

We Should Not Be Ashamed of True Lutheran Worship

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The Worship Issue

Has your church fought over the “worship issue”? Have you talked to anyone who has insisted that a dramatic change needs to be made in a Lutheran congregation's worship service or else it will die? When you talk about worship, you're not talking about an incidental matter, but an essential one.

What I think has happened, at least in the Missouri Synod, is that over many years—several generations—Lutherans who at first (through no fault of their own) were merely ignorant of their own worship heritage and theology have gradually become ashamed of it. After briefly tracing this move from ignorance to shame, my aim will be to help you identify this attitude of embarrassment and replace it with a sense of genuine, Godly pride in the Divine blessing that is true Lutheran worship.

Deep in the heart of this shame is a shift in emphasis. Two essential parts of Christian theology became set at odds against each other. “What you believe” was forced to give complete right-of-way to “how you live.” Doctrine and morals (also doctrine and missions) at least, according to the Bible, work well together. The Gospel that you believed and preserved pure with all your heart was the actual power behind your new life in the Holy Spirit, and it was the motivation to spread His Word to others. Does it work that way today? Yes!

However, it became clear that Christians who believed different, even opposing, doctrines were nevertheless living by the same moral standard in their everyday lives. What you could easily see at first glance were fellow believers in Christ doing very much the same things the same way: caring for their neighbors, feeding the hungry, raising their families, going to church, etc. You had to look much closer into the details to find the differences in what Christians believed. To be sure, it is difficult to evaluate a doctrine and compare it to God's Word. Let the seminary graduates fiddle around with that, many people began to think, because we're tired of doctrinal controversy. In fact, people became ashamed of it all. It is much easier instead to see how a person acts. So what if a “brother in Christ” refuses to baptize a baby? At least that person prays every day, reads his Bible, and does so much that is good.

Doctrinal Purity

And so, any belief that was once considered a dangerous doctrinal error on the part of any certain Christian group was quickly softened into a mere divergence in opinion or alternative interpretation. Those who strove to preserve the pure truth of the Bible and defend it against error were soon labeled as “legalists.” Since morality was becoming more important, when someone claimed to have pure teaching, it sounded as though they were claiming to be morally perfect. This conclusion was actually false, nevertheless many were convinced that doctrinal purity was merely a figment of the theologian's imagination and an impossibility on earth. It soon became fashionable to look past doctrinal differences in order to garner helpful hints from other church bodies. If Baptists or Methodists used something that worked for them, why shouldn't Lutherans give it a try? Embarrassed and ashamed, Lutherans more and more tried to

downplay those features of the pure, unadulterated confession of the Christian faith that were different from other churches.

In came the Church Growth movement, a marketing strategy borrowed from the business world that promised larger church attendance, especially by young people, and greater financial prosperity for struggling congregations. The movement's flagship tactic was a fundamental change in approach to worship known by names such as: contemporary, informal, seeker-oriented, blended, alternative, and evangelical. The change itself was for Lutherans to design a worship service that somebody else wanted. The logic was something like: since we need more people to attend our worship services, we need both to cut out those parts of the Lutheran Divine Service that we think are keeping them away, and add what we hope will draw them in. Everything non-Lutheran looked successful, like the various forms of decision theology, emphasis on morality and sanctification, and emotional, spontaneous worship elements. It ended up being decided—even in the minds of lifelong Lutherans—that true Lutheran worship was boring, irrelevant, and antiquated. Non-Christians, and former members who have dropped out of church, and people who (we surmise) are too young to understand theology need something else on Sunday morning (or Saturday night) to keep their interest. People who like true Lutheran worship would eventually die or go away. In short, the conclusion of the Church Growth movement was devastating: whatever faithfully expressed Biblical, Lutheran doctrine was bad and had to go; whatever was not Lutheran provided the deceptive hope that it might just work.

Clear and Bold Lutheran Teaching

However as Lutherans, we have many things for which we ought to thank God daily. We benefit from the bold stand for truth that Luther and other Reformers (both clergy and lay people) asserted so many years ago. They faithfully and tirelessly studied and taught the Bible, following its clear and pure meaning, without adding anything or taking anything away. They revived the glorious Gospel message that Jesus paid the full price for our sins, and that we are declared completely forgiven without having to fulfill any requirements on our part. The Lutheran reformers were not inventors, but rather discoverers of what God had provided all along in His holy Word. What a blessing the Lutheran confession of faith has brought to our sin-sick world!

