

## THE PURPOSE OF CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

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### Why worship?

**T**he frost on the windows means it's cold outside, and the car is going to be cold, too. With this kind of weather church will be half-empty. The house is warm, and the coffee is hot. Thirty seconds pass—now or never. A quiet moan and then the feet hit the floor. I'll go to worship today. Why?

The best part of Sunday is reading the paper on the patio early in the morning. It's warm enough to sit outside, but the sun isn't baking yet. Listening to the birds and lingering over the travel section. But worship starts at 9:00 a.m. in the summer. The moment of truth arrives: the patio or church? I'll go to worship today. Why?

It was a good weekend to get out of town, but Monday brought back the realities. Rude customers, a surly boss, and the internet was down for an hour. Hearth and home sound wonderful at the end of the day. But the plan was to attend Monday night worship. Stopped at the traffic signal. Turn right to church, five miles away. Turn left to home, one mile away. The light turns green, and the car slowly turns right to worship. Why?

Week after week for thousands of years the people of God have made their way to worship. The question of why they worship should be easy to answer. They worship to find the good news about God. Augustine caught this when he wrote, "My soul is restless until it finds rest in thee."<sup>1</sup>

Of course, God offers us this kind of rest in other places besides public worship. He chose to reveal himself to Adam and Eve in the evening during the quiet of the day. Their descendants heard the good news from their parents in stories about God's great and wonderful acts. Sometimes in palaces and sometimes from prisons, sometimes with their pens and sometimes with their voices, Old Testament prophets pointed Israel and Judah to the rescue that was to come. Medieval believers found God in roadside shrines that depicted the birth, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Since the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century, believers have been able to read the actual words of God in their own languages and homes;

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<sup>1</sup>St. Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.1.

people in our world read the Bible on their phones while they're stuck in traffic jams. God's good news has always been available in places besides worship, and restless souls have found their rest wherever they read or recollect God's saving promises.

Despite the proximity of God's promises in daily life, however, believers still worship; they always have. Despite remembering the parental stories, believers gathered together to "call on the name of the Lord" (Gen 4:26). Believers honored the temple obligations and made long treks to Jerusalem. They gathered in caves and homes and cathedrals, they risked persecution and death, they expended treasures and talents, they set out for new lands and new freedom, all for the sake of worship. Still today, they put up with the cold, put down the newspaper, and give up the comfort of home for worship. Why?

As believers in Jesus, they know what they will find there. "How lovely is your dwelling place, LORD of hosts. My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord" (Ps 84:1–2). Those are the words of faith, just as Augustine's words were words of faith. But ever since Adam and Eve listened to the lies of Satan, the sinful nature has compromised and confused the thoughts, words, and actions of believers—yes, even as they worship. Because of the sinful nature "how lovely is your dwelling place" competes with "how mindless, how irrelevant, how dull, how burdensome is your dwelling place, LORD of hosts." Each person who gathers in the nave for worship is a saint and a sinner at the same time. It is demeaning to judge these churchgoers as only sinners, but it is naïve to consider them only saints. Even those who come to worship—to say nothing of those who stay in their warm beds, finish their morning paper, and turn left for the comfort of home—even they come with mixed motives. The mix in their motives may not be wicked or perverse. The mix may come from unhappy life experiences or unrealistic priorities. Truth be told, we who shepherd them sometimes carry around the same confusion.

Understanding the purpose of public worship helps us clarify the "why" of our worship. Knowing the objective of worship doesn't necessarily demean other motives for coming to church (although it does discourage and disallow some motives), but it helps us identify the priorities of worship. For all the time this world has endured and for all the time it will last, we will find the people of God coming to worship for many reasons, some wholesome, some not so much. In God's house, however, God's gospel rest is there for all, and there is God's Spirit, working where and when he pleases. Understanding why we worship helps worshipers review the enduring necessity of the gospel for faith, causes them to appreciate the gospel message communicated to head and heart, leads them to gospel gems they may not have noticed before, and enables them to present a clearer gospel witness

to those worshipping with them. When they understand worship's primary purpose, believers arrive at church with intention: they know what they're doing and they know why they're doing it, and thus the Church is edified, and God is adored.

### **What do people expect to gain from worship?**

Charlie comes to church to hear the sermon. He's gone through seven or eight preachers in his eighty years—he loses count sometimes. A few stand out; a few were forgettable. But they all had something to say and Charlie appreciated them all. God loves the sinner in Christ. He learned that on his mother's knee and that's what he believes—and that's what he wants to hear. The liturgy? They keep changing it with each new hymn book. He never was much of a singer, and the organist right now doesn't do much to help him. He likes the new church, and he reached down deep into his savings when they raised funds for it. But the sermons in the old church were pretty much the same as the sermons in the new church: God loves the sinner in Christ. And that's why Charlie goes to church.

Lisa's parents didn't go to church, but they sent her to a Lutheran Sunday School when she was a kid. Nothing much stuck. She was outgoing and fun-loving even though her friends weren't the cheerleaders or the athletes in her high school. Quickly after graduation she married the only boy she had ever dated, and five children soon followed. He made enough money to feed the family, but the long hours on the road took their toll. He was never a talker, and now he spent most of his free time on the couch. Lisa craved companionship. The Lutheran church in her neighborhood brought back childhood memories, and she sent her children to Sunday School. She found friendly people there, people who loved to chat and listen. Someone to talk to—that's why Lisa goes to church.

Ben and Letisha moved north from the south because a local construction company was hiring engineers. They settled on a house in a nice subdivision and felt lucky to have friendly neighbors, neighbors who cared as much about raising children as they did. It didn't take long before they enrolled the kids in the Lutheran school the neighbor's children attended. They went to church and found the members friendly and inviting. The pastor's Bible information class opened their eyes to spiritual truths they hadn't thought about before, and they began to feel peace they hadn't experienced before. But something was missing. For as long as Ben and Letisha could remember, Sunday was a high-octane experience. Worship in the morning, worship at night, and the whole family gathered at Grandma's in the middle. The preaching was intense and so was the music. Nobody stood and clapped at Lutheran worship! Ben smiled at the pastor one Sun-

day and said, “We love your teaching, but we don’t much care for your music.” They aren’t finding at worship what they had always looked for before.

Mary and Jack were on-and-off church goers. More than Christmas and Easter, but not every Sunday. Jack made a lot of money, and Mary could stay home, keep the house immaculate, and see to the needs of their very gifted daughters. Depression hit hard when the girls headed off to college and jobs far away. Then Jack left. She was a business partner, younger, exciting, and drop-dead gorgeous. Mary overdosed on pills twice. The second time she called the pastor. Together with her counselor the pastor restored some of her self-esteem and she started going to church again. Everyone reached out to her. In Jesus’s voice and their companionship she found what she had lost. That’s why Mary comes to worship: she finds love and acceptance there.

