

Dear Friends in Christ:

We could shorten our Sunday Order of Worship by removing three items that do not have a permanent home in the Western Mass.

The first item is confession and absolution. This sacrament or half-sacrament was historically separate from the mass and was for many centuries an expectation of members before the mass was begun. Individuals were to seek a priest so that they could confess their individual sins and then receive absolution. This was to be done prior to receiving communion. Things got complicated and messy when penance was added to the mix, but it kind of worked—sort of. Here were some of the problems:

The leisure classes were in a much better position to take a half a day to travel to a church and have a priest hear their confessions and pronounce absolution. Working stiff and servants did not always have that option.

Women and children in the household were often not participants.

Enforcement was pretty difficult. How could one prove he had been to confession and had received absolution.

The practice was eventually undercut by anti-hierarchical and individualistic thinking in the modern age. *I don't need a priest to hear my confession. I will confess my sins silently to God and I will convince myself that He forgives me.*

By the middle of the 20th Century private confession and absolution had collapsed within mainstream Protestantism. By the end of the 20th Century it had pretty much collapsed in Roman Catholicism. In the midst of chronic problems followed by this broken play, some churches have slipped the absolution into the service. The Confiteor was a part of the Tridentine Mass, but there was no absolution. We usually place confession and absolution at the beginning of the service. The assumption is that an incomplete and general confession of sin is better than no confession of sin at all. Even this concession does not work well. If the confession happens before a large part of the congregation gets there, is it still a confession? If the sermon contains the proclamation of law to drive people to repentance, how can that work when the confession and absolution has already happened? And here is the big one: confession of all sins in general is confession of no sins in particular. Still, I think we need to do it.

The second is the passing of the peace. This is an ancient pattern, but it had a particular function. People who were penitents were not allowed to receive communion. They were expected to be in worship and then leave at the time of communion. The passing of the peace was an opportunity for people to say Good-bye before the penitents left and the Great Thanksgiving was begun. The practice was brought back in to Lutheran Worship with the liturgical reforms of the 1960s. I think the practice has some strength in terms of costs / benefits analysis. The biggest cost is that it introduces a 7th Inning Stretch into the middle of Christian worship. Ballparks do that better because they have dirty water hotdogs for sale and time to run to the bathroom. We have this major disruption of flow with a ritualistic good-bye after which everyone stays. Go figure. Full-voice conversations are sometimes begun here that extend all the way into the Great Thanksgiving. On the benefit side, there is at least the possibility of forgiving someone who has sinned against you before going to the table of the Lord. It is a hard time to remain anonymous or be ignored. It is almost impossible for someone to slip in to the service, say nothing to nobody, and slip back out without being greeted by the body of Christ. Some people do not stay for fellowship hour, and at least there is an opportunity to greet other members of the congregation and wish them God's peace.

The third item is the passing of the plates. We call it the offering. We should call it the passing of the plates. It is a financial necessity when the business model of the church has been democratized, and church income is what the people give. It was not historically a part of the mass, because the churches were funded by the governments and by the income the larger church generated in other ways: rents, services, taxes, labor, etc. Today, virtually all of our income (except for use of building, parsonage rent, and investment income) is given by our members. Conversely, if our members do not give, we have insufficient income. We have to pass the plates. Most of our members are generous and very good stewards. Some are not. If we are going to pass the plates, it is something that every worshipper should participate in—even if only putting an IOU in the plate. For more discussion on the optics of having some givers and some non-givers, check out 1 Corinthians 10.

In the traditional form of the mass, bread and wine were provided on a table outside of the altar area. The point of the offertory is that a deacon brings the bread and wine forward where a prayer is said over the elements and then the Great Thanksgiving is launched. There is a theological hazard that comes with *the offering*. Before the reformation, there was a Christian ethic which said, “Do what is within you.” In practice it became, “Do what you can and God will make up the rest.” One of the breakthroughs of the Reformation was the recognition that we are saved by God’s grace alone—a process to which we contribute nothing. We cannot help ourselves. The offering—the only offering that can do us any good—is the offering of Christ on the cross. Still, the passing of the plates has been around in Protestantism for hundreds of years, and we would need to come up with a new business model if we wanted to abandon it.

I am not advocating that we eliminate any of these practices from our services. If they do what we need them to do, we should retain them out of Evangelical Freedom. But we ought to be aware of their temporary nature. During the 15 Days to Stop the Spread, Churches skipped the passing of the peace and the passing of the plates, and we survived. We incorporated these three practices for good reasons; among them the historical reasons were sort of sketchy. But as long as they work....

Yours in Christ,

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