True Lutheran teaching articulates what the Bible teaches in plain, understandable words. You cannot get a simpler or clearer summary of the most important doctrines of the Bible than you have in Luther's Small Catechism. And since worship is the primary activity that puts into practice what the Church teaches, then true Lutheran teaching should reside at the heart of true Lutheran worship. Anyone who visits a Lutheran church for a worship service should expect to hear what the Bible says about the most important spiritual issues we face as human beings. Topics like: sin, judgment, forgiveness, Jesus' death is a payment made in our place, the assurance of our victory in His resurrection, our need to repent every day, our growth in faith and the Holy Spirit, our certainty of going to heaven, God wants to save all people; these are the type of things that the Bible talks about the most. A true Lutheran worship service addresses the proper distinction between Law and Gospel on these and all other doctrines of Scripture.

Worship Forms

There are not a few people from other Christian churches who are weary of shallow emotional manipulation in their services. They are picking up on the error when they hear that they need to

trust in human works for anything in their Christian life. They are starving for forgiveness, but all they are getting are laws, guidelines and examples for their Christian life. What they need is precisely what we have in the Lutheran Church! We shouldn't deny it to them, much less to our own members.

Worship is doctrine put into practice—true doctrine is expressed in true worship. Although it seems to start a lot of arguments needlessly, still, Lutherans worship God rightly because we believe rightly. The snide question of “Do you think there are only Lutherans in heaven?” has no place here. Is genuine, Biblical faith in Jesus Christ the proper “worship in Spirit and in truth,” (John 5)? You bet! Following the rubrics does not in itself make us Christian. No true Lutheran ever suggests that.

It's not that we worship according to a strict legalistic liturgical rule set out in the Bible, but rather we realize that our doctrine calls for a worship form that accurately and reverently portrays our crucified Lord Jesus as the one and only payment for our sins. Impure worship injects something into the church's liturgy that reflects false doctrine. Jesus is then not portrayed solely as Savior, and His forgiveness is deemphasized. Does God use His Word to create faith even when one's worship is impure and that Word is peppered with human falsehood? Graciously, He does, but not to provide excuses. No one can say whether a baptized Christian who is worshiping in a certain way is going to hell. That's not the point. I ask, when you know the truth, what's keeping you from telling it?

Participating with the Saints in Heaven

Lutherans have no need to be ashamed of true Lutheran worship. In answer to our contemporary world where all the attention is on “getting the job done,” true Lutheran worship is eminently practical. That means when God gathers us together in His name, His work is done in the best possible way. When we sinners hear His Word and sing it in hymns and the liturgy, Christ's Gospel forgiveness covers us and the Holy Spirit renews us so that, by grace, we are the true, holy people of God. Our moral life that we live in accordance to God's Law follows in its proper place, resulting from His grace and responding to His forgiveness. It cannot come through coercion or guilt or fancy programs, but our new life is powered by God's Gospel Word of forgiveness. And even though all this Divine activity is hidden, it is powerful and effective. We ought not despair if someone should tell us that true Lutheran worship will not bring in lots of people or money. Our Lord did not want us to worry about those things—He will provide the people and the resources in His time, for congregations to use as stewards. Rather, Jesus gave a simple command to His Church when He told Peter three times, “Feed my sheep.” (John 21) The baptized people of God are spiritually fed each week when they hear His Word, confess their sins, receive the Lord's forgiveness in the Gospel, and consume Christ's Body and Blood in Holy Communion. Don't believe anyone whenever they say that these gracious gifts are not enough for the health and growth of the Church. If we ought not invent doctrines, then we shouldn't have to invent worship either.

We should not be ashamed of our hymnals, either. Questions like, “Is following the hymnal the only way to worship?” are silly. Of course, hymnals are put together by human beings and so need to be extensively evaluated especially regarding their faithfulness to God's Word. Once a hymnal has been carefully developed over the course of several years, it can become a valuable

tool for a congregation that is committed to true Lutheran worship. A Lutheran church that faithfully uses any Lutheran hymnal should count it a privilege to be unified in true Lutheran worship with Christians all over the world, and from all generations. Why? Because true Lutheran worship is tied to the true, (that is, Lutheran) confession of faith—the manifestation of pure preaching of God's Word and the right administration of the Sacraments. Wherever these have gone out into the world, true believers receive God's forgiveness and rejoice. Think of the Christians in Siberia or Sudan who are following the Liturgy in a form very similar to ours. These Christians should remind us of the treasure we have in true Lutheran worship, that it is heaven literally breaking into our world. True Lutheran worship participates in heaven, but at the same time prepares us for heaven, when all the multitude of believers will join in perfect worship, for that is when we'll see God Almighty face to face. Nothing to be ashamed of there!

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