

# Our Lutheran Forms and Customs: What Essentials Must We Teach Our Seminary Students?

[World Mission Seminary Conference, Tsuchiura, Japan, 1974]

by Theodore A. Sauer

## Discussion Outline

- A. In *Distinctive Doctrines and Customs of the Lutheran Church* George Luecke lists the following among the time honored customs and practices which, in the manner in which they are carried out, distinguish Lutherans from non-Lutherans.

- Sponsors
- Close Communion
- Announcement for the Lord's Supper
- Confession and Absolution
- The Wafer
- Parochial Schools
- Catechetical Instruction
- Confirmation
- Ordination
- The Clerical Gown
- Altar and Pulpit
- The Sign of the Cross
- Set Forms of Prayers
- Church Year
- Church Hymns and Church Music

You may want to add to this list.

- B. Which of these customs and practices ought in some form to be retained in the life and worship of our young churches? Mark the foregoing list with "M" for "more important" or with "L" for "less important."
- C. What modifications, if any, of the above mentioned customs and practices have been introduced in our national churches?
- D. What are we doing in our worker training programs to introduce our evangelists and pastors to customs and practices which we feel ought to be a part of the life and worship of our national churches?
- E. Is there validity to the argument that "If churches in Africa are to grow and develop as African churches and not as mere extensions of foreign churches, as many are today, than they must be allowed to take root in the soil of Africa where they are planted? If so, what should be done to guide such development and to insure that it follows a proper, scriptural course?"

In his booklet, *Distinctive Doctrines and Customs of the Lutheran Church*, George Luecke writes, "The principal, most essential point of difference between the Lutheran Church and other churches that bear the name Christian are its distinctive doctrines, by which it is separated from the latter. However, there are also other points of distinction, which are no less marked, though not so vital and essential as the foregoing. The Lutheran Church observes and maintains certain time-honored customs and practices, which are in part based directly upon

Scriptural command or precedent, though perhaps not enjoined by God in just the form in which we have them, while in part they are of merely human, ecclesiastical origin and are therefore not considered binding in any sense, but are nevertheless cherished as valuable outward marks of distinction between Lutherans and non-Lutherans.

In the doctrines which distinguish our Lutheran Church from others there can be no compromise. These are determined by the Word of God. These we must teach with all care and diligence both to those preparing for work in the church and to our congregations.

What shall we say, however, about customs which God's Word neither commands nor forbids, but which are part of our Lutheran heritage? We have rightly come to cherish these for they are an expression of or a response to the truth of the Word. Shall we ask our young churches, surrounded by a culture distinctly different from our own to adopt these same customs, or is there room for customs different from those which are found in the Lutheran Church in America or in Europe?

Loud voices are being raised against the continued use in the African churches of customs brought by the missionary. A feature article in the *Times of Zambia*, May 12, 1974, has this to say, "The African Christian for a long time has been content to sit back and be fed by the mother church overseas. His role was to listen to the Gospel as told by the missionaries who brought the Word of God to the Dark Continent. The church in Africa today is undergoing the process of re-discovery of itself. It no longer wants to be a carbon copy of an English church."

Much of the so-called "rediscovery" is a rebellion against the truth of God's Word. This is evident from a resolution adopted by the All African Christian Conference in Lusaka last month in which it resolved that a first order of business must be to rid the continent of the conservative doctrinal position still held by some churches. Some of it on the other hand is claimed to be a searching for an authentic African expression of the Christian faith. One of the members of the AACC argued, "If churches in Africa are to grow and develop as African churches and not as mere extensions of foreign churches, as many are today, then they must be allowed to take root in the soil of Africa where they are planted."

What then about the distinctive customs which the Lutheran Church has "back home." To what extent should we introduce these in our young churches in other parts of the world? Are any of these essential to the proper growth and development of truly Lutheran churches in Africa, or in the Orient, or in South America, or ought they to be modified or eliminated? These are questions to which we shall have to address ourselves and for which we shall have to find and give answers.

In our work in Africa we have in general adopted the following course:

1. Distinctive Lutheran customs are explained in our worker training program, for the most part in connection with the study of Pastoral Theology.
2. A good number of these customs have been introduced and are a part of the life of the church.
3. Some customs run counter to the social structure of the Bantu people or for practical reasons can not be carried out at least in the form in which we know them in America or in Europe.
4. At all times the Scripture truth behind the custom must be kept inviolate. This in itself will determine which customs will be retained or which can or ought to be modified to fit the life and thought pattern of the people among whom we are working.

Specifically, the following is what we are doing in Central Africa. We use Luecke's list of distinctive Lutheran customs.

**Sponsors.** Generally not used. The African social structure is such that the uncle often has greater responsibility and authority than the father himself. If the father dies, the uncle takes over care of the children. In our Baptism service there is a charge to the parents and often also to the congregation in connection with the Christian training of the child.

**Close Communion.** The Scriptural principle must stand. Our congregations without exception practice close communion.

**Preparation and Announcement for the Lord's Supper, Confession and Absolution.** The practice here is not entirely uniform from congregation to congregation. The principle, "Let a man examine himself", however, is preserved. Some congregations have a special communion preparation service or class during the week. Many have individual announcement, some with opportunity for individual confession and absolution. Some have a separate confessional service or address on the day on which the Lord's Supper is celebrated.

**The Wafer.** Generally used.

**Parochial Schools.** Not feasible at this time. There are Sunday schools in all of our congregations.

**Catechetical Instruction.** Children's classes as we know them in the States are most difficult to conduct. A beginning has been made in our urban congregations. Most formal instruction is on an adult or young adult level, leading first of all to Baptism (36 lessons) and then to confirmation and communicant membership (9 additional lessons).

**Confirmation.** Practiced as mentioned.

**Ordination.** Instruction given in Pastoral Theology. Our practice is consistent with that in our WELS.

**The Clerical Gown.** The practice is not consistent, but is dictated in individual cases by practical considerations.

**Altar and Pulpit.** Most of our churches have an altar and some form either of pulpit or of lectern.

**The Sign of the Cross.** This is used much as we have traditionally used it in our services elsewhere.

**Set Forms of Prayers.** These are used and are included in the Orders of Service which are for use. There is, however, a somewhat more general use of free prayers in our services than we find in our Stateside churches.

**Church Year.** Forms the basis for our sermon series and for the series of Sunday school lessons and also determines the Scripture readings in the Sunday service.

**Church Hymns and Church Music.** It is here where in the long run we will very likely find the greatest differences in our worship. To date we have very few of our Lutheran hymns in the vernacular. The melodies themselves often have a strange ring in African ears. Gradually some of these will find their way into the worship of our churches. A new Tonga hymnal just now being printed by our Lutheran Press has a number of new translations. On the other hand, it is in this area where the faith of our African Christians can well find its own expression. One hymn, written by one of our seminary students is in our vernacular hymnal and has been sung by choirs in the States. As the time goes along, there may well be other hymns and perhaps liturgical music which will be a true expression of the faith of our African Christians. Until that time we will have to make use of suitable hymns and music from whatever source it is available to us.

Some Conclusions...

Our discussion top asks, “What essentials must we teach our students?” The following answers seem to be self-evident.

1. The Biblical principles behind our customs must be clearly taught. These ever remain unchanged.
2. The manner in which these principles find expression in our customs and practices often lies in the area of adiaphora.
3. Customs found in churches with which we are in fellowship ought to be explained. What is meaningful and useful can well be taken into the life of our national churches.
4. We ought to encourage our people to develop customs which are meaningful to them as long as these are consistent with the truth of God’s Word and with the injunction that all things be done decently and in order.