

Meaningful Worship

Meaningful WORSHIP

A Guide to the Lutheran Service

James L. Brauer

To
Edna and Harold
who
brought me
to the Lord's house

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Preface

If you have encountered the order of worship for Holy Communion in one of the Lutheran hymnals and have wondered about the meaning of it all, this book is for you. While *Meaningful Worship* refers in specific terms to Divine Service II in *Lutheran Worship*, it explains the standard Service of Holy Communion used, with specific variations, in all Lutheran worship books.

Perhaps you've asked, "What is going on in the worship service?" Some words and actions may seem obvious and clear. Others may be unfamiliar or a mystery. There is, however, a richness to the dialog between God and the believer in this worship form. When we understand the what and why of that dialog, we are led into the wonders of God's work among us.

As additional helps, Scripture references at the end of each chapter encourage further exploration. A glossary at the end of the book defines words that may be unfamiliar.

As you use this book, I pray that you will grow in your amazement at God's interaction with you in the worship service for Holy Communion and that you continue to become more aware of and more sure of God's great love in Christ.

St. Mark the Evangelist, 1993

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Liturgical material in the public domain: “Glory Be to the Father” (Gloria Patri), Kyrie eleison, excerpts from the Kyrie litany, Salutation and Response, responses before and after the Gospel, dialog within the Prayer of the Church, “Create in Me,” Lord’s Prayer, sharing the peace, and stanza 5 of “At the Lamb’s High Feast.”

Focused on God

God's Presence—Our Response

Do you remember visiting your grandmother's home? Why did you like being there? Was it sleeping in a bedroom where you were comfortable and secure? Was it hearing some of the reassuring sounds of the house itself? Was it smelling the aroma from the kitchen and enjoying the good tastes that came from it? Was it the good times you had there with your brothers and sisters? Very likely, the primary reason you liked to visit was to be with your grandmother herself. You wanted to see her, talk with her, hug her. And, undoubtedly, some of the best times there were around a meal.

How similar to when we go to God's house for worship! We go to meet *God*, to interact with him, to sense his love once more, and to express our thanks for his caring. That's the meaning of worship.

God is there, you see. "Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Matt. 18:20). Also, we know that God is present in his Word and that he comes to his believers in the Lord's Supper. And where God is, there are his gifts of salvation, peace, and joy. Other facets of worship, of course, delight us. Beauty of sight and sound there may be pleasant and rewarding. The friendliness of those around us and the sharing of our joy may be encour-

aging. The triggering of memories of past worship experiences may touch us deeply. Voicing our faith with other Christians may strengthen us. But what surpasses everything else is the very presence and power of God.

This would not be possible if it were not for Jesus Christ, because God's love is in Jesus. That's how God brought us close to himself. Jesus became human in order to rescue us. Because he died for our sins, we live. Faith in Jesus brings these gifts and joins us to God. By it we become his; he becomes ours. Jesus made it clear when he gave us the Lord's Supper and said, "This is my body given for you" (Luke 22:19). He made it clear through Peter, who wrote, "Baptism now saves you" (1 Peter 3:21 NASB), that Jesus is our Redeemer. To be with him is our reason for gathering on a Sunday morning. Therefore, our worship focuses on Jesus, who revealed the fullness of God's love. In him we meet God.

We long to continue to be with God because our spiritual life depends on him. Just as no tree bears fruit by its own energy, so God's design for spiritual growth involves the outside force of his Word and his Supper. By them the Holy Spirit works in us, and faith becomes deeper and stronger—and thus the fragile stem of faith grows and produces much fruit.

That fruit is the Christlike life. With the power that comes from God and freed from serving only self, we are able to put others ahead of ourselves. Honoring our parents and/or others in authority is a thankful act, not a burden. Our neighbor's possessions are safe because we have become content with what God gives us. Knowing that God does not require an eye for an eye but forgives us, we are enabled to forgive those who

wrong us. How grateful we are that he loves us and has made us his own children! He loved us first—long before we were born. It begins with God.

This is worship—a faith-response to God’s love and presence in Christ. Truly, it’s going home.

The Twin Elements of Worship

Just as going to our parents’ often includes conversation and a meal (especially when we’re celebrating something), so does worship. There’s a big difference, however. When we’re visiting family, we come together as equals. When we’re with God, we’re with the one who has done something only God could do: turn our hearts toward him. This he has done and continues to do as he comes to us though Word and Sacrament. The Word and the Supper bring us into touch with God. Together there’s a fullness of meeting God when the two elements are joined together in one event. Therefore, these two shape our worship and give it a basic structure. They are the high points, to which we add prayer and praise, as table 1 shows.

