

# What's Lutheran About Worship: Theology From the Inside Out

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## Introduction

What is Lutheran about worship? Immediately two prior questions arise: What is *Lutheran*? What is *worship*? That inevitably leads to a more fundamental inquiry: What is the relationship between theory and practice? And how do we resolve the problem of the relationship between the theory (theology) and practice (worship)?

There is an understandable tendency to dichotomize theology and practice as though distinctively separable, when in reality they cannot meaningfully be abstracted from each other. Practice, either consciously or unconsciously, will be informed by theology of some sort. It will be Lutheran or not, but it won't just be nothing. Theory and practice are inseparable.

The second problem is that some fail to see the difference between the theology of worship and its practice, that is, the difference between what worship is and how it should be done in the human, historical, and cultural contexts within which God's people have worshiped throughout the history of the church. Theology for us is an absolute, but practice is not. Our practice, while guided and informed by our theology, will change from time to time, and from place to place, as indeed it must. Theory and practice, while inseparably connected, are yet clearly distinct.

So, let's think this through. As a seminary student, I was taught that worship had two perspectives: sacramental and sacrificial. The sacramental elements are primary: those that God does (through preaching, baptism, the Lord's Supper, absolution, etc.), the sacrificial elements are the secondary, i.e., what we do (in praise, witness, confession, prayer, etc.). The scheme is familiar. The question might be asked, "Is there a better way?"

To begin at the beginning with what gives rise to worship and makes worship what it is, keep in mind that since theory determines the practice, we do well to start at that point and proceed to the questions of how it should function and how to organize these functions. We begin at the center.

## Theology From the Inside Out

Our Lutheran understanding of worship is inextricably related to our understanding of the church, and the doctrine of justification<sup>1</sup> is the article upon which the church stands or falls (“*articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*”). This is more than simply a theological statement, having implications merely for the formulation or articulating of our theology. It has tremendous implication for the practice of our theology—especially also for our understanding of and the practice of worship. In such an understanding, the Gospel is definitive, identifying the church. The Gospel (in its various forms, that is, written, spoken or visible) is the church’s mark. Where the Gospel is, there is the Holy Spirit, bringing sinners to faith in Jesus Christ. Where the Gospel is, even if it is partially denied or contradicted by error, there is the church.

This means that the Lutheran understanding of the church is fundamentally evangelical in a narrow theological sense. That is, the church must be understood, first and foremost, as a theological reality, a reality that God brings about through his Word and Sacraments. It is a top-down reality (*coram deo*), brought about by the Holy Spirit, through the Means of Grace. The true essence of the church may be understood fully only with this as the starting point. All else that we say and must say about the church radiates out from this center, from the inside out, as it were.

To “think church out from its center in the Gospel” is not mere “theologizing.” It is rather “theological thinking.” Nor is this mere theoretical speculation. “Thinking church from the inside out” has tremendous implications for how we live and act as a church, particularly for our worship. When we know that “the church is most church” (that is, it is most recognized as church) where the Gospel is (that is, where the Means of Grace are administered), then we know the proper beginning point for talk of the church and all her activities, including worship. Thus, articulating a Lutheran understanding of the church is the first step towards articulating a Lutheran understanding of the church’s worship. Remember, practice inescapably flows from theology. And the church’s theology of worship flows from its theology of the church.

## The Church as a Theological Reality

Lutheran theology begins with reflection upon the church, at the *locus* upon which it is centered, at the article upon which it stands. It begins with the evangelical core of Lutheran theology. In a secondary, though important sense the church is also a socio-psychological organism, and so we view group dynamics, personal relations, systems theory, and so forth as very important. Yet we do not begin there. Rather, this is where the cultural model of the church seems to begin, that is, with the church as people, defined socio-psychologically, and only secondarily works its way back to a theological understanding of the church. This is its mistake.<sup>2</sup> The church is first a theological reality,

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<sup>1</sup>Please note that I am using the phrase, “doctrine of justification,” in a way that is virtually synonymous with what we otherwise call the Gospel (in the narrow sense).