It’s not likely that they all belong to any one church, but every church has some of them. They don’t make waves or cause problems. Might their worship change, might their lives change, if they understood a little better what happens when they worship? Might their grasp of worship add intention to their hearing, speaking, singing, and standing? Will a sharper focus on the power of the gospel strengthen their faith? Might a better-informed worship attitude bring blessings to other worshipers and, in the long run, to a congregation?

The goal of a review of the objective of Christian worship is to encourage *intentional worship*. When pastors, musicians, planners, and worshipers are all on the same page, striving for a common experience, the gospel will have free course and be proclaimed to the joy and edifying of Christ’s holy people.

### **Worship the Lord**

The English word “worship” comes from the Anglo-Saxon *weorth-scipe* and means “to ascribe worth.” In other words, worship demonstrates the value we assign to a thing or a person. The concepts inherent in “worship” are not different from those in “praise,” “bless,” “laud,” and “acclaim,” but worship seems to go beyond what we say in words and music. Worship includes action. Gardeners who worship their yards do more than talk about them; they spend hours on their knees, weeding, trimming, and pruning. Their actions reflect the value they give to their flowers and plants. The worship of God implies action, too. John heard the songs of heaven: “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise” (Rev 5:12). John also saw the actions of heaven: “They are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple” (Rev 7:15).

What is God worth? The worship God receives in heaven is the same worship he deserves from us on earth. God tells us in the First Commandment: “You shall have no other gods.” Luther explains in the *Small Catechism*: “We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.” In the *Large Catechism*, he adds:

Here you have the true honor and worship that pleases God, which God also commands under penalty of eternal wrath, namely, that the heart should know no other consolation or confidence than in him nor let itself be torn from him, but for his sake should risk everything and disregard everything else on earth.<sup>2</sup>

To worship God means to stand in awe of him and respect him more than we respect any other person or thing; it means to love and cherish him more than any other person or thing; it means to trust him and have confidence in him more than we trust any other person or thing. Isaac Watts concluded, “Love so amazing, so divine, demands my life, my soul, my all” (*CW* 125:4). To worship God, therefore, is to have faith in him.

“I believed; therefore have I spoken” (2 Cor 4:13). Quoting the psalms (Ps 116:10, Septuagint), St. Paul makes it clear that confession inevitably accompanies faith. The voice confesses what the heart holds dear, certainly at all times, but especially in times of adversity and challenge. Faith that comes face to face with the cross and then cowers and clams up is either weak or gone. If a man will not admit what he holds dear, he must not hold it dear. That’s why faith and confession go together and that’s why both are worship. We worship God when we believe in him, and we worship God when we acknowledge that we believe in him. Very soon after its founding on Pentecost, Christian congregations attached to their baptismal rites a confessional statement (an embryonic form of the Apostles’ Creed<sup>3</sup>) to enable baptismal candidates—who faced a world of hurt in the third century after Christ—to speak with their voices what they believed in their hearts. In this way, early Christians joined Peter who responded to a wily and wicked Sanhedrin: “We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20).

Worship expresses how much God is worth. Faith is worship; confession is worship. But worship is more. Listen to Paul: “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true

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<sup>2</sup>LC I 16. Robert A. Kolb, Timothy J. Wengert, and Charles P. Arand, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 388. Hereafter, *The Book of Concord*.

<sup>3</sup>Frederick Bente, *Historical Introductions to the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), 19.

and proper worship” (Rom 12:1). In its widest sense, the entire Christian life is worship. Our thinking, speaking, and acting according to God’s will express what God is worth to us. John writes: “This is love for God: to keep his commands” (1 John 5:3).

“Worship the Lord” is nothing other than an imperative to obey the First Commandment. Refusing to worship the Lord, that is, failing to fear, love, and trust in God above things, is unbelief, and unbelief brings eternal destruction. Destruction is the lot of humankind since Eden. The threat of destruction makes worship impossible. The sinful nature cannot hold dear the one who vows to destroy.

To undo this dilemma, to make worshipers out of despisers, God sent his Son. Jesus the Christ offered his perfect life and innocent death as substitution for the imperfect lives and deserved death of humankind. On the basis of this substitution, God declared all people to be released from the penalty of sin and at peace with God. In Christ, God forgives sins. This is the gospel. With the power implicit in this good news, the Holy Spirit leads people to believe the good news. In some supernatural way—which we cannot grasp or understand—the Spirit prompts people to believe the impossible. One miracle of grace follows another. Through his Son God graciously justified the world and by his Spirit God graciously calls us to believe it.

Faith is not an independent action, something that comes from us. Explaining the work of the Spirit, Luther wrote:

I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way he calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.<sup>4</sup>

If the true worship of God is fearing, loving, and trusting in God above all things, and if fearing, loving and trusting in God above all things is faith, then our worship is itself a gracious gift of God. We worship him with all our heart, all our strength, all our soul, and all our mind because we can—we can through the Spirit.

### **Our worship of God compels us to public worship**

“It is not good for the man to be alone” (Gen 2:18), God said, and he quickly filled the world he created with people. Did those two people in Paradise set down a pattern for conversing with the Creator? Was God’s walk in the cool of the day a regular opportunity for fellow-

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<sup>4</sup>*Luther’s Catechism* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2017. Text of the enchiridion authorized by the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1995), 5.

ship? Was the seventh day different for Adam and Eve as it had been different for God? Did the happy couple talk together about God's magnificent love as they sat near the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? We can't know, of course.

The serpent and the fruit changed everything. Adam and Eve lost the divine image when they sinned, and they lost their perfect relationship with God, too. Every thorn and thistle that popped out of the soil was a reminder of God's righteous will and judgment. But God issued a promise that the Seed of Eve would arrive to destroy the serpent and undo the sin. Eve was sure God would keep this promise, so sure that she may have assumed her first son was that deliverer (Ge 4:1). How did the first father and mother pass along to their two sons the realities of God's judgment and promise? Were there times for family devotion and instruction? Did the four pray together regularly? We assume they did, although Moses doesn't tell us. Moses does tell us that both sons came to grasp the reality of God and both expressed God's worth in their own lives by means of sacrifice, Cain with the fruits of the soil and Abel with some of the firstborn of his flock. This was worship. But there is no evidence that their sacrifices were communal; we don't hear that they met for sacrifice at 10:30 a.m. on the seventh day.

The creatures were fruitful and multiplied and soon their extended family moved away from their early settlement. They built towns and cities, took on occupations, raised families—and freely exercised their “freedom” to sin. Though dimmed by sin, the creatures' consciences retained a witness of God's will, and the stories that passed from parents to children were memorable and convincing. At a certain point, these believers sensed a need for more than personal and private expressions of God's worth; they found others who held to God's promise and came together to share their faith. “At that time,” Moses relates, “people began to call on the name of the Lord” (Gen 4:26). The Hebrew verb<sup>5</sup> helps us to see that God's people *acclaimed* and *proclaimed* the Lord of love. Their desire to express God's worth led them to express God's worth with people who felt the same. Their personal worship of God led them to public worship with others.

