

Weekly Article: What is Worship?

“It’s time for church!” From infancy, I have attended church regularly. As a child, going to church was a time to learn more about Jesus and to sing hymns. I saw baptisms performed. I watched my parents during Communion, particularly as they returned from the altar. Going to church always meant a sermon, a main feature of the service. It was why we went to church: to hear about God’s love for us in Jesus.

What do Lutherans mean by *worship*? Most often, it refers to Sunday church services, and worship is indeed what happens on Sundays. Yet the concept of worship goes beyond an hour’s activity on Sunday (or any other day of the week, for that matter). Lutherans understand worship as something more than what occurs on one day of the week. *It is a matter of God’s gracious gift of faith and the resulting activities that flow from that gift.* Such faith-based activity is most evident in Sunday services as we gather as God’s guests to receive from Him and to express our thanks and praise to Him.

The concept of worship for Lutherans is multi-dimensional. Though many have tried, there is no one way to express the fullness of the concept of worship in a single word or equivalent concept. This is true when we study the biblical ideas and our historical heritage and reflect on present Lutheran worship practices. **Worship is God’s service to us** as His gathered guests and our “faith-full” response to Him in Christ. Worship is also an opportunity to grow and develop as a community and for the community to be empowered to go out into the world. Therefore, Lutheran worship can be described as being downward, upward, inward, and outward - or, to put it another way, Lutheran worship is *encounter, expression, education, and evangelism*.

The first dimension of Lutheran worship is *encounter*.

In her services of corporate worship, the Christian Church presents the eternal realities of God’s holy and infallible Word, exhorts high regard for Christian doctrine and the application of Biblical teaching, receives the benefits of the blessed Sacraments, and enjoys fellowship that has its roots in the Gospel of Christ Jesus.

Lutherans understand worship as a profound encounter with God and His manifold gifts to His people. God comes to His gathered guests with numerous blessings from on high. We **encounter our triune God**—our faith relationship with Him is what worship is all about. Encountering God and His gifts draws believers together so that true Christian worship has been described as “centripetal worship.” This means Christian worship is a centripetal force pulling us into the centre. At the centre of Christian worship, we encounter the Trinity and, even more, Christ crucified and risen again for us. This merciful God stands at the centre of our worship, and our liturgy, with its prayers and proclamation, its sacraments and song, cannot point to itself, much less force us to find that centre somewhere else in life, but instead witnesses and draws the worshipping assembly to that very centre.

Worship is an encounter with the grace-revealing God, who is most clearly known in His Son, Jesus, who sends us His faith-strengthening Spirit. This encounter is central to all worship and is the vital element of whatever else occurs in the Divine Service.

Second, worship is also an *expression* of our faith or a response to what God has done for us in Christ.

Psalms 96 (particularly vv. 7-9) captures the essence of this dimension of worship in a most engaging manner. The psalmist writes:

⁷ *Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength!*

⁸ *Ascribe to the LORD the glory due His name;
bring an offering, and come into His courts!*

⁹ *Worship the LORD in the splendour of holiness;
tremble before Him, all the earth!*

Psalms are written in a Hebrew poetic style characterised by parallelism - a second line repeats or parallels a thought from the first line. The parallelism in these particular verses from Psalm 96 draws the thoughts together and develops an idea that focuses on the key theme. The psalmist directs us to an understanding of true worship. The first line of the first verse is not a clear or complete thought because it does not tell the “*families of the peoples*” what should be ascribed. The second line of the verse completes the thought: God deserves our ascription of praise because of His awesome glory and omnipotent strength. The next verse becomes more focused. We are not to ascribe just any glory to God; instead, we are to ascribe the unique glory reflected in His name. Included in that ascription of praise are physical activities that express the worshippers’ self-recognition as creatures of the great Creator. Offerings, whether monetary or material, are integral to authentic biblical worship. Finally, the idea of worship is expressed, but not any worship; rather, it is worship that reflects God’s holiness, His uniqueness, and His utter “otherness.” Notice that as the psalmist expands and expounds on ascribing to God His worthiness, he culminates with an expression of awe and reverence before the gracious Almighty One. This is the essence of worship as a response.

Third, worship is also *education* or *edification*.

Early Christians, for example, used the account of Jesus' Last Supper both for liturgical and educational purposes. Luther recognised this dimension of worship early in the Reformation. He exhorted the Livonians to "consider the edification of the lay folk" as he helped them reform their worship practices.¹ A year later, in his *German Mass*, Luther explained the purpose of carefully conducted liturgical worship practices: "They are essential, especially for the immature and the young who must be *trained and educated* in the Scripture and God's Word daily so that they may become familiar with the Bible, grounded, well versed, and skilled in it, ready to defend their faith and in due time to teach others and to increase the kingdom of Christ."² Luther saw the abuse of worship practices in his day. Yet, he also recognised the profound ability of good liturgical worship to maintain the faith in the face of false "prophets" who proclaimed rigid adherence to a mechanical form of worship or who advocated total freedom from any constraints in the area of liturgy.

As education, worship teaches the faith and nurtures the faithful because it is Word-oriented. Worship is a safe learning environment because the Word of God has a primary place in this gathering. The fellowship of believers gathered in the name of Jesus fosters the work of the Spirit. Lutheran worship is Word-centred worship. Sermons based on the readings of the day and the use of liturgical texts are rooted in the divine biblical revelation. The Sacrament of the Altar is administered according to Christ's intent and institution. In such a context, **God becomes the teacher of His gathered guests.**

Fourth, worship is always *evangelism* or *witnessing*.

Whatever we do in worship expresses our faith so others may see. In this regard, there is a dramatic dynamic at work in worship. Our worship affects our witness, and our witness affects our worship. Lutherans see a two-way relationship between evangelism and worship. Worship affects witness, and witness affects worship. There is a closeness of faith and Lutheran worship. True worship has to do with life in faith. What happens in the worship practices is preparation, proclamation and enactment of what should happen daily. What we do on Sunday affects our daily lives, and our daily relationship with God affects our expressions of worship on Sundays.

After considering the four dimensions of worship, we now turn our attention to the four reasons for worship, which can be arranged in two pairs of relationships.

First, **God acts**. As we see His creation and, most importantly, as we understand His grace in Christ Jesus, our Lord and Saviour, we recognise the dynamic involvement of our creating, redeeming, and sanctifying God. Worship begins with God entering our world in love.

Second, as a result of God's actions, we want and need to **respond to Him**. There is a natural human desire to express feelings of awe and wonderment in particular ways. According to many modern sociologists, ritual is an important part of the human experience. Worship, therefore, is a proper response to God's activities for us, to us, and in us.

Third, God **commands** that we worship Him. This may be more obvious than we think. God has given many commands, some of which we do not always understand. As we mature in the faith, we find that God's commands are good. He has commanded that we worship Him, take time to be with Him, and come together with other believers to respond to His work in our lives. This quality time with God is His gracious will and loving wish for us.

Fourth and finally, we worship in **obedience** to God. Because of our sinful condition, we do not always "feel" like worshipping. However, despite our feelings, God wants our physical, emotional, and spiritual selves to come into His presence. Our worship is not merely for ourselves but for Him who loved us enough to send His Son and Spirit.

Thus, we return to the multidimensional dynamic of Lutheran worship: ***Our worship is from God to us and from us back to God.*** Our Lord speaks and we listen. The rhythm of our worship is from Him to us and then from us back to Him. He gives His gifts, and together, we receive and extol them. We build one another up as we speak to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.

¹ "Christian Exhortation to the Livonians," AE 53:47.

² "German Mass and Order of Service (1526)," AE 53:62.