



# Freedom and Order in our Worship

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Immediately after his account of the Day of Pentecost, St. Luke describes the worship life of the church at Jerusalem. “And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers,” he wrote (Acts 2:42). From its very infancy, the Church had a common order (*ordo*) of worship that included the reading of God’s Word, preaching, the Lord’s Supper and prayers. While there may be expressions of freedom from one congregation to the other, through the years the *ordo* has been preserved as the saints of every age gather to receive Christ through the Word and the Lord’s Supper given and responding in prayer and praise. This focus of the common order in worship should always be on Christ and His forgiveness for His people through Word and Sacrament.

At the time of the Reformation, Martin Luther’s liturgical reforms were carried out with a pastoral concern that highlighted both an emphasis on Gospel freedom on one hand and maintenance of the common order out of love for the neighbor on the other hand. Vilmos Vajta writes of the tension of faith/freedom and love/order in his helpful volume *Luther on Worship*, “The order of love precluded liturgical uniformity. Luther felt that a diversity in outward forms could easily be endured, as long as there was unity in the essentials. As a matter of fact, such diversity might keep people from assigning too much importance to the form of the service, and so from factionalism and sectarianism. On the other hand, Luther sought to avoid needless and senseless changes in the order of worship. In order to prevent confusion, he called for conformity among churches in the same region and for a consistent observance of the order once it had been adopted. His principle of love and regard for the common man made him the sworn enemy of arbitrary changes. In fact, he favored a wider degree of uniformity, as long as evangelical freedom could be maintained.” (183)

Luther’s pastoral sensitivity and the careful tension he held between freedom and order serve as a helpful model for pastors, parish musicians and church leaders involved in the planning of worship today. Our goal in worship planning is never to make changes, but always that the Gospel is proclaimed through the words that are spoken and sung. Lutherans seek to avoid a legalistic attitude that prohibits any freedom, but also recognize the great benefit that a common language of worship provides in teaching and pastoral care. From teaching the young children to sing one of the versions of the Agnus Dei to an older adult with dementia speaking the words of confession before receiving absolution, we understand the benefit of speaking and singing words that do not change each week.

We should also be mindful of St. Paul’s words to the Ephesians when we consider how our walking together impacts worship planning. He writes, “walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” (4:1-3) Freedom



in worship means that not every rite and ceremony will be identical from one congregation to another. But bearing with one another in love also means that we are sensitive to other congregations and recognize the unity that we share expressed in our worship.

Sadly, our conversations about worship have too often been appeals to either freedom or order rather than both. This has led some to some expressions of freedom that have not been beneficial for of our life together and demonstrative of our love for one another. In other cases, some call for legalistic observation of rites and ceremonies that are neither scriptural nor confessional. While we should strive for uniformity in worship, to demand absolute uniformity runs the risk of obscuring the Gospel and binding consciences.

Lutheran worship seeks to focus on Christ, His gifts of forgiveness and grace for His people and the response of faith in prayer and praise. The Divine Service in a Lutheran congregation maintains a common order of service for the sake of love but also allows for appropriate freedom. Our concerns about worship are not about musical instruments, but a zeal for the Gospel and how that Gospel is taught and applied to young and old. There is actually great freedom that can be celebrated in our services while maintaining a common order.

Dr. Luther wrote, “Now even though external rites and orders...add nothing to salvation, yet it is unchristian to quarrel over such things and thereby confuse the common people. We should consider the edification of the lay folk more important than our own ideas and opinions.

Therefore, I pray all of you, my dear sirs, let each one surrender his own opinion and get together in a friendly way and come to a common decision about these external matters, so that there will be one uniform practice throughout your district instead of disorder – one thing being done here and another there – lest the common people get confused and discouraged. For even though from the viewpoint of faith, the external orders are free and can without scruples be changed by anyone at any time, yet from the viewpoint of love, you are not free to use this liberty, but bound to consider the edification of the common people.” (*Luther’s Works, vol. 53, p. 47*) For Luther, the liturgy and hymnody were tools for teaching the Gospel. Luther’s liturgical revisions and the hymns he wrote in the language of the people demonstrate his pastoral concern for the worshippers and the teaching of the faith.

At the 2016 LCMS Convention, delegates adopted a resolution that appeals to congregations of the Synod “for love’s sake (Philemon 9), when celebrating the Lord’s Supper, to regularly use these basic components of the Order of Service (Ordo).” (2016 4-04A) My hope is that the congregations of Missouri District would strive for worship that proclaims the Gospel, balancing freedom and order by bearing with one another in love. *Lutheran Service Book* provides a great freedom that is barely explored by most congregations. I pray that these words are received as a word of encouragement for our life together as nearly three hundred congregations in Missouri. We are blessed to be a district that takes seriously both our confession of the Gospel and God’s mission to reach the lost. May we heed the counsel of Dr. Luther, “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.” (*LW, vol. 53, p. 61*) May our worship life across the district reflect Martin Luther’s pastoral concern and the unity that we share.