. They may not be comfortable saying the confession of sins the pastor composed for that week, but know that they can speak the Nicene Creed and the like. Generally it is a good idea not to commune when one is not comfortable with what is being preached or done in the service. Communion is an expression of unity and fellowship, and should not be received with others lightly. And finally, be sure to speak with the local pastor afterward and in a respectful and loving way express your discontent with the service or the way it was conducted. Perhaps he will rethink his practice based on your kind observances.

Of course we all know that problems in the theology and practice of worship are not bound to any one parish. We are facing a synod wide problem. And here too there is room for the lay person to make a difference. If you have a good pastor who understands and uses the liturgy, I cannot stress how important it is to support your pastor's involvement in the greater church. Too many parishes want to keep their pastor all to themselves and fail to recognize that they are part of a synod

and that their pastor may be needed outside of their parish walls. And you can be involved too. Attend meetings in your area about what is happening in the synod. Write letters to those in positions of influence and authority expressing your concerns. Write to the synod's publications, the Witness and the Reporter, when appropriate. Get involved in the political life of the synod by being willing to be a delegate to district and national conventions. Stand for election if you are willing and able. I personally do not place a lot of hope in our synod in the realm of worship. But we must not give her up without a fight.¹⁶ For the Gospel is what is really at stake in this issue of worship, and the salvation of souls. May our Lord grant us His grace to believe it, act from it, and defend it.

“Give unto the LORD the glory due to His name;
Worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness.”

Psalm 29:2

To Him be all honor and glory in His Church now and forever.

Rev. David A. Kind
“Come Let us Reason Together” Conference
St. John Lutheran Church, Maple Grove, Minnesota
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¹⁶ During the question and answer session at the end of this conference, a question was posed regarding how long the presenters thought it would take to leave the LC-MS and begin work forming a new synod. The author's response was that it would be a minimum of four years before there could be any decision made as to whether to leave the synod or not. The basis for that figure of four years is the LC-MS's process of doctrinal dissent. Members of synod ought first to publicly dissent from erroneous positions taken by the synod. This dissent must be amongst the dissenter's peers and must be presented to the CTCR. The dissenter can then attempt to bring a resolution to the synodical convention for action to rectify the error of the synod. If the synod does not rectify the error, the dissenter should then declare himself in a state of confession against the public position of the synod. If the matter is not cleared up before the next subsequent convention, the dissenter could justly consider leaving the synod, knowing that he has done all that is possible to call the synod to repentance. The author is no expert on synodical politics or procedures and is open to clarification or corrections regarding the above procedure.

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