

B.A.S.I.C.

Brothers And Sisters In Christ

The Augsburg Confession: Article 15 Of Church Usages

By Pastor Nathanael Mayhew

What are church usages? A more understandable title might be “Church Customs and Traditions” which would adequately describe the content of this article. Here the reformers discuss the dangers associated with customs and traditions when they are abused and made necessary for salvation. At the same time it is also dangerous to go to the opposite extreme and eliminate any practice or custom (which may be valuable to the spiritual growth of the church) just because it is not spoken of in Scripture.

In the Lutheran Reformation the reformers decided to do away with only those practices which were contrary to Scripture. Other practices which were not spoken of in Scripture but were found useful in the history of the church were retained for the benefit of those in the church. So the Lutheran Reformation is often called a conservative Reformation, because it changed only that which was necessary. On the other hand, the Reformed churches removed all practices that were not spoken of in Scripture, regardless of

its benefit to the spiritual life of the church. It was for this reason that the Reformed churches took for themselves the name ‘Reformed’, in order to show that the Lutheran Church was only partially reformed.

Article XV

Concerning Church customs the Lutheran Confessors stated: *With regard to church usages that have been established by men, it is taught among us that those usages are to be observed which may be observed without sin and which contribute to peace and good order in the church, among them being certain holy days, festivals, and the like. Yet we accompany these observances with instruction so that consciences may not be burdened by the notion that such things are necessary for salvation. Moreover it is taught that all ordinances and traditions instituted by men for the purpose of propitiating God and earning grace are contrary to the Gospel and the teaching about faith in Christ. Accordingly monastic vows and other traditions concern-*

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ing distinctions of foods, days, etc., by which it is intended to earn grace and make satisfaction for sin, are useless and contrary to the Gospel.

Stating the Issue

The Augsburg Confession stresses the negative and the positive concerning church customs: "Those usages are to be observed which may be observed without sin and which contribute to peace and good order in the church." Notice the two points - Human customs are to be observed which 1) may be observed without sin (negative) and 2) which contribute to peace and good order in the church (positive). We will look at both the negative and the positive side of church customs.

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Observed without Sin

The concern of the Lutherans with many of the practices within the Roman Church was that teaching that people could merit the forgiveness of sins through the observance of such customs. For this reason they clearly state: "*consciences may not be burdened by the notion that such things are necessary for salvation*" and "*all ordinances and traditions instituted by men for the purpose of propitiating God and earning grace are contrary to the Gospel.*" Listed as practices which were taught to make satisfaction for sins were: monastic vows (Article 27), distinction of foods (Article 26) and the practice of fasting on certain days. Such practices do not offer us forgiveness of our sins! Nothing but Christ and His blood alone can offer us forgiveness through faith.

This teaching was completely rejected by the Romanists. In the Roman Confutation they responded to this article by saying: "*The appendix to this article must be entirely removed, since it is false that human ordinances instituted to propitiate God and make satisfactions for sins are opposed to the Gospel.*"

But to teach that we may merit the grace of God through our actions undermines the very foundation of God's plan of salvation revealed in Scripture. In the Apology the Lutherans state: "*If our opponents defend the notion that these human rites merit justification, grace, and the forgiveness of sins, they are simply establishing the kingdom of Antichrist.... They take honor away from Christ when they teach that we are not justified freely for his sake but by such rites, and especially when they teach that for justification such rites are not only useful but necessary*" (Apology Article XV, ¶ 18).

Useful for Good Order

We have many traditions and customs in the church which are of human derivation. For example, the form of our worship is of human arrangement and does not follow a specific order prescribed by God. Similarly, throughout the year we follow the calendar of the Church year which helps us to focus on certain aspects of the work of Jesus (Christ's birth, earthly ministry, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension) and emphasize certain doctrines (Trinity, the work of the Holy Spirit, the Last Things, etc.). Following the Church year calendar in this way is not required by God but it is beneficial for instruction in the teachings of Scripture. The same is

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also true for many other human customs practiced in the church.

So how do we determine which human customs are good and which are not? There is no doubt that these decisions should be based on God's Word. If they contradict the Word of God, they should not be used or practiced. For example, when it comes to the structure of our worship service we follow the guidelines set forth in Scripture: ***"Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine"*** (1 Timothy 4:13); ***"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord"*** (Colossians 3:16), and ***"Let all things be done decently and in order"*** (1 Corinthians 14:40).

Making Changes in Church Customs

The Lutheran Church continued to struggle with the issue of customs in the church even after the death of Martin Luther. In the Formula of Concord this issue was dealt with again. In the Formula of Concord they lay out the criteria for introducing or making changes in church customs. ***"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 offence, 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" (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article X, §9).

Notice the five points stated above:

- Without frivolity and offence (Matthew 18:1-7);
- Profitable for good order (1 Corinthians 14:40);
- Christian discipline (Matthew 18:15-18);
- Evangelical decorum (1 Corinthians 11:5-16); and
- The edification of the church (1 Corinthians 14:26-28).

Conclusion

Because God has given us a great deal of freedom in the customs we have in the New Testament, there will at times be differences of opinion from one person to the next. As we deal with such situations it is helpful to keep in mind the words written here by our Lutheran ancestors: ***"Yet we accompany these observances with instruction so that consciences may not be burdened by the notion that such things are necessary for salvation."*** May our customs ever be useful for good order and never become works which merit the forgiveness of sins.

Let us continue to focus on Christ crucified in our preaching and through our church customs!

India Pastoral Visitation Report

By David Koenig

From the Field Feb. 20, '16

In the Berea Evangelical Lutheran Church there are new pastors and preachers that were accepted for study over two years ago. One of the privileges and blessings for me is to be able to visit the new men in their home and village. We do this to better know them and to find out things about which we can pray and help, as well as to encourage them in their ministry. Most of the time we are able to meet the wife and children. And it is very informative to go into the village and stroll down the street. What good fellowship it is to sit in the pastor's house and discuss and pray over things. They give us biscuits and drink and we give them some things also. This is the two way street of fellowship with one another under the gracious hand of our Lord. While we are with them we pray about what we have heard and encourage them as brothers in the faith.

Some interesting things we found out are as follows:

- In the congregation at Nindra several of the men who belong there have now gone forth to preach at new preaching points. Having heard the Word they now want to reach out with it to others and are gathering congregations about that life giving Word.
- In the village of Rayapedu there are five of the new pastors living. One man holds services there and the other four travel from that village to preach in other congregations that have been established. This is a true cen-

ter of BELC outreach.

- The congregations served by the men in this visitation ranged in size from 22 souls served to 240.
- The oldest pastor is Isaiah at 64 and the youngest is Devan at 20.
- While the pastors come from different church backgrounds ranging from independent, Pentecostal, Church of Christ, and so on, there is a healthy number who came over to us from the South Andhra Lutheran Church. In their case some things did not have to be taught them like infant baptism and the real presence in communion, since they already believed that.

As to the new pastors in the BELC and their work this deals with only 78 of the new men visited recently.

There are 54 villages where our men preach where the BELC is the only Christian church in town

There are 16 men who serve two stations. There are two men who serve three or more stations.

The 78 men serve 5327 souls for an average size of 68 in a congregation. Although there are several congregations which are larger, though most are smaller and the men have not been serving very long. This indicates the spread of the Word.

I would just like to say that it is a privilege to visit these men and their families and

see how though they are poor in worldly goods, the likes of which few in the USA could understand, yet they are rich with the precious treasure of God's Word.