We can make assumptions about corporate assemblies in the era of the patriarchs. We assume Noah's family gathered around him as he offered sacrifices to God after the flood. Some sort of corporate religious activity must have been involved in the decision at Babel to build a tower. Abram and Melchizedek came together to praise God Most High. It stretches the imagination to suppose that these great

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men of faith would not have gathered their families and households to call on the name of the Lord together; evidence about just what form these gatherings took is slim.

Whatever worship practices were in place by the time Moses led Jacob's descendants out of Egypt, the Lord established new and detailed policies for public worship at Mt. Sinai. He had adopted Israel to be his special people, and elaborate rites reflected that relationship. God established the day for public worship, the place for worship, the rituals for sacrifices, prayers, and praise, the annual cycle of festivals, and the representative ministry and its vestments. The activities of Israel's public worship were often personal—sacrifices brought by individuals to express a personal relationship with God—and the action of the sacrifices was carried out by the priesthood. In the morning and the evening, however, the faithful gathered at the tabernacle and eventually at the temple to offer sacrifices corporately. Psalm singing accompanied their arrival at worship, and appointed ministers of music, vocalists and instrumentalists, accompanied the singing. Especially at festivals the corporate assembly gathered for prayer and blessing. While sacrifice dominated the worship of tabernacle and temple, the symbolism of much of the sacrificial system proclaimed the divine plan of reconciliation: "Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness" (Heb 9:22). To those who would ponder it, the message of public worship pointed to the finale of God's promise to send a conqueror: his own Lamb who would take away the sin of the world. This was the ritual the Lord established for the nation by law: to acclaim and proclaim. In their acclamation, Israel proclaimed the name of the Lord.

Nebuchadnezzar brought the sacrificial system to a screeching halt when he destroyed Jerusalem and Solomon's temple. The remnant that remained likely gathered in the ruins and wept. The remnant carted off to Babylon gathered at the banks of the Euphrates and did the same (Psalm 137). In their weeping, they remembered the glorious worship of their homeland and contemplated its meaning. They gathered with family and friends to praise, pray, and proclaim. When Cyrus ended the exile in 539 BC and allowed the captives to go home, they rebuilt the temple slowly but surely and resumed the sacrifices. The Diaspora had already begun, however, and the practice of gathering apart from the temple encouraged an enduring role for the synagogue. The historical record does not support specific conclusions about synagogue practices before Christ, but biblical examples<sup>6</sup> and later rabbinic texts (e.g., the Mishnah, third century) provide insights. Although certainly a place for praise and prayer, instruction was a

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<sup>6</sup>Cf. Luke 4:16–30 and Acts 9:20.



regular inclusion in the synagogue experience.<sup>7</sup> The writings of Moses and the prophets were read and explained.

The public worship of the nation of Israel tells a sad story. The story is filled with apostasy and hypocrisy, abomination and rejection of the true God. At its best, however, the spiritual gatherings of God's Old Testament people display a faith-induced desire to gather together to acclaim and proclaim the name of the Lord. So vital was this experience to his plan of salvation that the Lord commanded the activity of public worship for Old Testament believers and commended a practice that went beyond what he had commanded—think of Jesus's regular participation in synagogue worship. The believer's inward desire to express the worth of his God prompted a similar desire to express that worth with others. Still today a believer's personal worship compels him to public worship. The psalm writer summarizes this reality:

How lovely is your dwelling place, LORD Almighty!  
My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD.  
Blessed are those who dwell in your house;  
they are ever praising you (Ps 84:1–2,4).

As good Jewish parents, Mary and Joseph passed on to Jesus the importance of temple and synagogue. The Gospel writers include specific information about his respect for temple regulations and his appearance at temple and synagogue worship. Their point is to show us Jesus's perfect obedience to his Father's will, but they also enable us to understand the value the Father and the Son attach to the corporate assembly.

This was the attitude Jesus passed on to the Twelve and to his followers. The first activity we see after Jesus's ascension is their continual gathering in the temple to praise God. Before their welcome at temple and synagogue had worn out because of Jewish opposition, the believers "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42). Accustomed to the synagogue's worship pattern, they focused on Jesus's fulfillment of the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms which had been witnessed by the apostles.<sup>8</sup> They participated both in a communal meal and the Meal the Lord had instituted. They met where they could, in homes or hiding places. Sunday, the first day of the week and the anniversary of the resurrection, became the regular day for their gatherings. Their preaching, music, and ritual had one objective: to incorporate the proclamation of the word of Christ as they gave thanks to God. And when

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<sup>7</sup>Frank C. Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 68–70.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. Luke 24:44 and Acts 1:20–22.

John describes the glorious realities of heaven, he does so in worship terms: all the saints gathering around the throne of the Lamb, acclaiming and proclaiming the salvation of God.<sup>9</sup>

From Adam to John the divine record reveals a consistent truth: those who express God's worth in their lives by believing, confessing, and living for God—that is, those who worship God with Spirit-empowered fear, love, and trust—also desire to gather with fellow believers to acclaim God's greatness and proclaim his love. Worship as an act of faith compels us to public worship with the faithful. Paul's directive to the Ephesians is not confined to public worship, but it certainly has a public-worship application: "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph 4:3–6).

### **How do we worship?**

The Spirit-empowered desire to find fellowship with God and his people doesn't necessarily provide a pattern for those assemblies. What do we do and say at public worship? Does the Bible tell us what to do? Are there regulations or guidelines?

#### *Old Testament worship*

From Moses to Jesus God provided a clear answer: obey the laws and regulations the Lord established for the nation of Israel. The ceremonial law, issued by God to Moses on Mt. Sinai, governed most of the aspects of worship in the tabernacle and temple. Jesus made it clear, however, that with his coming into the world the ceremonial law had begun to outlive its usefulness. He had come to fulfill the law; he was the Lamb the sacrifices had forecast. Those who controlled worship in the synagogues often turned their pious opinions into unbending rules. Reacting to their Sabbath intransigence, Jesus reminded the Pharisees, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). Perhaps his followers began to see that many of the Old Testament worship rules and practices were coming to an end along with the human traditions that had become attached to them.

Old habits die hard, however. For decades after the Ascension many Jewish believers continued to prepare for the Sabbath and observe its regulations. Proponents of the old customs plagued the New Testament church for a generation, insisting that both Jewish and non-Jewish believers observe Old Testament commands. Even

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<sup>9</sup>Cf. Revelation 5.

Peter, the spokesman for the apostles, cowered in the face of these demands.<sup>10</sup> Paul worked tirelessly to overthrow this perspective. He understood the function of the ceremonial law: “So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we (namely, Israel) might be justified by faith. Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian” (Gal 3:24–25). Paul did not contend for license in public worship, as his First Letter to the Corinthians proves,<sup>11</sup> but he did insist on freedom: “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery” (Gal 5:1).

