

Guiding Principles for the Worship Life of Concordia Lutheran Church

INTRODUCTION

The mission of Concordia Lutheran Church is "Learning, Living, Sharing the Gospel." One of the places where this mission is carried out is **Worship**. We know that through the spiritual discipline of worship people come to know Jesus Christ in deeper and more meaningful ways. And through the witness of worship the un-churched can come to know him for the first time. We believe in worship God shares the blessings of the Gospel with us, and we share those blessings with each other as we live out our calling. What guiding principles do we use to help shape our worship experiences here at Concordia? The following is an attempt to answer this important question.

BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES

Since we as a Christian congregation accept the Holy Scriptures as the authoritative norm for doctrine (teaching) and practice, we must ask, "What do the Scriptures say about worship?"

The Bible teaches us that God alone is to be worshipped (Matthew 4:10) and that those who worship Him must do so "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). Essentially all of life is to be an act of worship (Romans 12:1). We are to come before our God, bow down and worship Him. We are to sing for joy and shout aloud His salvation. We are to extol Him with music, song and life (Psalm 95:1-7, Psalm 96:9, 99:5; Revelation 14:7, 15:4).

In the Old Testament, many aspects of the corporate worship life of God's chosen people were specifically stated including numerous chapters in Exodus (12-14, 20, 25-31, and 35-40), Leviticus (1-8, 16, and 23), Numbers (28 and 29), and Deuteronomy (5, 9, and 16). 1 and 2 Chronicles describe some of the cultic worship practices, first at the tabernacle and later in the temple. Yet, most of these practices are descriptive. They were not prescribed for all places and for all time.

Since Christians are people of the new covenant in Jesus Christ, it is important for us especially to note what the New Testament says about corporate worship. Here we are in for a possible surprise. Very little is said of it. It is true that Jesus went to the synagogue (a local worship gathering place for Jews developed after the Babylonian exile) "*as was His custom on the Sabbath*" (Luke 4:16). However, nothing apart from His reading of the prophet Isaiah and claiming fulfillment of it in Himself, is made of it. We are also told that as an infant His parents took Him to the temple "*to present Him to the Lord*" and that they offered a sacrifice in keeping with what was requested in the Law (Luke 2:22-24). Likewise, every year His parents went to Jerusalem for the Passover, and when He was twelve they found Him in the temple discussing theology with the teachers there (Luke 2:41-46). While Jesus was critical of some of the practices which violated the temple (John 2:13-17; Matthew 21:21-23) nowhere does the New Testament tell us that He came to prescribe new forms of worship. Rather, He told the woman at the well who maintained that true worship was restricted to specific places (Gerizim and Jerusalem), "*Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming, and has now come, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of*

worshippers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and His worshippers must worship Him in spirit and in truth" (John 4:21-24). The woman replied, "I know that Messiah is coming and when He comes, He will explain everything to us." Jesus' declaration in response is critical, "I who speak to you am He" (John 4:26). Jesus is the Messiah and as such He had come not to abolish the Law or the Prophets. As He said, "I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matthew 5:17).

No one understood this better than the early Christian church. Immediately after Pentecost, they met together daily to praise God in the temple courts and in homes (Acts 2:46-48). Furthermore, "they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42). Certainly the focus of their worship was the crucified, risen and ascended Jesus as "Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36). Aside from these statements we are not given further details about the order, form, or structure of worship in the early church in the book of Acts. We may only surmise that it was similar to what they were accustomed to in Jerusalem at the Temple but with a new focus (the Risen Christ) and a new enthusiasm (the Holy Spirit).

But what about the churches beyond Jerusalem? The church in Antioch, Syria (Acts 13:1) was significantly different from the "Mother Church" in Jerusalem. What does the text say about their worship? Nothing beyond, "While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off" (Acts 13:2-3).

In most of the churches Paul and his companions founded, because they grew out of the local Jewish synagogue, the early Jewish converts to Christianity probably continued worshipping the promised Messiah in their accustomed ways (Acts 14:1; 17:2, 10; 18:4, 7; 19:8-10). Yet this was not always the case, such as at Lystra and Derbe (Acts 14:8-21) and Philippi (Acts 16). Thus, we cannot determine with great precision any particular worship "styles" or "forms" used in the New Testament churches.

St. Paul does, however, give some basic instruction regarding the local church's worship experiences. To the Colossians he wrote, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him" (3:16-17). To the Ephesians he wrote, "Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (5:19-20).

It should be obvious that the worship life of the early Christian congregations involved a sharing of the Word of Christ, a variety of music, fellowship, breaking of bread, including Communion, prayers and a sharing of material resources (Acts 2:42-47; Colossians 3:16-17; Ephesians 5:19-20).

In 1 Corinthians chapters 11-14, Paul addresses some of the problems of corporate worship in Corinth including an abuse of Holy Communion and issues related to disorderly speaking in tongues. In sum, Paul insisted that "everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way" when they gather for corporate worship (1 Corinthians 14:40), but he did not prescribe a particular order or form, nor did he equate "fitting and orderly way" with a prescribed order or form.

