

Toward a Lutheran Style of Worship

Charles St-Onge, May 18, 2003

Introduction

I am so thankful to have had the opportunity this year to take not just one, but two courses on “Lutheran Worship”. Because of the first course in the winter, this fall has been a wonderful opportunity to reflect more deeply on the worship life of our church, and what it means to worship as a Christian of the Lutheran tradition. My winter course presented many of the bare facts; the course this fall has given those facts shape and a focus. That focus is Christ. Everything about Lutheran worship, from the ordo of the communion service to the space we worship in, should proclaim Christ. The verse that should be in the mind of anyone involved in the worship life of a Lutheran community should be John 12:21: “Sir, we would like to see Jesus.” I’ve learned that there are five important aspects of worship that should be taken captive to Christ; the space we worship within, the time we worship in, the forms we worship with, and the history of the ones who worship.

Christotological Space

“When you come together...” *1 Corinthians 14:26*

While it is certainly true that the disciples of Jesus are to worship him “in spirit and truth” (John 4:23), this worship still must occur in a space. The church is a body of people gathered around the Word and Sacraments of Christ, and that gathering must have physicality. This gathering space serves two functions. First of all, it is *domus ecclesiae* – it is the house of the church. But it is also the *domus dei* – the house of God, and a reflection of the God being worshipped by the church.

As the *domus ecclesiae*, the space in which the people of God gather for worship should enable the people to gather as a *community*. The space should not dwarf the people or hide them, but should make it appear that the people are a *body*, gathered around Word and Sacrament. At the same time, as the *domus dei*, the space should not reflect the people, or be a cause for introspection, but should point the people to Christ. The people are not the subject of worship – Christ is. The altar, the font, and the ambo should be central, and any accents such as paraments or banners should be worthy of God and point to his Son. This is the balance that must be achieved in creating a Lutheran – a Christ centered – worship space. Most older church buildings that I’ve been in have too much of the *Dei* and not enough of the *ecclesiae* about them; but some of our newer churches have lurched to the opposite extreme. A Lutheran Christian worship space must strive to be both.

Christological Time

“...we wait for the blessed hope – the glorious appearing of our Great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.” *Titus 2:13*

A Lutheran church marks off its days and weeks and months so as to keep time focused on Jesus. There should be no other reason for Sunday worship, liturgical calendars and lectionaries than this. Without a structure to the year the Christian is too easily sucked into the time of this world. That’s why I think the band “The Choir” is right when it calls the children of this world the children *of time*. The weekly worship of Sunday and the church year are the two ways in which the church keeps its eyes on God’s time, the coming of Christ and his return as judge and deliverer of his people. The liturgical calendar is Gospel. It is a constant reminder that our kingdom is not of this world.

We can run into two dangers in our treatment of time. One is to mark liturgical time for its own sake, without understanding our actions as Christologically focused. Lost in countless festivals and commemorations, we can become focused instead on our own works and the works of others, rather than

Christ's work. The other danger is to stop marking time, considering such marking as unscriptural, as the Church of Christ does. This can lead to scriptural poverty and, ironically, to a loss of focus on Christ. Since rejection of a liturgical calendar usually means rejection of a lectionary as well, the congregation can begin to center on "favorite passages" only, and lose the richness of the whole council of God. My undergraduate college chaplain tried to institute a lectionary for just this reason, because the community had become stuck on a steady diet of pet-passages.

Christological Form

"They devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." *Acts 2:42*

Lutheran worship is focused not our attempts to reconcile ourselves to God, nor on our need for an uplifting emotional experience, nor on our need for sanctification. Lutheran worship focuses on the reception of the gifts of God and our thanksgiving for those gifts. We receive the Gospel in the absolution of the pastor, through the reading and proclaiming of the Word, through the new creation of baptism, and through the reception of Christ's body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins. Worship should not be focused inward on ourselves, but outward on Jesus Christ. The law of praying is indeed the law of believing. The forms used for worship will eventually impact belief.

Christological History

"Contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" *Jude 3*

Because we are part of a church that has existed before us, and will exist after we are gone should the Lord not return, we do not need to develop ideas of Christian space, time, and form from scratch. We can rely on the church of the last two thousand years to provide direction. Lutheran worship is not a brand new invention, but a continuation of the same faith delivered by Christ to the world through his apostles. Lutheran worship does not look to the past simply out of reverence for the saints of old, however. It looks to the past because the Holy Spirit has pointed the church of old to Christ just as surely as he points us. As one author put it, "It seems odd, that certain men who talk so much of what the Holy Spirit reveals to themselves, should think so little of what he has revealed to others."¹ We look to the past as a witness left by the Holy Spirit of his work in preserving the faith once for all entrusted to the holy ones, our ancestors in the faith. When we do try and do things from scratch, we deny the work of the Holy Spirit in the past, and in so doing, and are in danger of inventing our own Christ.

Conclusions

In my travels across the United States, Canada, and Europe, I have had the opportunity to worship with countless groups of Christians of all denominations, and visit sanctuaries of every shape and size. I've seen memorial chapels in the rural communities of Iceland; I've visited the cathedrals of Montréal and New York. I've worshipped with Mennonites in Southern Ontario, with Evangelicals in San Francisco, with Roman Catholics in Paris, and with Lutherans in South Carolina. Some of these services were intriguing, and some downright embarrassing. Now I find I can look back at those experiences and see why I felt the way I did using the framework of the ideas presented in this paper. I also feel much more confident of my ability to lead liturgy with understanding. The key is to remain focused on Christ, and to keep asking like the two Greeks of John's Gospel, "Sir, we would like to see Jesus."

¹ Klein, W. Blomberg, C. Hubbard, R. *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*. (Word Publishing, Dallas, TX, 1993) p.84