

What unites the church's worship?

"Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called— one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Ephesians 4:3-6).

A man from a Greek Orthodox Church once asked me if the apostle Paul would recognize our congregation as a Christian Church if he walked into the church's worship service. I quipped, "Would Paul recognize your service as a Christian Church?" The man responded, "Yes, our worship service has not changed in 2000 years." I was tempted to say, "Right!" However, I played nice and replied, "Paul would recognize Reformation as a Christian Church because the gospel is preached." I went on to say, "Language changes, music changes, liturgies change, however, Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever."

My answer to this man is the Lutheran confessional answer. According to article seven of the Augsburg Confession, "We teach that one holy Church is to continue forever. The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered. And to the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike. As Paul says: One faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all, etc." (CA VII).

There is practical wisdom behind these words. The confessors understood that human traditions, rites, and ceremonies differ over time and place. The Greek Orthodox Church is not the same today as it was 2000 years ago (no matter what they say). The Lutheran Church is not the same today as it was 20 years ago. Culture, language, and practice change. If liturgy unites us, we could never change our services. If music or instruments unite us, then we could never modify our instruments. We would be in bondage to a cultural imperialism that force us to worship as 16th century Germans or maybe worse 20th century Americans. I would probably vomit if I had to sing only stoic German hymns or happy-clappy praise songs. I would definitely renounce Christianity if I had to participate in the Chicago Folk Mass every Sunday. "For freedom Christ has set us free" (Galatians 5:1).

Even though CA VII is practical, the real significance comes in the primacy placed on the means of grace (Word & Sacrament) to actually create, sustain, and unite the church. As the Smalcald Articles explain: "Thank God, a seven-year-old child knows what the church is, namely, holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd" (Book of Concord, p. 315). Luther adds, "Its [the worship service] holiness does not consist of surplices, tonsures, albs, or other ceremonies of their which they have invented over and above the Holy Scriptures, but it consists of the Word of God and true faith." (Ibid). This is important because the purpose of the church is to "set people free from sin, death, and the devil by the word of the gospel and to call into being thereby the church which proclaims and waits upon the coming of the eschatological kingdom of God" (Forde 116). The question should never primarily be about style. Rather, it must ask if the service proclaims the gospel. If the service does, it is acceptable. If it does not, it is "useless and contrary to the Gospel" (CA XV).

There is still much to discuss concerning worship styles, Lutheran culture, role of public ministry, and the eschatology of worship. We have scratched the surface. As we take up these issues, let us always

remember that Christ alone unites our worship. May all our services be faithful to him, so that the apostle Paul could feel at home with us!

The peace of the Lord be with you,
Pastor Russ