Thus, we are led to conclude that the New Testament gives us the freedom to worship God when, where, and how we, individually and collectively, are led by the Risen Spirit of Jesus to do so. Jesus commissioned His followers to make disciples of all nations by "*baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*" and by "*teaching them to obey everything*" He taught them with the assurance He was with them until the close of the age (Matthew 28:18-20). Clearly the focus of Christian worship will be 1) the Triune God, and 2) the disciples' response to Him. The type, style, order, or form of worship is always secondary to these two concerns. Moreover, because Christians are to "*worship God in spirit and in truth,*" our worship will be indigenous to the people within our community and will reflect how God is at work in and through them.

LUTHERAN CONFSSIONAL PRINCIPLES

Because we are first a Christian congregation, we accept the Scriptures as the authoritative norm for the doctrine (teaching) and practice. However, because we are secondly a Christian congregation within the Lutheran denomination, we are also of a mind to ask, "What do the Lutheran Confessions say about worship?" Different Lutheran Christians can answer this question in different ways, but the following principles are intended to guide Concordia Lutheran Church in this regard.

The foundational statement of Lutheran belief and practice is found in Article 7 of the Augsburg Confession:

"It is also taught among us that one holy Christian church will be and remain forever. This is the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel. For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word. It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that ceremonies instituted by men, should be observed uniformly in all places. It is, as Paul says in Ephesians 4:4, 5, '*There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, on baptism.*'" (The Book of Concord, Tappert, 1959, Fortress Press, p. 32).

It should be very evident from these words that the primary concern of the Lutheran reformers was (and is) that the Gospel (the good news of what God has done and offers to people through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ) be clearly proclaimed and that the sacraments (baptism and communion) be administered as visible evidences of the Gospel. This is the essence of the Lutheran church and her proclamation. Ceremonies and rites, instituted by people, are only the forms through which the Gospel and sacraments are conveyed and therefore may be changed as long as they do not conflict with Scripture.

At the same time, the confessors were sensitive to their culture when it came to their worship practices. They reiterated the Biblical principles that God wants to be worshipped in spirit and in truth (Ibid., p. 254). Then they added, "We on our part also retain many ceremonies and traditions (such as the liturgy of the Mass and various canticles, festivals, and

the like) which serve to preserve order in the church. At the same time, however, the people are instructed that such outward forms of service do not make us righteous before God and that they are to be observed without burdening consciences, which is to say that it is not a sin to omit them if this is done without causing scandal" (Ibid., pp. 69-70).

The same issue is presented in Article 24 (The Mass) of the Augsburg Confession when they wrote, "We are unjustly accused of having abolished the Mass. Without boasting, it is manifest that the Mass is observed among us with greater devotion and more earnestness than among our opponents. Moreover, the people are instructed often and with great diligence concerning the holy sacrament....Meanwhile, no conspicuous changes have been made in the public ceremonies of the Mass, except that in certain places German hymns are sung in addition to the Latin responses for the institution and exercise of the people. After all, the chief purpose of all ceremonies is to teach people what they need to know about Christ" (Ibid., p. 56). (It was for this reason that Luther wrote the "German" Mass in 1526.)

Lest we are led to believe that they were inconsiderate of their church heritage as Roman Catholic Christians, these concluding words from Article XV provide sensitive insight, "Nevertheless, liberty in these matters should be used moderately, lest the weak be offended and become more hostile to the true teaching of the Gospel because of an abuse of liberty (Romans 14:13-23). Nothing should be changed in the accustomed rites without good reason, and to foster harmony those ancient customs should be kept which can be kept without sin or without great disadvantage. This is what we teach. In this very assembly we have shown ample evidence of our willingness to observe adiaphora with others, even where this involved some disadvantage to us. We believed that the greatest possible public harmony, without offense to consciences, should be preferred to all other advantages..." (Ibid., p. 222).

The Augsburg Confession and its Apology regularly reiterate the chief mission of the church: to preach the gospel in its purity and to administer the sacraments in accordance with Christ's command. Thus it should come as no surprise that in Article 24 - The Mass - of the Apology this assertion is made: "Practical and clear sermons hold an audience, but neither the people nor the clergy have ever understood our opponents' teaching. The real adornment of the churches is godly, practical, and clear teaching, the godly use of the sacraments, ardent prayer, and the like. Candles, golden vessels, and ornaments like that are fitting, but they are not the peculiar adornment of the church. If our opponents center their worship in such things rather than in the proclamation of the Gospel, in faith, and in its struggles, they should be classified with those whom Daniel (11:38) describes as worshipping their God with gold and silver" (Ibid., p. 259).

