

LCMS

Theses on Worship

September 28, 2009

Dear Friends in Christ:

Grace and peace be with you, from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!

On behalf of the Council of Presidents of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and Council Chairman Dr. Larry Stoterau, with this brief memo I share with our beloved Synod the document, titled “Theses on Worship.” This document has been in the process of preparation by the COP since the 2007 Synod convention.

The Council of Presidents is keenly aware of the diversity of worship practices in LCMS congregations. This diversity in many instances has resulted in disharmony and even polarization. In order to foster God-pleasing harmony in this matter, the COP encourages pastors, worship leaders, musicians, and other church leaders to engage in prayerful conversation with one another, in submission to God’s Holy Word and the Lutheran Confessions.

To that end and to assist with that process, the Council of Presidents presents these succinct but significant “Theses on Worship.” This document was approved unanimously by the COP at its regular meeting September 22, 2009, in St. Louis. As you will see, these theses are based on and supported solely by scriptural and confessional references. They are designed for wide distribution and study throughout the LCMS.

Please be assured that the Council of Presidents ardently desires to assist our Synod in every way possible to achieve harmony and concord in the theology and practice of worship. We recognize that different affinities in music and worship expressions exist among us. Yet we believe that our future with one another as brothers and sisters in Christ must be firmly grounded in the light of Christ’s forgiveness, grace, and mercy.

While seeking to enhance our worship of the triune God with a variety of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod remains steadfastly committed to the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. Through this varied repertoire we joyfully confess all that God has done for us, declaring the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light. May the songs of the Church prevail beyond human adversity and strife, confessing our eternal hope in Christ Jesus, our Lord and Redeemer.

Jerry Kieschnick

Dr. Gerald B. Kieschnick, President
The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod

"Transforming lives through Christ's love ... in time ... for eternity ..." John 3:16-17

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Theses on Worship

I. Worship is not an adiaphoron.

A. Worship is commanded by God.

...for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God. (Exodus 34:14)

God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth. (John 4:24)

And Jesus answered him, "It is written, You shall worship the Lord Your God, and him only shall you serve." (Luke 4:8)

B. The highest form of worship is faith.

Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." (John 6:29)

And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. (Hebrews 11:6)

According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, but deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation. (Hebrews 9:9)

It is by faith that God wants to be worshiped, namely, that we receive from him what he promises and offers. (AP IV, 49)

The woman came, believing that she should seek the forgiveness of sins from Christ. This is the highest way of worshiping Christ. (AP IV, 154)

God wants us to believe him and to accept blessings from him; this he declares to be true worship. (AP IV, 228)

In short, the worship of the New Testament is spiritual; it is the righteousness of faith in the heart and the fruits of faith. (AP XXIV, 27-28)

See also: AC XXVI, 4; AC XXI, 3-4, AP IV, 59.

C. Worship is Trinitarian, and centered on Jesus Christ.

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them, the LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. "So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them." (Numbers 6:22-27)

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. (II Corinthians 13:14)

Abbreviation Key:

AC - Augsburg Confession

AP - Apology of the Augsburg Confession

FC SD - Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration (Also, SD) FC Ep - Formula of Concord, Epitome

Treatise - Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope LC - Large Catechism

The references to Luther's Works:

AE - American Edition (For example: Luther, AE 53:80 means Luther's Works, American Edition volume 53, page 80).

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith... (Hebrews 12:1-2)

Then they said to him, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” (John 6:28-29)

but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:31)

“Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” “Spiritual worship” is a worship in which the spirit knows and takes hold of God, as it does when it fears and trusts him. Therefore the contrast is not only with Levitical worship, where cattle were slaughtered, but with any worship where men suppose they are offering God a work *ex opere operato*. (AP XXIV, 26)

D. The means by which faith is created and nurtured are essential to worship.

So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. (Romans 10:17)

having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. (Colossians 2:12)

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” (I Corinthians 11:23-25)

To obtain such faith God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the Gospel. (AC V, 1-2)

It is taught among us that the sacraments were instituted not only to be signs by which people might be identified outwardly as Christians, but that they are signs and testimonies of God's will toward us for the purpose of awakening and strengthening our faith. (AC XIII, 1)

This use of the sacrament, when faith gives life to terrified hearts, is the worship of the New Testament, because what matters in the New Testament is the spiritual motivation, dying and being made alive. For such use Christ instituted it, as he commanded (1 Cor. 11:24), “Do this in remembrance of me.” (AP XXIV, 71)

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II. The Scriptures and Confessions give the people of God considerable freedom in choosing those forms, rites, and ceremonies that aid the worship of God.

