

Christian Discipleship 104: Christian Life and Practice

Church Practices

Laying the Groundwork for why we do what we do

Opening Discussion: How would you describe the role of “traditions” in the Lutheran Church? What would you (or would you be able to) answer to someone who asked why we do something in our church? What is the value in knowing the history of and understanding the common practices of the Church?

Augsburg Confession, Article XV-Church Ceremonies:

Our churches teach that ceremonies ought to be observed that may be observed without sin. Also, ceremonies and other practices that are profitable for tranquility and good order in the Church (in particular, holy days, festivals, and the like) ought to be observed.

Yet, the people are taught that consciences are not to be burdened as though observing such things was necessary for salvation (Colossians 2:16-17). They are also taught that human traditions instituted to make atonement with God, to merit grace, and to make satisfaction for sins are opposed to the Gospel and the doctrine of faith. So vows and traditions concerning meats and days, and so forth, instituted to merit grace and to make satisfaction for sins, are useless and contrary to the Gospel.

Note from the Reader's Edition of the Lutheran Confessions: *Lutheranism embraces the good historic traditions of the Church, especially those of the Western Church. These include such things as following the pattern of the Church year, lectionary readings from the Bible, a liturgical order of worship, various festival days, vestments worn by clergy, and the use of candles, crucifixes, and other objects. As this article makes very clear, in the Lutheran Church, rites, decorations, or traditions are never used or followed to appease God's wrath or to earn the forgiveness of sins. Lutheranism removed from the Church useless and harmful traditions such as monastic vows and insisting on certain foods on certain days.*

Summary: We are free to preserve and practice many traditions of the Church, so long as they are not things that are opposed to or distort the Gospel. We preserve these practices as they have value in teaching us the way of Christ. No Christian can be required to observe a particular tradition that is not commanded in the Bible.

The Church Year

See later in this packet (page 8) for a chart of the Church Year.

The Church Year does not begin and end at the same time as our calendar year. It begins in late November or Early December with Advent. There are *three* main parts, or times, of the Church Year with *six* total main seasons.

1. The Time of *Christmas* (also known as “Christmastide”, includes seasons of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany)
2. The Time of *Easter* (also known as “Eastertide”, includes seasons of Lent and Easter)
3. The Time of the *Church* (also known as the Sundays after Pentecost or Ordinary Time)

The first half of the Church Year follows the life of Jesus Christ from the prophecies of His coming during Advent, His birth at Christmas, His revealing of who He is during Epiphany, His suffering and death during Lent, His resurrection on Easter, and His ascension into heaven. With so many feasts and festivals this half the Church Year is sometimes referred to as the “Festive Portion” of the Church Year.

The second half of the Church Year focus on the Church and the teachings of Jesus and the Apostles to the Church, the Body of Christ. We celebrate the beginning of the Church with Pentecost and Holy Trinity Sunday. Toward the end of the Time of the Church the readings focus on the Second Coming of Jesus at the Last Day. This season is referred to as the “Sundays after Pentecost” or sometimes “Ordinary Time” due to its lack of major feasts and festivals.

While the sequence of observing the Church Year is not commanded in Scripture, it is very helpful because each year the congregation receives an overview of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ and key teachings of the Bible.

A list of the major days of the Church Year is found on page x in the Lutheran Service Book hymnal.

The Lectionary

Each day during the Church Year has assigned readings from one of the Psalms, one other Old Testament Book (except for during Easter and some feasts), one from the Epistles, and one from the Gospels. It is not required that all of these readings be used each Sunday, but most Lutheran congregations do follow them fairly closely. With the lectionary this ensures that the congregation hears a variety of Bible passages on a variety of topics. It also helps the pastor to preach on the “whole counsel of God” and helps work against the tendency to continually return to the same texts or focus only on ones that are more popular with the congregation or less difficult.

On pages xiv-xxiii of the Lutheran Service Book hymnal you will find a listing of the lectionaries and the readings (except for the psalms). You will notice that some days have 2 choices for some of the readings and the option for longer readings.

There are two choices for the lectionary: the Three Year Lectionary and the One Year (Historic) Lectionary.

The Three Year Lectionary has its roots in the reforms of Vatican II in the 1960s. The LCMS (and other church bodies) have modified the version the Roman Catholics created, although many of the assigned readings are the same (but for example our lectionary does not include readings from the Apocrypha). In year A of the three-year cycle most of the Gospel readings are from St. Matthew, in year B from St. Mark, and in year C from St. Luke. Readings from St. John are included in each of the three years. *The main advantage of the Three Year Lectionary is that the congregation hears from a much larger portion of the Bible as compared to the One Year Lectionary.* Most LCMS churches follow the Three Year Lectionary as we do here at Christ the King.

