

The Biblical & Lutheran Case for Incense



First Lutheran Service in Brandenburg, Germany in the year 1539

Sometimes the charge is made about incense—as well as a good many other ancient traditions of the Church—that it's too "Catholic." Usually, people thereby mean that it's not Lutheran. They're thinking "Catholic," not "catholic." But there's a difference. Lutherans, since the beginning, have striven to be *catholic*, i.e. in concert with the historic Church according to the whole, as long as the practice or teaching is not contrary to Scripture and doesn't detract from Christ being at the center.

The Augsburg Confession, the foundational document of the Lutheran faith, says as much: "*Falsely are our churches accused of abolishing the Mass (the Holy Communion Service); for the Mass is retained among us, and celebrated with the highest reverence. Nearly all the usual ceremonies are also preserved.*" (AC XXIV)

So let's ask the question. Is, in this case, *incense*, Lutheran? The Church has used incense in worship for at least 1500 years and probably longer, so it's certainly *catholic*. But what does it mean? And how does it point to Christ?

The place to start, then, is this: Is it biblical? Because regardless of everything else, if it's not biblical, then it's not Lutheran. Let's take a look.

Let my prayer rise before You as incense, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice. (Psalm 141:2)

And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. (Revelation 8:3-4)

So, incense symbolizes the prayers of the saints rising up to God.

It also reminds us of the sweet aroma of Christ's sacrifice covering over our sins, and points us to Christ as the mercy seat of God. God gives specific instructions in the Old Testament to Aaron the priest on how he should use incense on the Day of Atonement:

And he shall take a censer full of coals of fire from the altar before the Lord, and two handfuls of sweet incense beaten small, and he shall bring it inside the veil and put the incense on the fire before the Lord, that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat that is over the testimony. (Leviticus 16:12-13)

And God speaks through the prophet Malachi about the offering of incense throughout all time:

For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts. (Malachi 1:11)

Incense is even one of the gifts brought to our Lord Jesus by the Magi:

And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. (Matthew 2:11)

According to these passages and a host of others, the use of incense is indeed a meaningful biblical practice. So then, is it *catholic*? Sure. Is it Lutheran? Most definitely!