The insistence to establish forms and practices for public worship based on Old Testament regulations never disappeared totally from the Christian church. John Calvin allowed only unharmonized metrical psalms in worship.<sup>12</sup> The iconoclasts in Luther’s day took the prohibition of graven images in the Mosaic law as seriously as any Jew.<sup>13</sup> Many Reformed churches still consider Sunday to be the New Testament Sabbath and some expect obedience to the Old Testament regulations concerning work on the Sabbath. The Seventh-day Adventists still practice a Saturday Sabbath. The Lutheran Church was not immune to this confusion, and the Augsburg Confession includes this needed warning: “Those who think that the sabbath had to be replaced by Sunday are very much mistaken. For Holy Scripture did away with the sabbath and teaches that after the revelation of the gospel all ceremonies of the old law may be given up.”<sup>14</sup>

There are insights to be gained by studying public worship in the Old Testament. But if we look to the Old Testament ceremonial law for specific practices and timeless regulations, we are looking in the wrong place. Paul wrote to the Colossians: “Do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ” (Col 2:16-17).

### *New Testament worship*

During the years following the Reformation, reforming theologians and church leaders had to assess the worship practices they

<sup>10</sup>Cf. Acts 10:9–48, Gal 2:11–13.

<sup>11</sup>Cf. 1 Corinthians 14.

<sup>12</sup>Senn, *Christian Liturgy*, 368.

<sup>13</sup>E. G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 536.

<sup>14</sup>AC XXVIII 58–60.

inherited from earlier centuries. Much of the legacy of the medieval church was tainted by Rome's sacrificial theology and had to be abandoned, but some leaders, primarily followers of Zwingli and Calvin, disavowed everything connected to the Roman Church, even elements that were biblical and confessional. Thus many of the early Reformed theologians bequeathed to their spiritual descendants a kind of liturgical biblicism which led to a rejection of any worship form not specifically identified in the New Testament.<sup>15</sup>

Luther's perspective on the church's worship heritage was very different.

The service now in common use everywhere goes back to genuine Christian beginnings, as does the office of preaching. But as the latter has been perverted by the spiritual tyrants, so the former has been corrupted by the hypocrites. As we do not on that account abolish the office of preaching but aim to restore it again to its right and proper place, so it is not our intention to do away with the service, but to restore it again to its rightful use.<sup>16</sup>

Luther's objection was not to the ancient rites, but to efforts to turn the rites into rules, especially if obedience to the rules purported to gain righteousness before God. Luther understood the church's traditions to be descriptive of past worship practices, but never prescriptive for the contemporary church. This is the position he took over against worship practices in the Bible as well as forms he prepared for the Lutheran church himself.

What we find in the New Testament are timeless principles and timely applications. The principle was love: "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you" (John 15:12). The application was the holy kiss: "Greet one another with a holy kiss" (2 Cor 13:12). The principle is timeless, but by the third century believers may have recognized that the holy kiss was impractical in a growing church. The principle is prayer: "I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people" (1 Tim 2:1). The application included "lifting up holy hands" (1 Tim 2:8). The practice is rare in our churches. The Augsburg Confession addressed this specific issue by pointing to the apostolic directive to the Gentiles to abstain from eating food containing blood. Since such food was abhorrent to Jewish believers, the Gentiles were asked to "make every effort to do what leads to peace and mutual edification" (Rom 14:19). The Confessions note, however: "The Apostles commanded abstention from blood. Who keeps this command now? Those who do not keep it certainly do not sin, because the

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<sup>15</sup>James White, *Protestant Worship: Traditions in Transition* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989), 71.

<sup>16</sup>LW 53:11.

apostles did not wish to burden consciences through such bondage. They issued the prohibition for a time to avoid scandal.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, New Testament principles are timeless and prescriptive; New Testament applications are timely and descriptive. In his essay “Are There Legal Requirements in the New Testament?” August Pieper wrote: “There is nothing pertaining to the church and its activity which has been prescribed as to outward form, no form for the worship service, the sermon, the prayers, the liturgy, the singing; also no time, no frequency, no duration, no prescribed order of worship.”<sup>18</sup> Liturgical scholar Peter Brunner made the same point and added: “Not even the use of the Lord’s Prayer may be demanded as an absolute legal-ritual necessity.”<sup>19</sup>

### *The Lutheran Confessions*

The Lutheran Confessions often refer to worship practices that existed in the Lutheran churches of the sixteenth century.<sup>20</sup> Many citations are similar to what is perhaps the most well-known of these statements:

Our churches are falsely accused of abolishing the Mass. In fact, the Mass is retained among us and is celebrated with the greatest reverence. Almost all the usual ceremonies are also retained, except that German hymns, added for the instruction of the people, are interspersed here and there among the Latin ones.<sup>21</sup>

This leads to the question: Do the liturgical practices of the confessions have the same status as the doctrinal sections of the Confessions? Are we bound to observe them? The question is answered by understanding the relationship that exists between the Scriptures and the Confessions. Only the Scriptures establish divine truth. The Confessions themselves make this clear: “We believe, teach, and confess that the only rule and guiding principle according to which all teachings and teachers are to be evaluated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments alone.”<sup>22</sup> We subscribe to the Confessions because they teach what the Scripture teaches. The Scriptures and the Confessions do not stand side by side as equal sources of truth. The Scriptures are the source of truth,

<sup>17</sup>AC XXVIII 65–66.

<sup>18</sup>August Pieper, “Are There Legal Requirements in the New Testament?”, C. Lorenz, trans., *WLQ* 86 (1989): 37.

<sup>19</sup>Peter Brunner, *Worship in the Name of Jesus*, M. H. Bertram, trans. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), 221–223.

<sup>20</sup>The author treated this subject in “The Liturgy and Its Use in Our Church,” in Kenneth A. Cherney, Jr., ed., *Heritage and Hope* (Mequon: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Press, 2013), 433–472. Much of the section on the Lutheran Confessions is adapted from that essay.

<sup>21</sup>AC XXIV 1–2.

<sup>22</sup>FC Ep 1.1.

the *norma normans*. The Confessions witness to the scriptural truth; they are *norma normata*. The confessors make no claim to be speaking timeless truth when they describe liturgical practices unnamed or unknown in the Scriptures, just as the Scriptures themselves prescribe no liturgical rite or practice for worship.