The One Year (Historic) Lectionary is much older than the Three Year with many of the readings being in use since the early centuries of Church History (it was "codified" by St. Gregory the Great in the late 6th Century). This is the lectionary that Luther, Walther and our other Lutheran Church Fathers used. This is one advantage of the One Year lectionary as that there are many resources and sermons based on it with its long-standing use as well as its connection with the history of the Church. The main disadvantage of the One Year Lectionary is that a smaller sampling of Scripture is heard by the congregation, as the readings repeat each year. Although use is not as widespread today, some LCMS congregations do follow the One Year Lectionary.

Liturgical Colors

Color and its bright message can easily be taken for granted or mistaken in its purpose. The paraments, vestments, altar cloths, banners, traditionally employed each Sunday, must be seen as more than an attempt to decorate, or give accent to the chancel. That is, no doubt, the view of some. It's true; interior design and decoration are important. But a greater service is demanded of our liturgical colors than merely making the surroundings "pretty." *There is a meaning to the colors and all forms of artwork and decoration should point us to the message and redeeming work of the Triune God.* These colors are not required by any command of Scripture, but we make use of them to teach and remind of us certain things as we worship our King and receive His gifts.

Blue:

The Church Year begins in Advent and blue is a color that may be used for Advent (purple may also be used). *Advent is a season of waiting and watching, and blue communicates the hope that we have in Jesus Christ. Blue is the color of the sky and helps convey that powerful message that our Christian faith rests on the hope that Christ, who came in history assuming our flesh, will also return on the Last Day from that same blue sky He ascended long ago.*

White:

White is the color of purity and completeness. It represents the holiness of God. It reminds us that our sins have been cleansed by the blood of Christ. We are declared, and will be made righteous, as we have been forgiven of our sins. White is used at “high points” of the Church Year such as Christmas and Easter, other key points in Jesus’ ministry, and some feast and festival days.

Green:

Green is the color of life and growth. To this end, green is the most common color used throughout the Church Year as growth takes time. Green is used during the Epiphany season, which focuses on Jesus revealing Himself for who He is: God in the flesh who came for the salvation of the world. The Longest season is made up of the Sundays after Pentecost, the Time of the Church. Green is used here as this season focuses on the teaching of Jesus and the Apostles and we grow in our knowledge of them and our faith is strengthened.

Black:

There is no doubt in what black, the absence of light, communicates. *It is a somber color associated with death.* We are reminded of the death, a high price indeed, that Jesus endured to atone for our sins. Black is only used two times during the Church Year: Ash Wednesday and Good Friday (three if a Holy Saturday Service is held). Ash Wednesday begins the penitential season of Lent where we focus on the seriousness of our sins and what Jesus endured to pay the price for them. On Good Friday, the sky turned black as Jesus hung on the cross.

Purple:

Purple is a penitential color as well and is used during Lent and may be used during Advent. *It is a rich, deep color that has come to represent solemnity, penitence, and prayer. Purple was also an expensive and cherished color in the time when Jesus lived on earth.* Purple was worn by the rich and often by royalty. We are told in the Bible that a purple robe was put on Jesus in a mocking fashion during the Passion. So purple is a color fitting for our servant King: Jesus.

Red:

Red is a striking and powerful color that communicates strength. *Red is the color of fire, and thus represents the Holy Spirit and His work.* Red is used on the Day of Pentecost, Reformation Day, Holy Cross Day, and on occasions such as confirmation, ordination, and installation. Red is also the color of blood and commemorates the heroic martyrs that died for the faith and is thus used on those feast days.

A Lutheran Perspective on Saints

“Our churches teach that the history of the saints may be set before us so that we may follow the example of their faith and good works, according to our calling.” Augsburg Confession, Article XXI

Why do Lutherans observe days during the Church Year to honor saints? I thought all this “saints stuff” was Roman Catholic? First of all it is important to remember that *all Christians are saints (and sinners)*. To be a “saint” is to be holy and we are made righteous not by what we have done, but by what Christ has done for and in us. Many passages in the New Testament refer to Christians as “saints” including Acts 9:13, Acts 9:32, Acts 26:10, 1 Corinthians 1:2, and 2 Corinthians 1:1.