This form, or *liturgy*, has a balance of God’s gifts and our response. The centerpiece, of course, is God’s giving. God comes to us; we respond to God. Still, it is God’s service to us. It is our service to God. The name “Divine Service” catches both directions, to us and to God. That’s how God wanted it to be.

The word *liturgy* is derived from a New Testament word meaning “public service,” service of a priest, or a public work by citizens. Today, we use it to refer to the main order of worship for the Christian church. That order can also be called “The Eucharist” (thanksgiving) or “The Service of Holy Communion.”

*Table 1***OUTLINE OF THE SERVICE****Preparatory**

Invocation
 Confession & Absolution
 Entrance Psalm or Hymn

Service of the Word

Prayer: "Lord, have mercy"
 Hymn of Praise:
 "Glory to God in the highest" or
 "This is the feast of victory"

Prayer of the Day
 OLD TESTAMENT

Gradual or Psalm

EPISTLE

W O R D

Verse or Alleluia

HOLY GOSPEL

O F

Hymn of the Day

SERMON

G O D

Creed

Service of Holy Communion

Prayers

Offering

Offertory:

"Let the Vineyards Be Fruitful, Lord" or

"What Shall I Render to the Lord" or

"Create in Me a Clean Heart, O God"

Preface & "Holy, Holy, Holy"

Prayer

Lord's Prayer

WORDS OF INSTITUTION

L O R D ' S

Peace

"Lamb of God"

DISTRIBUTION

S U P P E R

Canticle:

"Thank the Lord" or

"Lord, now you let your servant go in peace"

Thanksgiving Prayer

Benediction

Although the exact sequence of each part of the Divine Service varies from hymnal to hymnal, the service itself follows a recognizable pattern.

1. The beginning of worship.
2. The Word, especially two or three Scripture readings.
3. Expansion of the Word, including (in various sequences) the hymn of the day, sermon, and creed.
4. Transition from a focus on the Word to a focus on the Sacrament of the Altar: our offerings and prayers to God.
5. Preparation for Holy Communion, including Christ's proclamation that the bread and wine are his body and blood.
6. Receiving the Sacrament with thanksgiving.
7. Leaving the worship and returning home.

Again, within that general sequence, many variations exist between Lutheran hymnals, even in any one hymnal. While each version may have its merits, this book uses the sequence in table 1.

Times and Seasons, and the Divine Service

Just as the content of the Divine Service focuses on Christ, so does how we use time and season. How we structure the church year helps us keep our Savior at the center of our worship.

Christians begin each week with the "Lord's Day," for on the day of the Lord's resurrection (a Sunday), the new era of Christ's victory began. Because his victory over sin and death is the foundation of our faith, we anchor the Christian year in the celebration of that

resurrection, the Sunday we call Easter. And in preparation for that Easter celebration, the Christian church has added a season called Lent: forty days of preparation and self-examination.

The second most important day of the year is Christmas, the celebration of Jesus' birth on December 25 (although in earliest Christian times, the date was January 6). Christmas, too, has a preparatory season; we call it Advent (coming). The days from December 25 until January 6 are the "Twelve Days" of Christmas. Sundays between January 6 and Lent recall events in the life of Jesus, both his miracles and his teachings.

The period of Easter and Ascension (40 days after Easter) has seven Sundays of Resurrection accent. Pentecost, the 50th day after Easter, celebrates the sending of the Holy Spirit to the disciples after Jesus had ascended into heaven. This was the birthday of the Christian church. After Pentecost, 20 or more Sundays focus on the work of the Spirit in the early church and among us.

Table 2 shows the pattern of the Christian Year and its three parts. The first two revolve around the life of Christ, and the third part, about one half of the year, centers on his church.

Observing the church year calendar is not a biblical requirement, but the system does help us connect our time to sacred history. In it, we step aside from the secular cycles of life and are in touch with the fullness of God in Christ. Plus, this yearly cycle gives an annual review of basic Christian teachings and the story of God's love as we worship in God's presence.