<sup>2</sup>Please note carefully: My questions concerning the cultural model flow from my assessment of it as

and only secondarily a socio-psychological reality, its structure and life must first be determined theologically.

The ordering of the articles in the *Augsburg Confession* is very instructive in this regard. Following Article IV, on Justification, which the Apology calls the “main article of the entire Christian teaching” (and which Luther in the Smalcald Articles termed “the first, fundamental article,”) flows the article on the means of grace and worship. It was for the sake of justification, “so that we may obtain such faith,” that God instituted the ministry of preaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments. Then, following the article on the new obedience (AC VI), the *Augsburg Confession* defines the church as “the assembly of all believers in which the Gospel is preached purely and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel.”

The *Augustana*, therefore, begins its exposition of the church with the doctrine of justification and the means of grace. According to the *Augsburg Confession* the church is believers in Christ, to be sure. But it is not only that. (To say only that is to speak only half the truth, and the lesser half, at that.) The church is believers who are gathered around the Gospel and Sacraments. To speak of the church only as believers is to speak in terms of the result. But what if we think “out from the center,” with the *Augustana*, in terms, not of the result, that is, believers, but of the cause, that is, the doctrine of justification? How might our understanding of church change and how might that changed understanding lead to an understanding of worship that has a distinctively Lutheran look (that is, Gospel-centered)?

### **A Gospel-Centered Church**

An ecclesiology with the Gospel at its heart would understand itself primarily in reference to the Means of Grace. The things that most define the church are its marks, the gifts of Christ around which Christ gathers his holy people: Baptism (Mt. 28:19; 1 Pet. 3:21), Holy Absolution (Jn. 20:23), the Lord’s Supper (Mt. 26:28), and the Word proclaimed (Jn. 17:20; Rom. 10:14-15). These are the things that give definition to the church. For it is in, with, and under these visible and audible elements that the Christ whose church it is has promised to be salvificly present for us. To these he has attached his promises of forgiveness. Through them he bestows his Holy Spirit. None of this is possible without the Means of Grace. They are central. They are defining.

“Where the Gospel is purely taught and the Sacraments rightly administered,” (AC VII) there is the church. If you don’t have these, you cannot be sure that you have the church. This principle does not allow for a purely socio-psychological understanding of the church. Nor does it permit us to treat the Means of Grace as merely the presuppositions, or as a preamble to a discussion of the church. Christ has placed His gifts, the means through which He by his Spirit bestows his grace, at the center. This is what makes us a sacramental and Lutheran church. Only by maintaining this centrality may we continue to be Lutheran, i.e., sacramental, today.

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theologically mistaken, not, as is so often asserted, from some sort of fear of it. I am not afraid of the model. I simply believe it is off-center in its approach to what the church most fundamentally is and what it is to be about in the world.

According to this view, what would be the central, organizing principles of the church? Baptism, the Real Presence of the Lord's Body and Blood in the Lord's Supper, public preaching based on Scripture, spoken absolution. Full integration into the church would not be measured by activity on church boards or involvement in small groups, but by contact with the life-giving and church-defining Means of Grace. This must be the church's chief concern—not merely whether a person is on a committee or involved in a church activity, but whether he or she attends worship and receives Communion frequently, or regularly studies Scripture and prays.

### **A Gospel-Centered Church and the Ministry of the Gospel**

Christ not only gave his church the Means of Grace, but he also did not leave its administration to chance. He initiated the public ministry as a means for the Means of Grace, as *Augustana V* states. Since the doctrine of justification is at the center of our doctrine of the church, any talk of church cannot really take place without talk of the public ministry. God has built his church upon the apostolic confession of Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of the Living God” (Mt. 16:16). Jesus instituted the ministry when he breathed on his apostles and gave them the Holy Spirit and the Office of the Keys (Jn. 20:22-23). The public ministry was commissioned to carry out the church's task of making disciples of all nations by baptizing and teaching all things he commanded (Mt. 28:19-20).