A. Neither the Scriptures nor the Confessions prescribe forms, rites or ceremonies for worship.

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. (Galatians 5:1)

. . . addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . (Ephesians 5:19)

When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. (1 Corinthians 14:26)

We are talking about true spiritual unity, without which there can be no faith in the heart nor righteousness in the heart before God. For this unity, we say, a similarity of human rites, whether universal or particular, is not necessary. The righteousness of faith is not a righteousness tied to certain traditions, as the righteousness of the law was tied to the Mosaic ceremonies, because this righteousness of the heart is something that quickens the heart. To this quickening human traditions, whether universal or particular, contribute nothing . . . (AP VII/VII, 30-32)

We further believe, teach, and confess that the community of God in every place and at every time has the right, authority, and power to change, to reduce, or to increase ceremonies according to its circumstances, as long as it does so without frivolity and offense but in an orderly and appropriate way, as at any time may seem to be most profitable, beneficial, and salutary for good order, Christian discipline, evangelical decorum, and the edification of the church. (FC SD X, 9)

Therefore we reject and condemn as false and contrary to God's Word the following teachings:

1) That human precepts and institutions in the church are to be regarded as in themselves divine worship or a part of it. . . . 4) When such external ceremonies and indifferent things are abolished in a way which suggests that the community of God does not have the liberty to avail itself of one or more such ceremonies according to its circumstances and as it may be most beneficial to the church. (FC Ep X, 8, 912)

See also: FC SD 9, 30; Luther, *Latin Mass*, AE 53:37.

B. The liturgy, a true service, is that which aids both the proclamation and the hearing of the Gospel for the sake of faith, that is, true worship.

So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. (Romans 10:17)

It is also taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. (AC IV)

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. (AP XXVI, 3)

See also: Luther, *German Mass*, AE 53:90.

III. The liturgy of the Church builds a framework for the worshiper to live the life of faith.

A. Liturgy of the Church teaches the full counsel of God.

for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. (Acts 20:27)

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. (II Peter 3-4)

Whoever wishes to be saved must, above all else, hold the true Christian faith. Whoever does not keep it whole and undefiled will without doubt perish for eternity. This is the true Christian faith, that we worship one God in three persons and three persons in one God. (Athanasian Creed, 1-3)

And the Apology says: "The preaching of the law is not sufficient for genuine and salutary repentance; the Gospel must also be added to it." Thus both doctrines are always together, and both of them have to be urged side by side, but in proper order and with the correct distinction. (SD, V, 15)

B. The elements of liturgy, (*ordo*), tell the full story of salvation.

We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders that he has done. He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children, that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments. (Psalm 78:4-7)

Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized? (Acts 8:35)

Nowhere do they teach that sins are forgiven freely for Christ's sake and that by this faith we obtain the remission of sins. Thus they obscure the glory of Christ, deprive consciences of a firm consolation, and abolish true worship (that is, the exercise of faith struggling against despair). (Treatise, 44)

C. The liturgy of the Church moves worshipers into the world to live for and to proclaim the Good News to others.

Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high." (Luke 24:44-49)

And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:46-47)

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. (I Timothy 2:1-4)

Thus far we have learned the first three commandments, which are directed toward God. First, we should trust, fear, and love him with our whole heart all the days of our lives. Secondly, we should not misuse his holy name in support of lies or any evil purpose whatsoever, but use it for the praise of God and the benefit and salvation of our neighbor and ourselves. Thirdly, on holy days or days of rest we should diligently devote ourselves to God's Word so that all our conduct and life may be regulated by it. (LC, 103)

After we have been justified and regenerated by faith, therefore, we begin to fear and love God, to pray and expect help from him, to thank and praise him, and to submit to him in our afflictions. Then we also begin to love our neighbor because our hearts have spiritual and holy impulses. (AP IV, 125)

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IV. Imposing a certain form, rite or ceremony on the Church burdens men's consciences, thereby militating against the Gospel.

This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. (Matthew 15:9)

And he said, "Woe to you lawyers also! For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers." (Luke 11:46)

The Gospel clearly testifies that traditions should not be imposed on the church to merit forgiveness of sins or to be acts of worship that please God as righteousness or to burden consciences so that their omission is judged to be a sin. (AP XXVIII, 11)

Therefore we reject and condemn as false and contrary to God's Word the following teachings: . . . 2) When such ceremonies, precepts, and institutions are forcibly imposed upon the community of God as necessary things, in violation of the Christian liberty which it has in external matters. (FC Ep X, 8, 10)

See also: FC SD X, 15, 21, 27.

V. Great care is necessary in choosing forms, rites and ceremonies because they either support or hinder true worship. There are no "neutral" forms.