But is also undeniable that certain people in the Bible and throughout Church History have been called by God to do some amazing things, often showing strong faith even to the point of dying as martyrs. The Church began to recognize many of these people as “Saints” with a capital “S”. The Lutheran Church does not canonize (formally declare a person a Saint), but we do honor and refer to many Saints established by the Church before the Reformation.

But unfortunately, abuses related to saints began to take hold and they were very common at the time of Luther. People became so devoted to certain saints that it bordered on and often crosses the line into idolatry and worship. Although no example exists to do so in the Bible, people began to pray to saints rather than directly to God. It was believed that certain saints could help with certain problems or people of certain vocations. For example, if you needed healing from epilepsy you could pray to St. Valentine. The view developed that it was easier to go to saints with your prayers rather than directly to God because the saints were more kind and understanding. It was taught that the saints had merits and blessings that they could distribute. The Virgin Mary was elevated to the highest status of all saints. It was believed that if you went to certain locations, statues, or relics (which were often body parts of saints) then special blessings could be secured.

Like with many things, the Lutheran Reformation sought to correct the abuses associated with saints without “throwing the baby out with the bathwater.” We do not believe that one should pray to saints, or anyone who has died. We do not believe that saints can grant us any special favors or gain us better access to God since we can pray directly to the Triune God. Article

XXI of the Augsburg Confession and the Apology outline *three ways* that remembering and honoring saints is useful and not in conflict with the Bible (and this is also explained on page xii of the Lutheran Service Book). First of all, *we thank God for the great saints of the church*. God in His mercy has called faithful servants and teachers of the Word throughout the history of the Church. Secondly, *our faith is strengthened when we look at the examples of how God showed mercy to the saints*. Even though they, like everyone else had failings and sins, God used them to accomplish His purposes and we see examples of His mercy (Peter for example). Thirdly, *we see in the saints examples of great faith and service to God's Kingdom*. *We should imitate their faith and their holy living according to our calling in life*.

Feasts, Festivals, and Commemorations

During the Church Year there are special days that can be observed to remember key people and events in the Bible and throughout Church History. You can find a list of these feasts and festivals on page xi of the Lutheran Service Book hymnal and pages 263-264 of your Small Catechism with Explanation. In general, a feast is a day set aside to honor a particular person (such as St. Andrew on November 30) and a festival an event (such as Reformation Day on October 31).

Again, keeping in mind that none of these days are Biblically mandated to be celebrated they can be very useful in growing in our Christian faith as we remember key events and the life, faith, and witness of faithful Christian men and women.

You will see on page xi that some of the feasts/festivals are in bold. These are "*principal feasts*" and are the most commonly observed ones, especially if they fall on a Sunday. We observe these here at Christ the King.

The feasts/festivals not in bold are "*other feasts and festivals*" and are often celebrated, but not in as many churches as the principal feasts. We generally observe these at Christ the King.

All of the feasts and festivals have assigned readings.

On pages xii-xii in the Lutheran Service Book you see a list of *commemorations*. If you look through these you see *a wide diversity of interesting and important people and events* including pastors, missionaries, musicians, and New and Old Testament Saints. These days often do not have assigned readings in the LCMS and are the least commonly celebrated. We do

often, but not always, observe these days at Christ the King. Additionally, if a commemoration falls on a key day on the Church Year calendar you would not observe the commemoration in place of it. For example, in 2019 Easter falls on April 21 so you would not observe the Commemoration of Anselm of Canterbury in place of Easter!

Christian Art and Symbolism

Art and symbolism have a rich history in the Christian Church. Many church buildings contain beautiful statues and stained glass windows. You often see symbols that convey Biblical truths presented. In times when many people were illiterate (or could not understand the Latin mass for that matter), symbols and artwork were a powerful way to communicate ideas to them. Even today, these images speak to us and enrich our worship.

Of course, as with the saints and other things that we have learned about, there have been abuses related to symbols and religious art. In fact, the use of art and images has been a fairly contentious one throughout Church History (we can discuss some of this). We do not believe these mediums should be worshipped or objects of adoration as they do not have power in themselves. While some of the reformers sought to do away with religious art and even some symbolism, Lutherans maintained that they have value as long as they do not conflict with, but rather teach, the truths of the Bible.

See the example (page 14) of the Wiemar Altarpiece and think about what would be lost if visual arts were prohibited.

Also see pages 9-13 for the provided *examples of common Christian symbols*. The cross and the fish are two most recognizable Christian symbols, but there are many more. There is also a Bible verse given that relates to each symbol. When you see any of these symbols at Christ the King or in other churches, this will help you identify the meaning.