The Confessions understand the public ministry to be that office (*Amt*) in the church that has its source in the apostolic ministry, which was instituted by Christ himself. The public ministry is not a human invention for the purpose of smoother administration of a congregation or to facilitate socialization. The one who holds the office is not just a part, or even the leader, of a team. There is a lot of talk today about the role of the pastor being one who leads the priesthood of all believers into their proper “ministry.”

The Confessions, however, assign to the public ministry a much higher role, one more intimately related to the essence of the church and of worship. Christ instituted it, they say, precisely so that those for whom He died might have, through the Means of Grace, the faith that justifies them before God. The public ministry therefore bears an essential relationship to the Gospel. It was given in the service of the Gospel; to give the gifts; to administer the Word; to be Christ's hands and mouth to his people. In other words, it was instituted by Christ to apply the gifts of grace, not merely to point others to them.

The relationship between church and ministry is another discussion in itself, one fraught with controversy in our circles. I don't bring it up here in order to distract us from our focus on worship. Rather, I do so to show that one cannot speak completely about what the church is and what it is supposed to do without at the same time speaking about the office our Lord instituted within the church. This is because both of them fundamentally concern the Gospel and the provision our Lord has made to ensure that sinners might have the faith that justifies them before God. They are complementary to each other in the Gospel and, thus, both are necessary for a proper understanding of worship.

## A Gospel-Centered Church and Worship

Finally, we come to a specific discussion of worship itself. A Gospel-centered understanding of the church places worship at the heart of the church's life. It is there that the gifts of Christ are distributed (Mt 18:20), there that the life-giving Word is proclaimed, there that the Lord's Supper is given and eaten, there that the absolution is spoken. Worship is the primary place where Christ does his saving work in the Spirit. It is certainly not the only place, but it is the primary place where that upon which the church stands and falls is given, where that around which the church is centered is administered.

Worship, therefore, is primarily defined as God's service, God's work. It is the *locus* of God's church-creating and sustaining activity. To some degree Lutherans have adopted an understanding of worship that comes from foreign theological soil, which is truly harmful. So many of us think of worship as what we do, as if we are the actors and God is the audience. That our theology is Gospel-centered, however, that we are *evangelical* Lutherans, implies just the opposite. Worship is the place primarily where God gives and where we receive. It is only secondarily what we do, what we say back to God, what we give back to God.

Of course, there are so-called sacrificial elements in worship. They include doxology, stewardship, prayers, etc. Nevertheless, our posture before worship is similar to our posture before the Gospel: we are passive participants, active recipients of the grace of God. Worship is not in the first instance the occasion for the process of socialization or celebration to occur. It is not the place to build us up psychologically and make us feel good about ourselves, or about our congregation or about the world. It is a theological, a Christological, a Gospel event. It is the place or event where/when God does his saving work, the place from which all other activities in the church flow, and toward which they lead. It is, simply, central. What we stand upon as church and everything that flows from that, including our response, is given there.

What does a church that sees worship as the primary locus of God's saving work look like? What does Lutheran worship look like? It teaches the liturgy and treats what has been passed down from previous generations with respect, avoiding both mindless repetition and careless innovation. It is not idiosyncratic in its use of the liturgy and the sacraments. It does not treat worship as entertainment, or as the place to salve our battered psyches.<sup>3</sup> Nor does it become a forum for the sterile preservation of the past. It seeks always to showcase the Means of Grace in forms and categories that are meaningful to the people of a given social context.

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<sup>3</sup>One detects within the cultural model circles an over-emphasis on the Word (Gospel) as preached or intellectually articulated. This subtle form of rationalism could well be part of their problem with giving the Sacraments the central place they should be given within the Divine Service.

## **A Gospel-Centered Church and the Priesthood of All Believers**

Now that we are properly “centered,” we are able to speak of the church as the “people of God.” This is because a Gospel-centered understanding of the church and of worship leads naturally (necessarily!) to an understanding of the church as the people of God, who are mightily active in doing good works and living lives of service to God and our fellow human beings, that is, Christians who incarnationally, sacramentally live out the implications of the means of grace in their lives.