While all of the aforementioned quotes were written during Luther's lifetime, the issues involved continued to be discussed years after his death. Just what does it mean to be a Lutheran Christian (a term which Luther himself never wanted used to describe those who agreed with his teachings)? What traditions are to be maintained? The "Formula of Concord," drafted in the late 1570's and completed in 1577, was written to clarify some of these concerns. As one might guess, the role of traditions was once again discussed. Article X of the Epitome dealt with "Church Usages, Called Adiaphora, or Indifferent Things." The chief question at issue was, "In times of persecution, when a confession is called for, and when the enemies of the Gospel have not come to an agreement with us in doctrine, may we with an inviolate conscience yield to their pressure and demands, reintroduce some ceremonies that have fallen into disuse and that in themselves are indifferent things and are neither commanded nor forbidden by God, and thus come to an understanding with them in such ceremonies and indifferent things?" (Ibid., pp. 492-493). Some said "yes" and some said "no." Such is the norm of adiaphora.

Five affirmative theses were written to state what the writers believed, taught, and confessed. They wrote that they believed, taught and confessed unanimously...

1. "...that the ceremonies or church usages which are neither commanded nor forbidden in the Word of God, but which have been introduced solely for the sake of good order and the general welfare, are in and for themselves no divine worship or even a part of it." (Ibid., p. 493).
2. "...that the community (or churches) of God in every locality and every age has authority to change such ceremonies according to circumstances, as it may be most profitable and edifying to the community of God" (Ibid., p. 493).
3. "... (that) in this matter all frivolity and offenses are to be avoided, and particularly the weak in faith are to be spared" (Ibid., p. 493).
4. "...that in time of persecution ... we dare not yield to the enemies in such indifferent things, such as the apostle Paul writes, '*For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery*'" (Galatians 5:11) (Ibid., p. 493).
5. "...that no church should condemn another because it has fewer or more external ceremonies not commanded by God, as long as there is mutual agreement in doctrine and in all its articles as well as in the right use of the holy sacraments, according to the familiar axiom, '*Disagreement in fasting does not destroy agreement in faith*'" (Ibid., pp. 493-494).

Guiding principles for worship drawn from the Lutheran Confessions:

1. The chief principle is that the primary concern in worship should be the clear proclamation of the Gospel and the proper administration of the Sacraments. Worshipers should come to know Christ and grow in Him.
2. The local church has the authority and right to choose its own worship forms as long as it remembers the chief principle stated in #1. There is no one set form of worship that must be used by all Lutheran churches.
3. Traditions from the history of the church can be respected and used when they serve to enhance the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments in the culture of the local congregation.
4. Special sensitivity to the concerns of the weaker Christian needs to be maintained. Frivolous change is uncalled for and can harm the Body of Believers.
5. Churches need to respect, not to belittle, one another when they make comments about worship forms other than their own. One form is not in and of itself "better" than another form. One may be chosen over or in addition to another because of how it relates to the culture, making it a more effective vehicle for the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments.

6. Worship will reflect the culture in which it is expressed. The early Lutherans worshipped in German and Latin. Today, Lutherans worship in many different lands, languages, and with a variety of forms. We believe worship should be culturally relevant and as such is in a state of constant change.
7. Holy Scripture is the ultimate source for worship doctrine and practice. The Lutheran Confessions serve as an instructive, helpful, companion guide.

APPLICATIONS AT CONCORDIA

With these guiding principles from God's Word and the Lutheran Confessions, we now ask, "So what does this mean for the corporate worship life of Concordia Lutheran Church in Steamboat Springs, Colorado?" The following principles are given to serve as our guide.

1. We believe that when we discuss the worship life of Concordia we are seeking to help people become true worshippers of God who will worship Him "in spirit and in truth." This implies that our worship will engage our inner beings, our insights, our feelings, our minds, our wills (our "spirits"), as well as be consistent with God's Word (which is "truth"). Furthermore, this requires that our worship is determined by God's essence ("spirit"), is shaped by His revelation in Jesus ("truth"), and is empowered by the Holy Spirit ("the spirit of truth").
2. We believe that our goal in worship is to clearly proclaim the Word of God (both Law and Gospel) and properly administer the sacraments (Baptism and Communion) so that people will come into a living relationship with Jesus Christ and His Church and /or grow in their relationship with Him.
3. We believe that we are free to choose a style of corporate worship as long as it does not contain elements contrary to the Word of God or in any way diminishes the proclamation of the Gospel or appropriate use of the sacraments.
4. We believe that as a Lutheran Church we will respect our Lutheran heritage but not be bound by it. We will respect the worship forms of other Lutheran Churches and ask that they do the same for us. While we will be sensitive to our Synod's request to use Synodically approved worship forms, hymnals and the like; we will not be bound by this request. Rather, a commitment to fulfill our mission, "Learning, Living, and Sharing the Gospel", will take precedence over Synodical resolutions regarding the forms of worship.
5. We believe that our worship reflects our faith as a Christian community, and that it is meant to be a witness to all who attend. Therefore, it must be culturally relevant so that the people who gather with us for worship clearly hear the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Respectfully submitted,
 The Worship Committee of Concordia Lutheran Church
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