

The Augsburg Confession

Article 15

Of Church Usages

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 concerning 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.

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 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!