*Table 2***THE CHRISTIAN YEAR****The Time of Christmas**

Advent (4 Sundays)

NATIVITY OF OUR LORD

Epiphany

Sundays after Epiphany (up to 9 Sundays)

The Time of Easter

Lent (40 days) (6 Sundays)

Holy Week

RESURRECTION OF OUR LORD

Sundays of Easter (7 Sundays)

Ascension (40 days after Easter)

PENTECOST (50 days after Easter)**The Time of the Church**

Sundays after Pentecost (up to 28 Sundays)

Summary

Why then do we worship? We come to worship in order to focus on God's love in Christ. In worship God actually comes to us. We really interact with God. We truly receive God's love. Although we might enjoy the nostalgia of keeping alive historical traditions, we gather in the name of Jesus to receive his forgiveness of sins, to hear his Word, to share his Supper, and to express our gratitude, trust, and affection for God. The Divine Service, the order of Holy Communion, then, is focused on God. It's better than going home.

For Exploration

1. God's promise to be present with his believers:
Matt. 18:20; 28:20; 1 Cor. 10:16; 1 Thess. 2:13
2. Christian worship's focus on Jesus:
John 5:23; 8:31–32; Acts 4:12; 1 Cor. 11:25; 2 Cor. 5:15; Gal. 3:26; Phil. 2:9–11; 1 John 1:7
3. The Holy Spirit produces in us faith and its fruit:
Mark 1:15; 16:16; Acts 7:51; Rom. 10:17; Phil. 1:6; 1 Peter 1:23; 2:5
4. The Lord's Day, and why Christians worship on Sunday:
Acts 20:7; Rom. 14:5–6; Heb. 10:25

Meaning in Word and Action

Picture a mother holding a baby that's wearing the cutest outfit the mother could find. She holds her child close, then seats it on her lap. She coos, then laughs, hoping for a smile in return. Her gentle words alternate between compliments about the outfit, about how much she loves her child, and about whatever the child just finished eating.

Mothers especially sense that the above interaction is important for a child. Some things are absolutely essential. Every human body needs to be fed and kept warm. Studies over the last 50-plus years, however, have shown that babies also need to be touched and held in order to be healthy and to grow. (Some of those studies were done to learn why infants in orphanages had a high death rate.) Science has shown that talking to a baby stimulates its mind and, if the sound of the voice is gentle, helps provide a sense of security.

On the other hand, some specifics in the mother-child picture are not very important at all. For example, as long as the child is being fed wholesome food, the choice between pureed apple and apricot matters little. Whether the cute outfit is a sailor suit or has pictures of animal characters is immaterial. Nor can the

child distinguish between “Oh, you’re so loveable” and “I love you so.”

The point is, some aspects of worship are absolutely essential and others are beneficial, but the specifics of either may vary. The previous chapter discussed the absolute necessities of the presence of God, Word and Sacrament, and (by implication) the people of God gathered together. This chapter looks at some items that over the centuries have been found to be extremely beneficial: the place of worship, the use of music, movement and posture, and repetition.

The Place of Worship

Every well-designed church building, from chapel to cathedral, says, “Here is a special place, an important place; something important happens here.” Perhaps you’ve already felt that when, for example, you were looking for a building in which to be married.

At the top of the spire, lifted above everything else, a cross proclaims what the church building is all about. The cross was an instrument of torture in the Roman Empire that was considered too horrible to be used on its citizens. Today, the cross reminds us that something extraordinary happened on it: Jesus’ victory over sin. Even the inside of the building points to that extraordinary victory. Paintings, stained-glass windows, statues, and other art forms depict events of Jesus’ ministry and the people who followed him. Various symbols on the altar cloths and elsewhere summarize teachings about what God has done for his people. And, although a person may not understand every symbol or picture, the main message cannot be misunderstood: This is a place to come and know God.

Special buildings, of course, are not an absolute necessity for worship, nor is a certain level of beauty. The building is just a space in which we come together as God's people in order to meet God in his Word and Sacraments. Yet, if you've ever worshiped with a group that is renting a hall somewhere, you know the significance of a church building by its absence. True, the event in the hall is still worship, but you feel that something's missing. Even the furnishings there, necessary for the building's primary use, distract your thoughts. But when the worship space is a well-designed church, its beauty supports its use: the worship and praise of the greatness of God in Christ.

Singing Our Praise and Prayer

The power of music is great, but not greater than the power of God's Word. Yet the two combined encourage our emotions to join our intellect in worship. All cultures have found that people's most important thoughts and greatest emotions are best expressed through song. Think of your reaction to your favorite love song, or the national anthem, or your school's fight song. Music has power. That's why music in worship—your favorite hymn included—seems a natural way to express our thankfulness, love, and praise to God.

