

Why Do We Do That?

This is the twelfth in a series of articles on Lutheran customs and practices. Do you have an idea for a church practice you would like explained? Suggest it to Pastor Becker.

Another way to ask a question about Lutheran practices is to ask, “Why don’t you do that?” While some practices common in other churches don’t fit with our Biblical beliefs, other practices which may be considered “un Lutheran” are actually quite Lutheran but are not common today for non-Biblical reasons.

Examples of such practices could include celebration of Holy Communion in every Sunday service, kneeling for prayer, and “crossing” oneself when praying.

At the time of the Lutheran Reformation, some radical reformers, reacting against church doctrines based on mere tradition, without Biblical support, rejected traditional practices in general unless they were specifically found in the Bible. This included such things as clergy vestments, candles and other church decorations. Luther, however, retained traditions except those clearly contrary to scripture.

Later in Lutheran history, some felt that an emphasis on right teaching detracted from heartfelt spirituality. Objective truths were seen as less important than subjective feelings. “Pietism” developed as a reaction against “dead

orthodoxy”. “Going through the motions” of church rituals was downplayed and there was more emphasis on spontaneous expressions of faith.

Every Sunday Communion

During this time the practice of including Holy Communion in every Sunday and festival service of worship declined, even though the Lutheran confessions stated that this was Lutheran practice. Rather than seeing value in receiving the sacrament often as a means of grace, it was felt that receiving it too often could make it less “meaningful” and “special”.

Private confession and absolution, which the Lutheran Confessions also stated was not given up (AC XXXV), also fell into disuse.

Such attitudes were carried by Lutheran immigrants to America, where they were reinforced by contact with non-Lutheran neighbors who held to reformed theology, rejecting the means of grace and emphasizing conversion experiences. This was compounded by the lack of Lutheran churches on the frontier and Pastors to lead worship and administer the sacraments.

Luther once commented that unless one received Holy Communion at least four times per year it should be doubted that he or she was even a Christian. In some Lutheran churches, four times each year became the norm. In some it became once per month. In recent years there has been a trend in Lutheranism toward renewing the practice of every Sunday communion because of

the spiritual benefits God gives to us in this means of grace.

Private confession and absolution has also been encouraged again, not as a required ritual, and not with penance assigned, but as a way to offer pastoral care to those burdened by sin.

Kneeling

Kneeling at times of confession, prayer and receiving Holy Communion was once common in Lutheran worship. There is no theological reason for this practice to have died out but may have been practical factors such as the lack of kneelers in new churches. There have also been trends toward revival of this Lutheran practice.

The sign of the cross

Luther’s Small Catechism instructs believers to make the sign of the cross while speaking the invocation in their morning and evening prayers. Although some have the impression that this action is “Catholic”, many find that it is a way to focus faith on Christ who died for us. Making the sign of the cross is as much of a good Christian practice as wearing a cross.

Fasting

Fasting is not something that Lutherans “don’t believe in” but we don’t believe in requiring it. Fasting itself does not make us more spiritual or holy and it certainly does not make up for our sins, but, like bowing in prayer, it can be a way of physically expressing our neediness to God and can be a way to devote specific time or resources to God.