

# able Talk

College Hill Lutheran Church

## Ceremonies and Rites: *What's Up with these?*

The Bible teaches that we are justified by grace through faith in Christ (Ephesians 2:8-9). So why do churches have all these ceremonies and rites? Aren't they being ritualistic? Do they think that they earn something by doing them? What's up with these?

Jesus opposes the traditions of the Pharisees and scribes because they are *teaching as doctrines the commandments of men* (Cf. Matthew 15:1-9.) In essence they are saying "Thus saith the LORD," when in fact it is merely "we say..." The manmade commandments of men cannot be taught as though they were commandments from God. Neither can they be seen as meritorious—that is to say that we somehow merit grace and forgiveness by doing them.

Why then do we (College Hill Lutheran Church) have ceremonies and rites? Are we teaching as doctrines the commandments of men? Certainly not. As is shown below, Lutherans have always maintained that ceremonies and rites are NOT meritorious, *but are retained for the sake of good order and for teaching the faith.*

### **The Bible teaches:**

St. Paul writes: "*But all things should be done decently and in order*" (1 Corinthians 14:40). Likewise, he writes to the church in Philippi: "*Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things*" (Philippians 4:8). And again, to the church in Thessalonica: "*Test everything; hold fast what is good*" (1 Thess. 5:21).

### **Thus Historic Lutheranism teaches:**

"Of Usages in the Church [Lutherans] teach that those ought to be observed which may be observed without sin, and which are profitable unto tranquility and good order in the Church, as particular holy-days, festivals, and the like. Nevertheless, concerning such things men are admonished that consciences are not to be burdened, as though such observance was necessary to salvation." (Augsburg Confession XV)

"Nevertheless, very many traditions are kept on our part, which conduce to good order in the Church, as the Order of Lessons in the Mass (The Holy Communion Service) and the chief holy-days. But, at the same time, men are warned that such observances do not justify before God, and that in such things it should not be made sin if they be omitted without offense." (Augsburg Confession XXVI)

“... ceremonies ought to be observed both to teach men Scripture, and that those admonished by the Word may conceive faith and fear of God, and obtain comfort, and thus also may pray, for these are the designs of ceremonies.” (Apology XXIV)

“Falsely are our (Lutheran) churches accused of abolishing the Mass (The Holy Communion Service); for the Mass is retained among us, and *celebrated with the highest reverence*. Nearly all the usual ceremonies are also preserved.” (AC XXIV, *my emphasis*)

Rev. Paul H. Lang, Lutheran pastor, confessor and teacher of the church, makes the following helpful observations in his book *Ceremony and Celebration* (1965):

**Definitions**—“Ritual and ceremonial are component parts of the liturgy... *Ritual* refers to that part of a divine service which consists of its words, that is, the rite or the order of service... *Ceremonial* is everything connected with the performance of a rite. It refers not only to bodily expressions, such as speaking, singing, kneeling, bowing, making the sign of the cross, and the outward observance of the church year, but also to the ornaments, symbols, and material objects employed in the church’s worship, for example, the church building, the altar, crucifixes, candles, and vestments.” (6)

**All worship is ceremonial**—“Public worship cannot be unceremonial because it requires some form of communication and all forms of communication are ceremony. When people speak about unceremonial worship, it is not a question of ceremonies, but of informality and spontaneity. Even informal or spontaneous worship, however, must have some kind of form or ceremonial.” (6-7)

“In time even unprescribed, spontaneous forms become routine and then the worship is formal, ritualistic, or ceremonial.” (7)

**Divine Principle taught in O.T.**—“It is legitimate... to conclude that the ritualistic and ceremonial type of worship *which God ordained in the Old Testament represents a divine principle*. It is the principle that God is pleased with a rich ceremonial and with beautiful objects, regardless of cost, when the worship is genuine and proceeds from faith.” (9, *my emphasis*)

**The Early Christian Church was Ritualistic**—“The church’s worship from the first to the sixteenth centuries was ritualistic and ceremonial.” (10)

**Most Important- It Teaches the Faith**—“Rites and ceremonies are an outward expression of what a church believes and teaches. An ancient Latin formula puts it this way: *Lex orandi lex credendi*. ‘As we worship so we believe’ or ‘as we believe so we worship.’ The externals in worship are a means of communication which people understand and by which they are often affected more readily and powerfully than by words. A crucifix may move the heart of an ordinary person more than a sermon on the crucifixion of Christ. Bowing the head when the holy name of Jesus is said in a worship service may be a very powerful testimony of our faith in Christ as Savior and Lord. The wearing of Eucharistic vestments by the celebrant in the Holy Communion Service may testify to the preeminence of the Holy Eucharist as the chief service of the church more than the words of the rite itself, “this do in remembrance of Me.” (10)

## **A Recommendation**

If you think a ceremony or rite is strange or wrong or you simply want to learn more about it—then ask: Why do we do this or that? Attend Bible study on Sunday mornings at 9 a.m. or Parish Ed on Wednesdays at 6 p.m. to learn more.



At College Hill Lutheran Church, the liturgy is done deliberately, reverently, and orderly as St. Paul says (1 Cor. 14:40). In doing so, we show what we believe and thus teach others the holy faith that Christ so graciously gives to us for eternal life.

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College Hill Lutheran Church  
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**Consider how the following ceremonials teach the faith:**

The Liturgy

Standing (for prayer, Trinitarian hymn stanzas, etc.)

Bowing

Genuflecting (kneeling) Double genuflecting (kneeling on both knees as many do at the Lord's Table)

Vestments

Dressing nice

Altar paraments

Folding hands

Making the sign of the cross

The Church Year

Facing the Altar when we pray and sing hymns of praise

Lighting candles

The Crucifix

Chanting

The Location of Altar

The Location of Baptismal Font

The Colors of the Church Year

Stained glass windows (if a church has them)

Architecture

Others?