Like the “good trees” that we have by the Gospel been declared to be, we bring forth “good fruit” (Lk 6 43-45). Like the “body of Christ” that we have been brought into by the Gospel, we have been given a “still more excellent way” (1 Cor 12 31). Having been “buried with Jesus by baptism into death, we walk in newness of life” (Rom 6 4). Having been saved by grace alone, apart from works of the law, we know that “we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared before hand that we should walk in them” (Eph 2 8-10).

Say it how you will—and the Scriptures provide a marvelous variety of ways of saying it—the Gospel brings forth in those whom it claims works pleasing to God. We to whom the blessings of justification have been given cannot keep our works to ourselves precisely because the Gospel is central in our understanding of ourselves as church. For we know that our works do not avail before God, that we have the superabundant works of our Lord as our own through faith in him. We don’t need our good works for God or for ourselves. We have as our own through faith the superabundant works of Jesus himself. So we are free to give our good works away to our neighbor, who does in fact need them, and to spend our lives in the service of those for whom Christ spent his life.

What would a church mightily active in good works look like? It’s hard to say, because sanctification cannot be dictated according to form or custom. There would be no necessarily Christian “life-style,” no rigid application of the law to bring conformity in areas of Christian freedom. Rather there would be a wonderful diversity in Christian living, a blessed pluralism of good works, whereby Christians do works pleasing in God’s sight as they fulfill their vocations and incarnate the love of Christ in the places where God has located them— at home, at work, at school.

They bring others to Christ through outreach, witness, evangelism, and by their own proper participation in the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations. Worship has its fulfillment—it reaches its objective—when sinners and seekers are brought into contact with Christ through his gifts of grace. The question, so often asked, of whether the primary purpose of worship is for inreach or outreach is a false question. It is for both. And the centrality of the Gospel in our understanding of worship betrays the lie in it. The purpose is that all might be forgiven and incorporated more fully into their Lord through the means of grace.

## Conclusion

What have we accomplished here? We have gone back to the beginning, to the center, to answer our question. We have examined two questions: What is Lutheran? What is worship? We have discovered that both questions have the same basic answer: The Gospel of our Lord's free grace for sinners through faith apart from works defines both what it means to be Lutheran and what it means to be about worship.

Language, cultural forms, meter, tune and rhythm, movement, architecture, clothing—none of these are the main things, and, as good Lutherans, surely we want to keep the main thing the main thing. The real question for Lutheran Christians never changes: What are the best means of conveying the saving Gospel to people of a given time and place? The Gospel, the precious Word and Sacraments—these lie at the heart of the matter, these are what make worship Lutheran or, for that matter, Christian. The cultural forms are only the means, not the end, of Lutheran worship.

But for that very reason, there is no question that cultural forms and language and tune and rhythm and architecture, and so forth, do make a difference. As instruments of the Gospel, they are the means through which the justifying Gospel reaches sinners—an awesome responsibility for mere means. The means are not ever totally separated from the ends they serve. They can alienate, or they can attract, they can drive people off, or they can draw them in. They can dignify the message or they can detract from it. For these reasons, I think, they are infinitely important, for our choices of cultural forms can affect the eternal well-being of the people whom we serve. They are both nothing and everything, so that by all means we might save some.

And so we come to the final point: It's people that we serve. That's where theory and practice come together. And that's a good thing to keep in mind as we think through the thorny thicket of worship forms. In a way the whole problem comes from the difficulty we have dealing with diversity. For a long time I have thought we need to develop a "theology of difference" which would enable us to sort out which kinds of diversity are bad and which are good, which diversity we should avoid and which we should rejoice in.

Yet I am sure of this much: when the diversity is presented to us in the form of people, the question of what is Lutheran about worship becomes less abstract. Because then, we can't see it merely as a problem to be overcome, nor as a challenge to be faced, nor even as an opportunity to be grasped. Instead it may be seen as a blessing to be received by a gracious Lord who is honored by all the world's cultural forms and all the world's languages when they are directed to him in faithful worship based upon the unchanging Gospel. Then the Gospel is served. Then God's people are served. Then our worship is Lutheran. Because that's what's Lutheran about worship.



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