Luther's pastoral, conservative, and traditional sensibilities led the Lutheran Church to become a liturgical church, but he always remained cautious of liturgical edicts. Luther insisted:

Liberty must prevail in these matters and Christian consciences must not be bound by laws and ordinances. That is why the Scriptures prescribe nothing in these matters but allow freedom for the Spirit to act according to his own understanding as the respective place, time, and persons may require it.<sup>23</sup>

The Confessions echo this perspective. We find no hesitation on the part of the confessors to report the general liturgical practices in their Lutheran congregations; they forthrightly describe their preferences. But the confessors make one thing clear:

For this is enough for the true unity of the Christian church that there the gospel is preached harmoniously according to a pure understanding and the sacraments are administered in conformity with the divine Word. It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that uniform ceremonies, instituted by human beings, be observed everywhere.<sup>24</sup>

“Lord, I love the house where you live, the place where your glory dwells” (Ps 26:8). But what do I say and what do I do when I get there? This is the question that faces every lay person, every called minister, every congregation, and every denomination Sunday by Sunday. The question cannot be answered, however, by referring to biblical or confessional rules and regulations. We respect the past and are edified by it, but we are not enslaved by it. Our search for clues about what Christians will say and do in public worship must begin elsewhere. It starts with the gospel.

### **We gather to proclaim and gain the gospel**

The good news that comes from God is this: Your sins are forgiven. There is nothing more refreshing and more relieving for people who feel the weight of guilt over their sins than God's good news. This is the message the Spirit employs to overcome disbelief and doubt in the hearts and minds of human beings and lead them to trust the good news with confidence. Such confident trust is faith. As faith trusts the message, it seeks to know and accept all the facets

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<sup>23</sup>LW 53:20.

<sup>24</sup>AC VII 2–3.



of the good news—everything God did in the past to achieve forgiveness, everything he does in the present to promote forgiveness, and everything he will do in the future to finalize forgiveness. All of God’s thoughts, words, and actions across time and into timelessness seem impossible to the human mind, but the Spirit enlightens hearts with the power of the same gospel to know and believe. With the forgiveness of sins accomplished, God reestablishes the fellowship lost in Eden and restores the image of God that delights in turning away from sin and living according to God’s will. When he creates faith to believe the gospel, he promises to guard and preserve faith with the same gospel, and he joins the believers in a fellowship that lasts forever. Everything we are and everything we hope to be is ours through the gospel, i.e., the message “that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:19).

Believers gather with other believers at public worship to gain the gospel. Many arrive at 9:00 a.m. on Sunday morning for other reasons, too: to find comfort in tradition, to meet their friends, to be uplifted by music, to train their children. People are different. Some of their reasons for coming to church are wholesome, and some not so much. In the end, however, what attracts worshipers and what guides public worship is the gospel of Jesus: Your sins are forgiven.

It is the Church’s mission, its primary objective, to announce the gospel to people. God has committed to us the message of reconciliation, and Jesus has commissioned us to proclaim it, not only in the word but also in baptism and Holy Communion. Jesus says, “Preach the gospel” (Mark 16:15). Jesus says, “Make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt 28:19). Speaking of his holy meal, Jesus says, “Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). What is true of the Church’s mission in general is also the objective of its public worship.<sup>25</sup>

Some contend that the preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments are, in fact, a divine command. Writing specif-

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<sup>25</sup>The words used in the New Testament for what we call public worship, i.e., the gathering of believers around Word and Sacrament, come from the Greek *συνάγω*, to assemble. Cf. Matt 18:20, 1 Cor 5:4, Acts 4:31. In an effort to promote the priestly service of New Testament ministers, however, some early Christian leaders, e.g., Clement of Rome (96 AD), spoke of these ministerial acts as sacrifices. Soon enough the church began using the term *λειτουργία*, an action offered to God. Similar words followed such as worship, office (*officium*), *Gottesdienst*, and divine service, all of which enfold a First Commandment activity. This historical accident has brought no end of confusion to Christian churches: Is public worship obedience to God or gospel proclamation? This is why we make a distinction between *worship* (an obedience concept) and *public worship* (a gospel-proclamation concept). On this subject cf. Senn, *Christian Liturgy*, 100–101.

ically about the Word and Holy Communion, Peter Brunner wrote: “With respect to worship, the following elements of form are required with the compulsion of a divine commandment by reason of Christ’s institution.”<sup>26</sup> Prof. Pieper reflects biblical truth more accurately:

Gospel, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper are not legal ordinances. The administration of Word and Sacrament enjoined upon the Church and each Christian—we mean the enjoined actions of preaching, baptizing, and of celebrating the Lord’s Supper—is likewise not a legal ordinance. After we have come to know the gospel in faith, preaching, baptism, and celebrating the Lord’s Supper become for us Christians not a duty—for duty is a legal concept—but an inner spiritual compulsion.<sup>27</sup>

What compels the believer to public worship is not law but love for the gospel. John Newton wrote:

How sweet the name of Jesus sounds in a believer’s ear!  
It soothes our sorrows, heals our wounds, and drives away all fear.<sup>28</sup>

Believers love to be with Jesus, and Jesus is there at public worship. It all seems so common. The altar guild members arrive and carefully set out paper-thin hosts and grape wine. The pastor arrives and opens his books and arranges his notes. The usher arrives and pours tap water into the font. But when the pastor sprinkles the water on the baby’s head and speaks the words, “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” Jesus shows up, covers the child in his perfect righteousness, and adopts the child into the family of God. When the pastor speaks the absolution or announces the gospel from the pulpit—as he has done hundreds of times before—Jesus shows up, for when the minister forgives sins “this is as valid and certain in heaven also, as if Christ, our dear Lord, dealt with us himself.”<sup>29</sup> When the pastor distributes the host and offers a sip of the wine, Jesus shows up because in that bread and wine are his true body and blood.

Miracles happen at public worship, and both worshipers and worship leaders can settle in their places expecting a miracle: the baby rescued from the clutches of Satan, the cancer victim sporting a smile despite her pain as she listens intently to the sermon, the once-estranged but now reconciled couple walking hand-in-hand to commune together—all these are miracles and we see them at worship. Believers gather with other believers to acclaim and proclaim the gospel. When they do, the Spirit uses their message to bring life and immortality to light. Considering what the gospel is and what it

<sup>26</sup>Brunner, *Worship*, 221.

<sup>27</sup>Pieper, “Legal Regulations?,” 40.

<sup>28</sup>CW 358:1.

<sup>29</sup>*Small Catechism*, 11.

does, we say with David, “I rejoiced with those who said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord’” (Ps 122:1).

### *The modes of gospel proclamation*

Neither the gospel nor the miracles it produces are exclusive to public worship, of course. Miracles happen wherever the gospel is proclaimed. At first bored and even cynical of Christianity, the boyfriend who became the fiancé listens more intently to the witness of his soon-to-be bride. What never made sense when he was a teenager seems incredible now and he wants to hear more. A miracle. The addict who refused the warnings, refused the admonition, refused to repent, and refused the certified letter of excommunication that arrived in the mail, feels his conscience tearing him apart. His sobs are the sobs of despair. He can’t believe God could forgive him, but as he listens he remembers Jesus and becomes determined to give counseling a try. A miracle. She always wants more, never satisfied when Bible study ends. What came before, what comes next, why did he do it, how could he do it? With each new insight her confidence grows and her faith acts in love. A miracle. Her cheeks are hollow, her eyes stay closed, her finger isn’t far from the morphine pump. The pastor holds her hand and speaks softly about the mansion she will soon enter, and a smile crosses her lips. A miracle. Gospel-prompted miracles often occur far away from Sunday morning worship.

