

## ARTICLE: Worship

It is always good to look at the historical roots of our understanding of worship, and in this instance, we want to look particularly at the origin of the salient phrase *lex orandi, lex credendi* (law of praying, law of believing).

In the early 5<sup>th</sup> century, a lay monk named Prosper of Aquitaine<sup>1</sup> (390-455) was a literary disciple and defender of Augustine. Facing a controversy over baptism, Prosper penned the original adage: *legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi* (the rule of believing establishes the rule of supplicating). As part of his argument for salvation by grace alone, Prosper demonstrated that the reason the Church prays for all people is that faith is purely the result of God's grace. Thus, the liturgy underscored the belief of the Church.

Although Prosper's concept is clear in its context, the simplified form of the phrase - *lex orandi, lex credendi* - has taken on a life of its own. Three distinct ways have developed for interpreting and applying the basic truth articulated by Prosper.

First, worship life creates and affects beliefs.

Arius (AD 256-336), an early Christian teacher who began to lead people away from the true biblical faith, understood that the worship life of a Christian community had a powerful effect on its beliefs. To introduce his aberrations about Christ's origin, Arius set his beliefs to *music*, using marketplace tunes to infect people's thinking and theological consciousness.

One result of these popular jingles was that Arianism was difficult to eradicate in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). A century or so later, when Nestorius, bishop of Constantinople (ca. AD 428), forbade his people from speaking of Mary as "God-bearer," only allowing them to call her "Christ-bearer," a theological battle erupted. His devotional directions were considered denials of the doctrine of the nature (actually the two natures) of Christ. As a result of this Nestorian heresy, a church council meeting in Chalcedon in AD 451 quickly reaffirmed the phrase "God-bearer" in the liturgical confessions of the Church.

A more recent and concrete illustration of this idea that worship forms faith is the 1950 doctrinal statement by Pope Pius XII that established the bodily assumption of Mary as an official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. This doctrine states that Mary is *physically* in heaven. It flows out of the worship life of Catholics, who have prayed to Mary for centuries. Such devotion is verified and undergirded by the papal affirmation, but it was based on the practices of the Catholic Church over many centuries, *not* on any biblical evidence. Eastern Orthodox Christians have had similar liturgical influences upon their doctrine. Likewise, several Protestant Christian groups hold a similar view, seeking to demonstrate the Spirit's presence through charismatic activities in their worship practices. Similarly, many modern Christian church bodies continue to seek Christian unity through external worship practices, particularly a common worship resource, rather than through agreement on biblical teachings.

Second, beliefs create and affect worship life.

The second way to view the phrase *lex orandi, lex credendi*, takes an opposite perspective.

Due to many heretical worship practices in the early Church, ecclesiastical and doctrinal control over the liturgy was often rigidly exercised. The Reformation era brought about a recognition of the *dogmatic value* of liturgy. John Calvin, in particular, made the Second Commandment foundational for all worship practices of those who followed his style of reform. Idolatry of any type was carefully avoided, including, as Calvin saw it, the idolatry of the liturgy.

A theology of worship affects the actions of worship. Indeed, the early revival preachers in the United

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<sup>1</sup> Aquitaine is a region in southwestern France.

States used an approach to evangelistic worship with a particular theological goal. Preparatory songs “warmed people up to worship,” and then the preachers gave extended and persuasive sermons that ended with an exhortation to “accept Christ.” A physical act of coming forward and being “smitten in the Spirit” concluded the services. Recent evangelical worship styles continue this mechanical and manipulative approach to worship, even here in Australia, yet such practices clearly show that *theology affects worship practices*.

Third, worship life and beliefs affect each other.

The third way to interpret Prosper’s phrase is a middle position that acknowledges the validity of the two previous views while showing that each is deficient for neglecting the other. Lutherans have navigated this middle course between the proverbial and mythical Scylla and Charybdis.<sup>2</sup> For centuries, Lutherans have reflected the mutuality of both doctrine *and* devotional life. Theology and worship are significantly interrelated.

In 1523 and again in 1526, Martin Luther wrote his *Order of Mass and Communion for the Church at Wittenberg* and his *German Mass*, in which he demonstrated that changing certain parts of the liturgy was necessary for doctrinal purity, especially when he discovered that the proper biblical emphasis in the Lord’s Supper was on *God’s gift to humanity rather than on the sacrificial responses of humans toward God*.

A mutual relationship always exists between liturgy and doctrine because liturgy communicates doctrine and affects the lives of those who worship. Rites and ceremonies form a training school of faith. While ceremonies cannot create faith, they can point to it. They are the scaffolding needed for building the church, but must not be confused with the church itself. They can serve to bring the immature (the young and simple folk) into the orbit of the Word and Sacrament, where faith is born. As long as man is “external,” such outward orders will be needed for the sake of love, for love and order belong together. What occurs in worship affects doctrine, and, according to Luther, the doctrine of the Church should be evident in its worship.

The Danish Lutheran theologian Regin Preter has carried on Luther’s approach of relating theology and liturgy. In a masterful article titled “*Liturgy and Theology*,” Preter exhibits this uniquely Lutheran approach: “The liturgy of the Church is theological. It speaks to God and man about God and man... The theology of the Church is liturgical, a part of the liturgy in the wider sense. It serves God and neighbour. The separation of the two has detrimental effects, warns Preter:

If liturgy is separated from theology, i.e., if it is no longer in its essence “theology” or true witness to the revelation of God, it then becomes an end in itself, a “good work,” performed with the intention of pleasing God. If, on the other hand, theology is separated from liturgy, i.e., if it is no longer seen as a part of the liturgy of the Church, part of the living sacrifice of our bodies in the service of God and our fellow men, it, too, becomes an end in itself, a human wisdom competing with and sometimes even rejecting the revelation of God... These two dangers arising out of the neglect of the essential unity of liturgy and theology are, I think, imminent in our present situation in the Lutheran Church.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, there is an intimate relationship between what is done on a Sunday in a Lutheran congregation and what it means to be Lutheran.

Lutheran theologian Peter Brunner also underscores the mutual relationship between doctrine and worship. In introductory comments to his classic book *Worship in the Name of Jesus*, he states: “The church’s doctrine on worship will determine which liturgical order it employs, which it leaves to

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<sup>2</sup> Being between Scylla and Charybdis is an idiom deriving from Greek mythology, which has been associated with the proverbial advice “to choose the lesser of two evils.”

<sup>3</sup> Preter, “*Liturgy and Theology*,” 141.

freedom of choice, and which it rejects.”<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, Brunner also states that “if the dogmatic statements do not simultaneously express what takes place in the concrete worship service in which we take part, this worship will find itself in a bad way. It would then cease to be the worship instituted by God and Christ.”<sup>5</sup>

Being a Lutheran means retaining the mutual tension between worship life and doctrine. It means we shall evaluate our worship practices in light of what the Bible teaches. It also means that we shall evaluate our worship practices to be sure they reflect what we wish to teach.

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<sup>1</sup> Prenter, “*Liturgy and Theology*,” 141.

<sup>1</sup> Brunner, *Worship in the Name of Jesus*, 24.

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<sup>4</sup> Brunner, *Worship in the Name of Jesus*, 24.