

Worship and the Divine Service

Charles St-Onge, May 18, 2003

A debate began in the Christian community of the 4th century about the time when the bread and wine on the altar became the Body and Blood of our Lord.¹ A similar debate rages today within the Church about the point at which a worship service is no longer God's service to us, but instead becomes our service to ourselves. It is just as hard to draw a distinctive "line in the sand" in the latter debate as in the former. What is, indeed, constitutive of God-pleasing, Christian worship? When are our concerns about a community's worship valid critiques, and when are they merely personal preferences? What must occur in worship for *Gottesdienst* to occur?

It is tempting to engage in what the Chinese called the "death of a thousand" with the liturgy of the church. The death of a thousand was a torture technique that killed a person not by a single blow, but by hundreds of non-lethal cuts. What if we add a band to play the service hymns instead of organ – is *Gottesdienst* still occurring? What if we take out the ordinaries? What if we only read from the Gospel instead of including an Old Testament and Epistle Lesson? What if we skip the Great Thanksgiving and commune only after the pronouncement of the words of institution? What if...we only *mime* the verba²? No final, fatal blow to the *Gottesdienst*: only a slow killing by incessant nicking³.

This form of attack can also be reversed. Rather than cutting at the divine service, the service can be built up from scratch from its most basic elements and presuppositions. Then it will be more obvious what is appropriate to divine service and what is not. But what are the basic presuppositions behind the divine service? It certainly must be corporate – a community gathered. Paul's first epistle to Corinth, for example, is addressed to the ἐκκλησία of that city. The letter is addressed to a corpus of people, not just to a collection of individuals. Worship is in the words of one author, "assembly in the name of Jesus"⁴. The presence of the Word of God is another basic element of the divine service. The Word of God is "the perceptible medium of God's uninterrupted, gracious presence in His congregation on earth."⁵ Furthermore, the divine service should not be a "temporal aberration". The service should be historical, recognizing the church militant that has existed before we came on the scene, and also eschatological, giving a foretaste in the present of the coming final victory of Christ. It should be noted that eschatology is linked with history. A lack of eschatological vision will necessarily lead to a loss of historical consciousness. Finally, the divine service should be fitting. Worship is a symbolic testimony:⁶ the very form of worship, the music used, and the words spoken reflect a particular understanding of the nature of God in Christ. The form of worship reflects that in worship God is serving us, a service to which we respond with prayer and praise.

If these are the basic presuppositions of the divine service, then what should the divine service look like? What is the service of God at its most basic? At the heart of the divine service since the earliest times of the church were the spoken Word and the Word present in his body and blood in the Eucharist. The focus of the spoken Word are the very words of the Lord recorded in the gospels, while the heart of the Eucharist is the words Christ spoke when he instituted his supper. Upon these building blocks the divine service is built up. Without the Word, there is no divine service.

Although the Word spoken from the gospels is at the heart of the "service of the Word", the whole of Scripture confesses Christ (John 5:39) and is profitable for teaching (2 Tim 3:16). In addition to the gospels, the Bible contains other epistles concerning Jesus, and the whole of the Old Testament. Would it not, then, be profitable to include a reading from each of those other sections in the service? The Psalms, long recognized as the songbook of the Bible, should also have a place in the readings from Scripture. The Word should be expounded in order to make clear its meaning to the gathered community. Would it not also be proper to respond to this Word with an affirmation of what it means to be the church, using for example a creed? Now, all of this should be done in good order, keeping in mind the climactic place of

the reading from the Gospel. Since worship is historical because it is eschatological, the church should use a traditional framework for these readings such as the one with its roots in synagogue worship: Old Testament, Psalm, Epistle, Psalm, Gospel, and Exposition (Sermon). Either before or after the sermon one of the creeds of the church may be spoken in affirmation of the faith revealed in the spoken Word. A prayer before the readings prepares the congregation for the hearing of the Word of God.

The service of the Lord's Supper is the second basic element of worship even if it is not used every week. Basic to this service are the proclamation of the words of institution and the distribution of the body and blood. This service should reflect the enormity of what is occurring: Christ giving his very self to his people "for the forgiveness of sins". Surely a hymn of praise that reflects this reality would be an appropriate means of preparing for this communion with the Lord. Such a fitting hymn has existed for some time in the form of the "Sanctus": "Holy, Holy, Holy Lord..." This hymn ties New and Old Testament together: Isaiah's vision of the throne of God, the confession that this same God became incarnate for us, and the implicit belief that he is now going to give himself as food and drink. A prayer of thanksgiving before the heavenly banquet would also be appropriate, for if we give thanks for any meal, how much more for this one! How should all this occur so as to be done in good order and in a manner befitting the triune God? The early church again provides a structure that has been in use for millennia. The opening verses of the Great Thanksgiving and the Proper Preface set the tone for what is to come. The congregation responds with the angels in the singing of the Sanctus. Words of thanks are offered, Jesus' words are uttered, and the congregation partakes of Christ.

A rite of preparation and a time of prayer and offering of gifts tie these two services together. The rite of preparation again draws on the songbook of the church, the psalms, for its material. The Body of Christ prepares to come into the presence of God through prayer of supplication (the Kyrie) and a hymn of praise that also describes into whose presence we have entered (The Gloria Patri, or another appropriate hymn). In between the service of the Word and the Holy Communion, the people of God offer prayers of thanksgiving and petition to God, and offer the first fruits of their labors. After the service, a final psalm or hymn prepares the body of Christ to once again enter the world.

Any Christian who understands worship as *Gottesdienst* should have little reason to quarrel with any of this "building up" of the Divine Service. Certainly one cannot argue that the Word is anything but central, or that God in Christ is only a peripheral element. The prayer and praise of the service is rooted in Scripture. The structure of the service itself is historically formed and eschatologically focused. Because the tried and true structures of the service come from the past, they put the worshipping community in touch with the church throughout time and her anticipation of Christ's return. The Divine Service brings the Lord of the universe into our mundane daily life, which is only fitting for a king whose kingdom "is not of this world" (John 18:36).

¹ Spielmann, Richard. *History of Christian Worship*. (The Seabury Press, New York, NY) p.44

² An ELCA pastor in Middletown, OH occasionally "clowns" the liturgy for his congregation

³ Marquart, Kurt. "Corporate Worship in the Church", *Lutheran Worship – History and Practice*. (Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, MO, 1993) p.70

⁴ Brunner, Peter. *Worship in the Name of Jesus*. (Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, MO, 1968), p.18

⁵ Brunner. *Worship in the Name of Jesus*. p.129

⁶ Brunner. *Worship in the Name of Jesus*. p.226