Christians proclaim the gospel in many ways and many places besides at public worship. They evangelize family members and friends, they discipline fellow members who have fallen into shameful sins, they teach their children and support the Christian education of others, and they comfort those in pain and trauma. The same gospel they proclaim in worship is proclaimed in many different places. The same gospel offers the same forgiveness of sins; the same gospel works amazing miracles. But Christians go about proclaiming the gospel with different purposes in mind.

Philip overcame the carriage of a governmental official from Ethiopia as he was reading Isaiah’s prophecy. The man was confused; he admitted it and invited Philip to clarify what the prophet meant (Acts 8:26–40). Our witness often has the same goal: to simplify and explain Bible truth. We may even ask: “Do you understand what God says about sin?” wanting to be sure that the perception of sin is accurate; “Do you understand what God says about forgiveness?”, hoping that they grasp at least the facts of Jesus’s work. When the message is clear to the intellect, the Spirit can begin to work miraculously to lead a sinner to believe it. *In evangelism we proclaim, and we clarify.*

Neither Nathan nor Jesus hesitated to speak directly to a sinner committing a shameful sin. “You are the man,” Nathan said to David (2 Sam 12:7). Jesus identified his betrayer by giving him a piece of bread dipped in a dish (John 13:26). At a certain point both Nathan and Jesus moved beyond a general admonition and specified the sin

and the sinner. This is the procedure Jesus lays out in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 18. We follow Jesus's outline by approaching the sinner and identifying his sin. The steps that follow are pointed and specific, all intended to lead to repentance. Even the final act of the Church, excommunication, is aimed at a specific sin, i.e., the sin of unbelief, the refusal to repent. But the absolution is specific, too. Nathan absolved David face to face: "The LORD has put away your sin." Jesus did the same with Peter after his denial. *In Christian discipline we proclaim, and we specify.*

All over Judea and Galilee the crowds flocking to Jesus were amazed that he spoke as one with authority. He began with what they knew from the Old Testament Scriptures and widened and deepened their understanding. He told them stories from everyday life, shepherds, coins, and seeds, and explained how his kingdom worked. The people called him Rabbi, teacher, and he worked constantly to expand their knowledge and deepen their faith. That's what education does: it broadens knowledge. Christian education is no different. It begins with simple truths and moves to deep observations. The child learns one-line Bible passages and moves toward answering questions from the catechism's exposition. The adult learner moves from the life of Christ to the journeys of Paul and the Revelation of John. The pastoral student begins his faith life with "Jesus loves me, this I know" and moves toward seminary Christology. Learning is a life-long activity also for Christians, just as Peter wrote it ought to be: "Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet 3:18). *In Christian education we proclaim, and we broaden.*

The man had good friends. They heard about Jesus the healer and that he was touring the countryside on their side of the Jordan. They took their deaf friend to Jesus, hoping for a cure. But the deaf man couldn't hear their plans, and he couldn't ask about them, either. Jesus sensed his confusion and "took him away, apart from the crowd" (Mark 7:33). With signs and sighs Jesus communicated with him. His ministry was personal, man-to-man. The gospel brings comfort wherever it is proclaimed, but trouble and trauma usually require a person-to-person touch. When we deal with people who are frightened or grieving, we clothe the comfort of the gospel in a listening ear, an understanding smile, and perhaps a gentle touch. We sit close and look our friend in the eye as if to say, "I am your friend, but Jesus is your best friend." *In counseling we proclaim, and we personalize.*

Whether as universal priests or called ministers, whether in private or in public, believers proclaim the same saving gospel, but they proclaim it in different ways and in different settings. Examples from the Bible and simple common sense guide us in evangelism, discipline, education, and counseling. What about public worship?

Could we determine our worship objectives simply by observing other gospel endeavors? Evangelism, discipline, education, and counseling occur regularly in worship. Believers have sensed that worship requires a different approach, however. Fitting practices for evangelism may not work well in worship. What serves the gospel in worship may not be the best in discipline. Christians have dealt with these issues before, and so our research begins by observing the patterns and practices of worship in the Church's past. What did believers do back then?

### **Worship and the example of the Church**

Believers have never hesitated to consider the example of believers who lived before them. Jesus himself quoted Moses; Peter remembered the words of Joel and David in his Pentecost sermon. The author of the letter to Hebrew Christians listed a whole set of past heroes of faith and then called them "witnesses" who surround the Church (Heb 12:1). The same writer encouraged: "Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith" (Heb 13:7). Luther understood as well as anyone the difference between the divinely inspired words of the leaders of the past and their practical applications and customs. He refused to turn ecclesiastical practices into rules. But Luther also understood the concept of respect. Writing about the Christian church year, for example, he wrote, "What has been established of old by the agreement of the church and out of love for God and for just reasons must necessarily be observed, not because it is of itself necessary and unchangeable but because the obedience of love which we owe God and the church is necessary."<sup>30</sup>

Like Luther, Scripture-loving believers of all times have tended to establish goals and priorities for public worship by carefully observing the Church's past practices, not being legalistically bound by them, but lovingly respecting especially those concepts which promote and proclaim the gospel of Jesus. *A Handbook of Church Music* describes this approach under the theme "A Lutheran View of Tradition."

Because it views itself as part of the one, holy Christian and apostolic church, Lutheranism looks to the experience of the church at worship throughout its history as an important source of its way of worship. . . . For Lutherans, the word tradition—in the sense of the gathered experience of the church at worship throughout its history—is an important working concept. For Lutherans, their worship tradition is always a living tradition, continuously devel-

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<sup>30</sup>Ewald M. Plass, *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, vol. 1 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 307.

oping and living in a vital parish practice. Building on the experience of the past, the Church moves confidently into the future.<sup>31</sup>

The first Christians who gathered in their homes after Pentecost didn't approach the issue of worship without experience. The rites of the temple and synagogue were deeply embedded in their spiritual psyche. They were at home with the concepts of instruction, participation, and repetition. Rituals and music were part of worship in both temple and synagogue, as were communal prayer and psalm singing. They heard the reading of the Scriptures and the sermons based on them. They knew all about the annual round of festivals such as Passover and the Great Day of Atonement. Even Christians are creatures of habit, and it doesn't surprise that the formation of Christian worship has its roots sunk deep in the worship life of the Old Testament. There was an enormous change, of course. The Old Testament shadows became New Testament realities and the focus turned from Messiah who was coming to Christ who had come and was coming again.

