

Social Space and Religious Culture (1300-1800)
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The Reformation of Ritual and the Impact on Space

Visitation protocols reveal that virtually from the beginning, Protestant churches in the lands examined were locked between services except for approved civic gatherings. This locked condition, persisting to this day and in marked contrast with Catholic practice, indicated the changed nature of the interior. Even though Lutheran divines nominally adhered to the belief that spaces, objects, and persons could not themselves contain divine power, actions as well as formal theology must be taken into account when one attempts to ferret out the body of convictions of those who directed reform. By their directives, magistrates and divines suggested not simply a fear of iconoclasm, not only a determination to be in charge of the new churches to which they had just become heir, but also a sense that sanctuaries were sacred space, in stark contrast with the secular environment, and as such should not be sullied by vulgar intrusion at will. Every other action taken by reforming authorities in relation to church interiors may be seen as containing layers of meaning. Some of these were conscious and deliberate, but some may have been beyond the cultural capacity of their sponsors to conceptualize in the ways that we, in our altered culture, may do so today. All were related to the salient rituals that were retained: the Eucharist, preaching, and Baptism.

This paper examines several of the changes undertaken in many Lutheran churches in German-speaking lands. Owing to economic constraints and also to the fact that leaders did in fact not object to the Gothic floor-plan of existing sanctuaries as Calvinists did, evangelical communities were quite content simply to revise the décor, and to a lesser extent the arrangement of sacral objects, in order to present to the less-educated laity the doctrinal messages contained in all the other media of instruction: sermons, liturgy, music and hymn-lyrics, catechisms, edifying publications, and school curricula.

I. The Altar and Its Vicinity

A. Crucifixes and Art--Eucharist

As is well known, Lutheran divines specifically did not reject visual representations of biblically- and historically-attested saints. Others, however, together with the embellishments attached to medieval holy figures including Mary, were banned. Altarpieces henceforward embodied this principle. This had the effect of underscoring the Word of God as contained in the Lutheran Bible, and of interpreting the meaning of the Eucharist. It also all but eliminated female images from the sanctuary, particularly since, in addition to altarpieces with their prominent women saints, rood-screens with Mary on the left and John on the right were usually removed. While there was still room for metaphor, as with blood springing from Christ's side, seen in

the Weimar Herder Church (Sts. Peter and Paul), such paintings commanded undivided attention week after week and thus a fuller absorption. I have written separately about the effects of removing most women.

B. Table--Eucharist

The Reformation compelled the priest to speak in audible voice and vernacular directly to the congregation. This clergymen could not do while facing the old high altar. It was imperative that the laity gain full access to the Eucharistic rite. Many parishes found a solution in moving an altar-like table, if not the flat altar surface itself, to the front of the chancel dais. In cathedrals and other large churches, choirs now receded in importance, which gave visual backing to the stark reduction in the numbers of ancillary clergy and to an immediate (though not permanent) decrease in clerical stature. Candles, objects of precious metal, and finely embroidered cloths remained in place in rich churches unless sequestered by princes for their economic benefit. All monstrances, pyxes and thuribles disappeared.

C. Crucifixes--Eucharist

The model for Lutheran crucifixes now became Lucas Cranach the Elder's depiction of Christ on the cross on the predella of the altarpiece in the Wittenberg city church. In the late Middle Ages, crucifixes ranged from the physically agonized and emotionally distraught (with eyes open) to the limply hanging, if tortured, dead Son of God (with eyes closed). The Lutheran Reformation introduced a near-rule of the latter type as emblem of the accomplished Atonement. The continued presence of crucifixes alone set Lutheran sanctuaries apart from Reformed ones and symbolized the evangelical belief in the physical presence of the Body and Blood in the Eucharist. Their retention suggested, too, that the site where they hung remained sacrally potent, in contrast with official Lutheran teaching.

II. The Sanctuary

A. Pews--Preaching

In the late Middle Ages, seats or pews already existed for canons, nobles, magistrates, and a few others of high status and/or frailty. The Reformation hastened the speed with which seating was introduced. Although primarily warranted by the new prominence of prolonged preaching, its presence enabled authorities to keep track of attendance (voluntary under Catholicism) and to define hierarchy. It also guaranteed that males and females did not mingle. Disciplinary goals were already visible in the late Middle Ages, however.

B. Baptismal Fonts--Baptism

Lutheran divines did not immediately alter the position or significance of the font, except to insist that this piece of ecclesiastical furniture had no sacred power in itself. It remained at the rear of the sanctuary and was resorted to by clerics and infant-bearing midwives, along with other godparents, on any day of the week. Gradually, as I have shown elsewhere, it was shifted to a more central and visible location. This indicated that unbaptised children were no longer a danger to the congregation, and a greater awareness of the ritual as introduction to membership in the body of the faithful.