

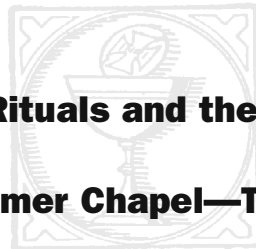
For the

LIFE of the WORLD

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For the LIFE of the WORLD

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Mary Douglas, an eminent English anthropologist claims, “As a social animal, man is a ritual animal.” By this she means that like language, ritual is essential to the life of any community and the existence of people in community. By means of ritual, people who are otherwise disconnected, can live and work together socially in a family, or a congregation, or a nation.

Once we all live in a community, we are all involved in ritual. We may find that hard to accept for ourselves, even though we see it quite readily in the odd behavior of strangers. In fact, I would maintain that if you really want to understand how the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod or your congregation works, you need to examine its rituals. They are the key to understanding any community.

Because we confuse ritual with its abuse, we underestimate its importance. Like many other Christians and our secular contemporaries, we treat ritual with contempt. Ritual, we reckon, is used by Roman Catholics to evade the simple truth of the Gospel and mystify ordinary people. And so we speak rather disparagingly of it as empty or meaningless or dead, as if it were in itself alien to the Gospel and contrary to true piety. Yet, I could maintain ritual is just as important for us Lutherans as doctrine. In fact, doctrine cannot operate properly and be understood rightly apart from ritual.

If the Gospel is divorced from its ritual enactment in the divine service, it becomes disincarnate and ineffectual. It ceases to be “the power of the Lord for the salvation of everyone who believes” and is reduced to a system of religious ideas—a religious ideology for individuals. But since the Gospel has to do with the gracious presence and activity of the risen Lord Jesus with His people, it is enacted ritually.

Rituals reveal the basic values and beliefs of a community. They show what people have in common with each other, what binds them together, what is most important to them. That is why meals, birthdays, weddings and funerals are so significant for families. But since rituals express what is taken for granted by everybody in a particular community, people are largely unaware of their full significance. They usually remain unexplained until they are questioned. Nobody needs to tell you the meaning of a hug or the holding of hands. Yet, you would be hard put to explain exactly what they mean. In fact, mutual behavior is hard to explain because it is part of a common world view—the whole system of values shared by a community.

Rituals do not just embody the basic views of a community—they constitute and maintain its common life. They don’t just show

what people have in common, but are performative enactments which do what they mean and mean what they do. So, for example, the ceremony of marriage makes a couple husband and wife, just as the rite of ordination makes a person a pastor in the church.

Ritual involves people physically in some enactment—it communicates something bodily from person to person in a community. Yet, even though it engages people physically, it communicates with people at all levels of their being. At its best, it acts

RITUALS AND THE ENACTMENT OF THE GOSPEL

By Rev. Dr. John W. Kleinig

upon the whole person—body, soul, and spirit. So, for example, a kiss is not just one of many physical forms of contact nor does it merely convey the idea of love. Rather, by means of a kiss, two people make love and share their love with each other.

The same goes for the Gospel! Christ does not convey forgiveness to us theoretically, but physically by the rite of absolution.



And that affects our whole being. We are not born again by thinking about the doctrine of regeneration, but are regenerated totally through faith in the sacrament of baptism. Christ does not interact with us in a disincarnate way in our worship, but by His ritual embodiment for us in the sacrament where He gives His body and blood to us physically. So then, by means of the rituals which Christ has established, He engages us fully at all levels of our being—from the physical to the spiritual—and communicates the Gospel comprehensively to us.

Generally speaking, rituals constitute communities in four different ways. First, they found new communities. Thus, a new congregation begins with the performance of the divine service in a new location. Secondly, rituals initiate people into local communities. A convert to Christianity becomes a member of the church through the rite of baptism. Thirdly, rituals integrate people with each other in a community so that they can cooperate and share with each other. You can see these most obviously in the function of family meals and the importance of the Lord's Supper in your congregation. Lastly, rituals enable communities to operate corporately by choosing leaders and conferring authority on them, as happens in the call and installation of a pastor in a congregation.

Ritual, then, is important for us as Christians because the Triune God uses it to establish, sustain and extend the church on earth. He uses certain ritual enactments which He Himself has established to

speaking His life-giving Word to us and to interact with us physical beings physically. Lutherans call these divinely instituted rituals the means of grace. Through them Christ continues His ministry as the God-man in and through the church, from His ascension to the close of the age. Through them God the Father gives us His Holy Spirit.

Christ therefore interacts with us ritually in the divine service. He calls us into the presence of the Father, and forgives us our sins. He speaks His Word to us, which accomplishes what it says to us. He leads us in our prayers to His Heavenly Father. He shares His own eternal life with us through His body and blood, so that through them we are drawn into His fellowship with the Father.



Ritual is important for us as Christians because the Triune God uses it to establish, sustain and extend the church on earth. He uses certain ritual enactments which He Himself has established to speak His life-giving Word to us and to interact with us physical beings physically. Lutherans call these divinely instituted rituals the means of grace. Through them Christ continues His ministry as the God-man in and through the church, from his ascension to the close of the age. Through them God the Father gives us His Holy Spirit.

He conveys the blessing of the Father to us and gives us the Holy Spirit to empower us to live and work with Him. All this is mediated ritually through word and action in worship.

So then, we Christians cannot do without ritual if we are to be faithful to our Lord. By His incarnation He has chosen to engage us physically with natural things, such as water, bread and wine, as well as human words and acts. Through these He creates and sustains our faith. Through these He establishes the church as a heavenly community on earth and empowers us to lead heavenly lives on earth. These holy things make and keep us holy. Ritual is therefore just as important as right doctrine, for apart from it we have no access to the Living God.

The Rev. Dr. John W. Kleinig is a lecturer at Luther Campus, North Adelaide, Australia