Most Bible interpreters agree that Luke is describing a pattern of priorities when he describes the first Christian gatherings: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42). As the Word of the Lord grew across Asia, Europe, and North Africa, those responsible for public worship leaned on this pattern. The reading of Scripture and the instruction that followed preceded the Meal, expressions of fellowship were critical and valued, and intercessory prayer became common. Christians sensed the power of music to carry the message to the heart and eagerly followed St. Paul's encouragement to "let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit" (Col 3:16). The Edict of Milan<sup>32</sup> changed the character of Christian worship as churchmen scurried to serve thousands of worshipers in large buildings instead of dozens in homes and caves. The gathering of believers became more organized and more formal, but the essential purpose and pattern of Christian worship did not change. Especially in the western Christian church the basic worship rite and its intersection with the Christian calendar established a worship pattern which meant to *summarize* the fundamental truths of the Christian religion which are built on the words and works of Jesus. To this weekly and annual summary the church added poetry, music, and art to *solidify* these truths in the hearts of worshipers.

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<sup>31</sup>Carl Halter and Carl Schalk, eds., *A Handbook of Church Music* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), 16–17.

<sup>32</sup>Decreed by Constantine the Great in AD 313, the Edict of Milan granted freedom of religion in the empire and resulted in the spectacular growth of the Christian Church.



Volumes have been written about the history and practice of Christian worship, but the essential purpose for gathering around word and sacrament remains as simple today as it was two millennia ago. Believers gather with other believers to proclaim the gospel of Jesus and to acclaim his glory. In this assembly they often clarify, specify, broaden, and personalize gospel truth, and the Spirit produces fruit. Their specific plan in corporate worship, however, is to *summarize the truths of the gospel and solidify them on the hearts of worshippers*. This they have done over centuries of time and place and still do today—not by compulsion but with respect for and in agreement with the Church—by means of a repeating ritual and the fine arts.

### **Participants in gospel proclamation**

The gospel proclamation that happens in public worship does not belong only to the man standing in the chancel. Before he ascended into heaven Jesus authorized his followers to carry on his prophetic office by proclaiming the gospel to every creature. The ministry of the gospel, i.e., the work of proclaiming the forgiveness of sins, is part of the faith-life of every believer.

Jesus also established a public ministry of the gospel in which some are designated to represent others in gospel proclamation. By this public ministry Jesus intends to bring blessings to the entire body of believers: the blessing of efficiency since not all can preach and teach or go and tell at the same time or in the same way; the blessing of expertise, since some have gained the gift to teach and properly distinguish between law and gospel; the blessing of pastoral care since some are deemed responsible for the well-being of others. The public ministry is not a different ministry from the ministry of the gospel. It is a representative ministry and does not devalue or denigrate the role of the universal priests. Luther made this clear:

For when I preach, when we come together as a congregation, this is not my word or my doing; but is done for the sake of all of you and for the sake of the whole church. . . . So also they all pray and sing and give thanks together; here there is nothing that one possesses or does for himself alone; but what each one has belongs to the other.<sup>33</sup>

Both universal priests and public ministers come together at worship, therefore, to proclaim the gospel.

Explanations of Christian worship often begin by establishing this formula: God speaks, and believers respond. In a similar vein, some speak of worship as having both “sacramental” and “sacrificial”

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<sup>33</sup>LW 51:343.

dimensions: some actions are directed by God toward the worshiper sacramentally and some aspects are directed by the worshiper toward God sacrificially.<sup>34</sup> These explanations are legitimate as long as the sacramental actions are not presumed to be the exclusive role of the representative minister and the sacrificial aspects presumed to be the exclusive role of the universal priest. The reality is that God speaks through both the called minister and the worshiper, and both the called minister and worshiper respond to God in their proclamation. Peter Brunner wrote:

The congregation's Spirit-effected response to the gift of salvation, conveyed in Word and Sacrament, is itself Word. . . . This responding, confessing, thanking, and glorifying word of the congregation will always recall the great and saving deeds of God's might; it will acknowledge, laud, and glorify them prayerfully, and in this manner also proclaim and present them to others.<sup>35</sup>

The homiletics textbook *Preach the Gospel* observes:

The sermon is an address made to people, but at the same time it is an offering made to God. It is both sacrament and sacrifice. . . . Luther called preaching the highest form of sacrifice because right preaching always praises the Lord.<sup>36</sup>

Bruce Backer sees the same dual role in Christian hymns:

Hymns are a response to God. We sing our hymns to God who has rescued us. As we praise and thank him, we repeat the great things he has done for us. Hymns enable the believer to exercise his ministry. In hymns the universal priesthood is in action. As the believer addresses God, he lays the Word of God close to the heart of his brother by singing of the great things God has done.<sup>37</sup>

We attribute high value to the proclamation of the gospel in the Scripture readings and sermon, in the absolution, and certainly in the sacraments. These carry with them the very words of God with the gospel at their heart. Consider, however, the gospel proclamation in creeds, psalms, and canticles, in the public confessions of sin, in prayers, and even in art and music as they recall the great things God has done. Universal priests and public ministers—and we include music ministers—gather together in public worship to praise God by proclaiming the gospel of Jesus.

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<sup>34</sup>Luther Reed, *The Lutheran Liturgy* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1947), 69, 772.

<sup>35</sup>Brunner, *Worship*, 122-124.

<sup>36</sup>Joel Gerlach and Richard Balge, *Preach the Gospel*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1982), 2.

<sup>37</sup>Bruce Backer, *Lutheran Worship* (New Ulm: Dr. Martin Luther College, 1988), 94.

### Worship as proclamation and praise

I will extol the LORD at all times;  
     his praise will always be on my lips.  
 I will glory in the LORD;  
     let the afflicted hear and rejoice.  
 Glorify the LORD with me;  
     let us exalt his name together (Ps 34:1–3).

Some commentators<sup>38</sup> quote these words of David to maintain that the primary purpose of public worship is to praise God. Were they to read to the end of this psalm they would understand what David considered the essence of praise: “The LORD will rescue his servants; no one who takes refuge in him will be condemned” (Ps 34:22). The psalms repeatedly align praise and proclamation, e.g.,

Sing to the LORD a new song;  
     sing to the LORD, all the earth.  
 Sing to the LORD, praise his name;  
     proclaim his salvation day after day.  
 Declare his glory among the nations,  
     his marvelous deeds among all peoples (Ps 96:1–3).

