

A Theology of Worship

Charles St-Onge, 5/18/03

Far too often as Christians we make the mistake of starting in the middle, rather than at the beginning. At least, this is often the case when we confessional Lutherans discuss “Christian worship”. We assume as givens such things as the need for liturgical structure, Sunday worship, and a historic lectionary. In the meantime, our friends in the rest of the so-called North American Christian community are worshipping on Saturday evenings, in auditoriums, listening to praise bands and sermons entitled “Ten Tips for a Terrific Marriage”. Or perhaps they *are* worshipping on Sunday morning, but using a mangled post-modern liturgy, watching someone paint a picture of the ocean during a homily on “The Depth of God’s Love”. We tsk-tsk these “travesties”, but more often than not do not know how to respond critically. We launch into a lecture on the biblical basis for the Agnus Dei, but we do not start at the very beginning: why do we worship at all, as Christians? We as Christians need a strong, theological understanding of *why* we worship. Only then can the question of what, where, with who, and how, we worship be addressed.

Why do we, as Christians, worship at all? The question would seem to be trivial, perhaps even absurd. But trivial questions are often the most critical ones to ask. Just ask a randomly selected group of North American Christians to tell you the Gospel, and the importance of trivial questions will become clear. Many Christians would say that we worship to give praise to God, but this answer is clearly deficient. Who is God? Why would we praise him (or her, or it)? Is any type of praise acceptable, or are there specific forms of praise most acceptable to the deity? Indeed Muslims, Jews and many Hindus give praise to a Supreme Being or god: is Christian worship different from other religions only in the object of praise? This is, in fact, the reason why the previous answer is deficient: it is not a uniquely Christian answer. To understand why a Christian worships, we must understand what a Christian is. And to understand this, we must understand the relationship of God and man. We must begin with theology.

Consider first man’s situation. Orthodox Lutheranism believes, teaches, and confesses that man is “unable by nature to have true fear of God and truth faith in God.”¹ Furthermore, we profess that “we have been elected to eternal life out of pure grace in Christ without any merit of our own.”² The Christian is such not by his own work, but by the work of God in Christ, through the Holy Spirit. Unregenerate man is converted by God, brought to faith in Jesus by the Holy Spirit through God’s word, and justified before the Father for the sake of Jesus’ atonement on the cross. The faith of the now regenerate Christian is such that it “should produce good fruits and good works and that we must do all such good works as God has commanded”³. The Christian is now also part of the “assembly of all believers and saints”⁴, the Church. Now we can assert that Christian worship is 1) a *response*, like good works, of the Christian to the God who has saved him, 2) *communal*, since the Christian is by definition part of the Church. As one Eastern Orthodox scholar has put it, “Christian existence is essentially corporate; to be Christian means to be in the community, in the Church.”⁵ These points are in no way givens within the wider Christian community, which is what leads us to disagree on the nature of worship. But the question of God’s role in the life of the Christian is sure to widen the gulf.

How does God enter the life of man? How is it that God brings an unregenerate man to belief in Jesus as Savior? Orthodox Lutheranism teaches that it is baptism that brings a Christian into relationship with God. Baptism is God’s means of joining us to both Christ’s death and His resurrection, and thus making us partakers of eternal life. Just as God used the Flood to judge the wicked, and the Red Sea to destroy Pharaoh’s army, so does God in the waters of baptism drown the unregenerate man. The Holy

Spirit moves over the waters of baptism to create new life just as He moved over the primordial waters at the first creation⁶. As the Book of Acts records Ananias saying to Saul, “Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins” (Acts 22:16 RSV). Baptism, the power of the Word and water, is the first of God’s gifts to us. The second and equally significant gift is the giving of Christ’s body and blood “for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26:28 RSV). The celebration of the Lord’s Supper is a heavenly meal. It is a precursor of the wedding feast to come spoken of so frequently by Jesus⁷. In fact, by our drinking of His body and blood, we become participants of a heavenly reality.

God comes to us through his Word, the Holy Scriptures. Baptism and the Eucharist are in fact visible and tangible expressions of this same Word. God teaches, reproves, corrects, and trains in righteousness all Christians through the Holy Scriptures (2 Timothy 3:16 RSV). As Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, faith comes “from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ.” (Romans 11:17 RSV). What is the preaching of Christ but the proclamation of the Word of the Scriptures? As Jesus himself said, “you search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me.” (John 5:39 RSV).

If worship is something we offer to God as a community, what then do we “do” with these gifts of God to us? The concept of worship as the offering of praise to God is inadequate to deal with the Christian reality. In fact, when Christians are baptizing, sharing in the Eucharist, and listening to God’s Word proclaimed, they are not truly *worshipping* at all! They are actually the recipients of God’s good gifts, not the givers of praise. Strictly speaking, Christian *worship* is limited to the songs of praise and prayers of thanksgiving given as a response to those gifts. Or put differently, Christian worship is the Church’s response to the sacramental gifts of God *in Christ* preached, poured out in baptism, and eaten as bread and wine. Or again, as Martin Luther wrote, in worship “our dear Lord Himself talks to us through His holy Word and...we, in turn, talk to Him in prayer and songs of praise.”⁸

Christians worship because they are Christians. They worship together because, by definition, to be Christian is to be in the Church, which is the Body of Christ. Christian worship is as much reception of gift and participation in heavenly reality as a “giving of praise”. This theology of worship assumes a Lutheran understanding of salvation as the pure gift of God’s grace for Christ’s sake, and a view of baptism and the Lord’s supper as sacramental, not sacrificial or memorial. Before we can discuss Christian worship, we must discuss these foundational points. Martin Luther underscores this point when he writes “if I am ignorant of God’s works and power, I am ignorant of God himself; and if I do not know God, I cannot worship, praise, give thanks, or serve him.”⁹ Our understanding of God and our relationship to Him must be the starting point for any discussion of Christian worship.

¹ “The Augsburg Confession - Article II (German)”. The Book of Concord. Theodore Tappert (ed.) (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1959) p.29

² “The Formula of Concord – Epitome, Article XI”. The Book of Concord. p.496

³ “The Augsburg Confession - Article VI (German)”. The Book of Concord. p.31

⁴ “The Augsburg Confession - Article VIII (German)”. The Book of Concord. p.33

⁵ White, James F. Introduction to Christian Worship. (Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN) p.28

⁶ Danielou, Jean, S.J. The Bible and the Liturgy. (University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN)

⁷ Danielou. The Bible and the Liturgy. p.156

⁸ White. Introduction to Christian Worship. p.27

⁹ Luther, Martin. “The Bondage of the Will”. Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings. John Dillenberger (ed) (Anchor Books, New York, NY, 1962) p.179