A. Forms of true worship are in accord with the Word of God.

God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth. (John 4:24)

Your Word is truth. (John 17:17)

. . . take care that you be not ensnared to follow them, after they have been destroyed before you, and that you do not inquire about their gods, saying, "How did these nations serve their gods?—that I also may do the same." You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way . . . (Deuteronomy 12:30-31)

. . . because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. (Romans 1:25)

We should not consider as matters of indifference, and we should avoid as forbidden by God, ceremonies which are basically contrary to the Word of God, even though they go under the name and guise of external adiaphora and are given a different color from their true one. (FC SD X, 5)

See also: FC EP X, 5; AC XXVIII, 23, 30; Luther, AE 35:82.

B. Forms of true worship help to preserve order.

But all things should be done decently and in order. (1 Corinthians 14:40)

We on our part also retain many ceremonies and traditions (such as the liturgy of the Mass and various canticles, festivals, and the like) which serve to preserve order in the church. (AC XXVI, 40)

Neither are useless and foolish spectacles, which serve neither good order, Christian discipline, nor evangelical decorum in the church, true adiaphora or things indifferent. (FC SD X, 7, 13-14)

See also: AP XV, 20.

C. Forms of true worship do not burden the consciences of the people of God.

At the same time, however, the people are instructed that such outward forms of service do not make us righteous before God and that they are to be observed without burdening consciences, which is to say that it is not a sin to omit them if this is done without causing scandal. (AC XXVI, 41)

This subject of traditions involves many difficult and controversial questions, and we know from actual experience that traditions are real snares for consciences. When they are required as necessary, they bring exquisite torture to a conscience that has omitted some observance. On the other hand, their abrogation involves its own difficulties and problems. (AP XV, 49)

D. Forms of true worship are edifying to the local congregation and therefore also to the surrounding community.

For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. (Acts 15:28-29)

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. (AC XXIV, 3-4)

See also: Luther, *German Mass*, AE 53, 80; AC XXVIII, 73-74.

E. Forms of true worship teach the faith.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. (Colossians 3:16)

After all, the chief purpose of all ceremonies is to teach the people what they need to know about Christ. (AC XXIV, 3)

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. (AP XXIV, 3)

See also: AP XV, 20.

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VI. Uniformity in forms, rites and ceremonies while desirable, is not essential to the unity of the Church.

But as the different length of day and night does not harm the unity of the church, so we believe that the true unity of the church is not harmed by differences in rites instituted by men, although we like it when universal rites are observed for the sake of tranquility. So in our churches we willingly observe the order of the Mass, the Lord's day, and the other more important feast days. With a very thankful spirit we cherish the useful and ancient ordinances, especially when they contain a discipline that serves to educate and instruct the people and the inexperienced. (AP VII/VIII, 33)

For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word. It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that ceremonies, instituted by men, should be observed uniformly in all places. (AC VII, 2-3)

But as the different length of day and night does not harm the unity of the church, so we believe that the true unity of the church is not harmed by differences in rites instituted by men . . . (AP VII/VII, 33)

If human traditions are not acts of worship necessary for righteousness before God, it follows that somebody can be righteous and a child of God even if he does not observe traditions that have been maintained elsewhere . . . (AP VII/VIII, 34)

The ancient Fathers maintained such liberty with respect to outward ceremonies, for in the East they kept Easter at a time different from that in Rome. When some regarded this difference a divisive of the church, they were admonished by others that it was not necessary to maintain uniformity in such customs. Irenaeus said, "Disagreement in fasting does not destroy unity in faith," . . . (AC XXVI, 43-44)

See also: Luther, *German Mass*, AE 53:80, 68.

VII. The polarization that is affecting the Church concerning the issue of forms, rites and ceremonies is sinful and hinders the proclamation of the Gospel.

But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another (1 Corinthians 12:24-25)

Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. (Galatians 5:19-21)

We believe, teach, and confess that no church should condemn another because it has fewer or more external ceremonies not commanded by God, as long as there is mutual agreement in doctrine and in all its articles as well as in the right use of the holy sacraments, according to the familiar axiom, "Disagreement in fasting does not destroy agreement in faith." (FC Ep X, 7)

VIII. The people of God are commanded by God to keep talking with each other, under His Word, so that divisions are healed and the Church is united in doctrine and practice.

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ . . . (Ephesians 4:15)

I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. (1 Corinthians 1:10)

In the church we must keep this teaching, that we receive forgiveness of sins freely for Christ's sake by faith. We must also keep the teaching that human traditions are useless acts of worship, and that therefore neither sin nor righteousness depends upon food, drink, clothing, and similar matters. (AP XXVIII, 7)

S.D.G.

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