Christian worship often uses music to lift its prayers to God, for prayer is a special form of communication with him. The usual talk between friends and family is not like prayer to God. Nor is the exchange of greetings at the store or workplace. Prayer is unique. Because chanted prayer goes beyond ordinary speech, the tones, pitches, and pace of the music and its poetic choice of words more fully express our heartfelt desires. (As an extra benefit, the rhythm makes it

easier to keep together when we pray in unison, reminding us of our unity in Christ. Even when the prayer is spoken in unison, the congregation usually falls into its own rhythm.) After the worship is over, the melody of sung prayer often sticks in our minds and helps us recall the words.

Once again, because of the power of music, we use it both to praise God for how wonderful he is and to call for him to help us.

Movement and Posture

Similar to the way space and music help us focus on the presence of God and what he does for us, so do movement and posture (sometimes called ceremony).

Simple sitting and standing take on a symbolic meaning when done in worship. For example, in a courtroom, you show respect for the judge by standing when he or she enters the room. With common courtesy, you do the same when someone visits your home. So also we stand to hear the words of Jesus in the Gospel Reading, but sit for the other Scripture readings. This distinction shows respect to our Lord as well as to his very words. Sitting, especially during extended hymns and the sermon, helps us focus our attention.

Kneeling, the posture of humility, is often used as we confess our sins or pray. It helps us express our reliance on God.

Bowing our heads also shows respect. We may do this at the name of Jesus or when we approach the altar (including when we approach it in our hearts with prayer).

Making the sign of the cross over our bodies reminds us that we are marked by the cross at Bap-

tism as one redeemed by Christ the crucified. Satan cannot claim us as one of his. This is true whether the pastor makes the sign of the cross over us or we do it ourselves.

Again, these postures and movements are not themselves worship but only outward expressions of our thoughts and attitudes. Still, they convey significant meaning. As human beings, we understand a lot more about what people are saying when they communicate face to face, complete with gestures, than when we only read or hear their words. Can you imagine yourself talking without making some gesture with your hand? We humans invest a great deal of meaning in our movements. True, much of our posture and movement in worship has been standardized over the centuries, but that fact illustrates their validity. They clearly remind us of our relationship to God, who is present in our worship.

Repetition

How often can a child be held? How many times a day can a husband and wife hug each other? Do you think you will ever tire of hearing that you're loved? There seems to be no limit. In fact, we encourage the frequent use of these words and actions. Each repetition is important, as is the accumulated effect.

The same is true of the words and actions of worship. Well-chosen words from the past often have deeper meaning than clever new ones, and they connect us with past occasions when they were heard. Because we are human, repetition (including habit, sometimes) offers stability and reminds us of who we are. Likewise, repetition of worship strengthens our sense of being loved and our identity as children of

God. A repeated word or action may even draw a response from deep within us and help shape our being and behavior. Think, for example, of the effect that your favorite Christmas carol has on you.

Empty repetition, of course, never has meaning. It's like having something happen to you when you are unconscious. But meaningful repetition is like a hug with God, over and over again.

Summary

People constantly try new approaches in all areas of life, and many helpful discoveries are found from experimentation. Often, though, old ways of doing things are central to our well-being because they have proved their worth. Think, for example, of our frequent washing of hands with soap to reduce the risk of spreading disease. At one time, this was an innovation; now it's a healthy habit. But imagine what would be lost if society gave it up just because it's a habit.

So it is with Christian worship. Much of what we do—including the building, the music, and the movements—has been learned from those who were believers long before we were. To some people today, the customs and patterns may seem arbitrary and useless at first. However, when we know why they exist and what they mean, they become important and useful to us. True, they are not absolute necessities, not like food is for a child. But just as being held and having interaction with other humans contributes to emotional and physical growth, so Christian worship is assisted by space, music, movement, and repetition. Together, they strengthen that which is already occurring spiritually.

In the following chapters, we will be exploring the

actual content of the Divine Service, the main order of worship for the Christian church (see table 1, page 12).

For Exploration

1. The use of music in the worship of God:
Ps. 92:1; 95:2; 100:2; 1 Cor. 14:26; Eph. 5:19; Rev. 5:9; 15:3
2. The use of posture and movement in worship:
Ps. 95:6; 134:2; 138:2; Matt. 4:9; 1 Tim. 2:8; Rev. 4:10; 8:2
3. List benefits you have experienced from a place of worship and its furnishings.
4. Which memorized prayers do you use, and which of them are most meaningful to you?