Luther understood the same connection between praise and proclamation:

Therefore our task is simply to praise and thank him, first, by receiving and believing in our hearts that from him are all things and he is our God; and secondly by coming out with it and freely confessing it with our mouths before all the world in *preaching, praising, lauding, and thanking*.<sup>39</sup>

Consider Jesus’s summary of the moral law: Love God and love your neighbor. What higher love can be expressed to God than to proclaim the essence of glory, the forgiveness of sins? What higher love can be offered to neighbors than to proclaim to them the love which can save them from sin, death, and hell? The highest form of praise, therefore, is to proclaim the gospel. Rather than dividing praise from proclamation, it may be said that all gospel proclamation is praise and the highest praise is gospel proclamation. Christians praise God in many ways. Whether with family or friends, in farm or factory, whether formidably or feebly, believers praise God by lovingly carrying out the tasks of their Christian vocation. At the same, however, believers say with St. John, “I have no greater joy than to know that my children are walking in the truth” (3 John 4).

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<sup>38</sup>Notably Rick Warren in *The Purpose-Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 103.

<sup>39</sup>WA 17II.8. Cited by Vilmos Vajta in *Luther on Worship* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), 159.

### The objective of Christian worship

In liberty but with careful thought, believers of many ages have sensed this to be the objective and purpose of public worship:

**Universal priests and public ministers gather together to praise God by proclaiming the gospel in word and sacrament to summarize truth and solidify it deep in the heart by means of ritual and the fine arts.**

What are the implications of this objective for Lutherans today?

If the purpose of Christian worship is to proclaim the gospel in word and sacrament, we must be content with how the Spirit works through the proclamation of the gospel. The gospel always has an effect, for God's word does not return to him empty (Isa 55:11), but the working of the gospel defies human schedules and deadlines. The Spirit always works miracles through the gospel, but sometimes the miracles reveal themselves slowly and sometimes they are unseen. Public worship, therefore, does not set ecclesiastical activity on a fast track. It is not a quick fix for straying teens, poor stewardship, or slow numerical growth. It does not offer easy solutions to life-style aspirations, and it is not a forum for denouncing society's sins. Pastors need to remember this themselves, and they need to share it with the universal priests. Today's believers, encumbered by a sinful nature and surrounded by American pragmatism, too often approach public worship with their own objectives. Although sometimes well-intended, imprecise objectives will bring confusion to public worship and may lead to competing goals. Worship education wisely begins, therefore, with a review of the essence of the gospel and the Spirit's working through the means of grace. Luther urged his colleagues that worship reform must take second place to gospel teaching.

You should deal first with the center of our teaching and fix in the people's minds what they must know about our justification: that is, that it is an extrinsic righteousness—indeed it is Christ's—given to us through faith which comes by grace to those who are first terrified by the Law and who, struck by the consciousness of their sins, ardently seek redemption. . . . Adequate reform of ungodly rites will come of itself, however, as soon as the fundamentals of our teaching, having been successfully communicated, have taken root in devout hearts.<sup>40</sup>

If our proclamation of the gospel is an act of praise, we must consider how to proclaim the gospel with our best gifts and efforts. Giving our best has absolutely nothing to do with the power of the word; the Spirit works where and when he wills. Giving our best has everything to do with our stewardship of God's gifts, however. Jesus

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<sup>40</sup>LW 49:263.

made it clear in the parable of the growing seed (Mark 4:26–29) that the impetus for growth is in the seed. This truth does not free us, however, from our responsibility to till, irrigate, and fertilize the soil. God does not ask us to make the seed of faith grow; this the Spirit does supernaturally through the gospel. But God does ask us to proclaim the gospel so that it can find its way to the intellect and the emotions. This we do by understanding and employing the psychological realities of communication—realities God himself created in the human creature—and then putting them to use with wisdom and faithfulness.

If gospel proclamation is the task of both universal priests and public ministers, the universal priests must know and understand their task. Compare the time it takes to train preachers and church musicians in their work as gospel proclaimers with the time spent training lay people to worship with intention, and the task we face becomes obvious. Too few worshipers know why they come to church and what to do when they get there. Often they go through the motions and too often they go through the motions haphazardly. Who would send members out to canvass a neighborhood without training? Who would perform a marriage without counseling? The universal priests have a role in public worship. They need to know what it is and how best to carry it out.

If we agree that public worship means to summarize the fundamental truths of the Scriptures, we must consider how our worship rite does that and how we use the rite to meet that objective. The purpose of proclamation in Lutheran worship is not to provide opportunities for popular topics. Lutheran worship obliges us to focus our attention on the words and works of Jesus, the foundation of God's plan to save the world. Sunday by Sunday and year after year we review these basic truths, not simply to give or gain information, but to receive the power of the Spirit who works through these truths to create and nourish faith. The Western Rite, the course of our main order of service, evolved with this review in mind; the Ordinary and the Proper, the Church Year and lectionary all serve this purpose. Those who tire of the repetition of this rite or find it ponderous or less than exhilarating may want to consider that the problems with the rite may not be the fault of the rite but how it is being used in their worship life to proclaim the gospel to faith.

If we agree that public worship means to solidify the liberating truths of the gospel in the hearts of hearers, we need to make a careful review of the power which God himself implants in music and the arts. Vocal and instrumental music were an integral part of worship in the temple, and the psalms permeated worship in temple and synagogue. Twice in his letters Paul encouraged the use of "psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit" (Col 3:16 and Eph 5:19). We sons

and daughters of the Reformation have an impressive example in Martin Luther who, next to theology, valued music most highly. He had no use for pious fanatics who destroyed the church's artistic legacy. For Luther, music was the servant of the gospel which carried the beautiful message of the gospel to the heart in beautiful forms. His musical contributions to the Lutheran church are inestimable, and they set the course for Lutheran worship after him.

Luther's perspective on music is valuable for today's pastors, musicians, and worship planners. It encourages the Church to find value in a variety of musical forms, old and new. Luther never set aside the old Gregorian chants even as he promoted the new polyphony of northern Europe. With guidance, today's worshipers can find value in the Church's songs from many eras. Luther would expect his heirs to approach music in worship with the same interest and passion he demonstrated as he edited and composed music for the liturgy and hymns. He would encourage us to search out and support poets and musicians who could enhance public worship. Finally, Luther would expect that we take care to balance the role of message and music in the songs we sing. The message of the gospel remains beautiful without music, but music without a message or music which overshadows the message does little more than manipulate the emotions.

### **Finding consensus**

When they gather for worship, believers praise God and serve their neighbor by proclaiming the good news about Jesus Christ. This is the purpose of Christian worship. Whether they are among the lost or the found, people are looking for God. Some want to grow stronger in faith and living. Others want to know who God is and what he says. As pastors, church musicians, and worship planners, as classroom teachers, parents, and parish administrators, as worshipers—men, women, and children—our task is to show them God in the person of Jesus Christ who forgives their sins, empowers their living, and promises eternal glory. With this single purpose we approach public worship and all it involves with commitment and joy.

This article is chapter one from the forthcoming *Christian Worship: Foundations*, a companion volume to the new WELS hymnal (Advent 2021). This volume is a pastor's manual that provides rationale for the services in the new hymnal.