

# Model Theological Conference on Worship

Paul Grime — Response to Jeff Cloeter

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Pastor Cloeter, thank you for reminding us of one of the classic Lutheran distinctions that Lutherans have always turned to in their conversations about worship, namely, the sacramental and sacrificial dimensions. There is, in fact, a rhythm that characterizes our worship, one that begins with God breaking into our time and space to snatch us from the jaws of the devil. What can a child of God do but receive such gifts with thanksgiving and praise?

When you consider the historic, western Mass, even in its most basic form, it becomes quickly apparent that our worship is never just a simple exposition where God delivers his benefits and we then respond in sacrifices of praise. Yesterday, Dr. Gibbs reminded us that Lutheran preaching shouldn't be characterized by a simplistic structure a "first I'm sad" and "then I'm glad." Similarly, Lutheran worship engulfs the worshiper in a relentless back and forth rhythm where God comes again and again to rescue us sinners. Sometimes our response must be a penitential confession of our sinful condition; other times, it's a full-throated "Amen" as we claim for ourselves the good news that is proclaimed to us. Back and forth goes this rhythm. When you least expect it, a phrase from a hymn or a line from the sermon pricks your heart, exposing your sin to such an extent that you feel the spotlight has been turned just on you. And when you figure that the good news of God's redemption couldn't be said another way, just then Christ comes to the rescue to lift you up with words of comfort and peace.

I wonder at times whether this rhythm in our worship hasn't gotten a bit sluggish or even a somewhat sclerotic. We have time only to consider the sacramental dimension. Yesterday we were encouraged to present the Gospel to our people in all its fullness. That means not simply to

throw in a couple of stock phrases at the end of the sermon to satisfy the expectation to preach Law *and* Gospel. Instead, it demands that we draw from the rich imagery of Holy Scripture to present Christ and all his benefits in full, living, vivid color.

At the risk of repeating myself from previous occasions, I want to draw your attention to the example of Luther the hymnwriter. An interesting study of Luther's hymns was done several years ago by a Frenchman, of all people, named Patrice Veit. He did a semantic study of the key words Luther uses in his three dozen or so hymns. What fascinated me in particular was his discovery of how Luther speaks of Christ in his hymns. Veit tallied 126 different places in the hymns that speak of Christ. What's noteworthy is that in only 11 instances does he use the name Jesus or Christ. In the other 115 references he uses a wide arsenal of images. This Christ is our Savior, our Lord, our guest, our brother, our rock, and our mighty fortress. He is God's beloved Son, his dearest treasure, the bright jewel of Father's crown. What this single example demonstrates is how steeped Luther was in the rich imagery of Holy Scripture. How could he not be, having just translated the entire New Testament and a good portion of the Old Testament in the two years prior to his great outburst of hymn writing?

Does the Gospel come through in our services with such vividness? Does our preaching resort too often to those stock phrases of "Jesus died for you" or "God forgives you all your sins"? Or even worse, do we find ourselves using generic language about God's love without grounding that love in the incarnation? The same question can be asked regarding the hymns and songs we sing in our services. As Dr. Walther would remind us, does the Gospel predominate in all that we say and sing? And do our hearts long to hear those sweet words of comfort and peace, of rescue and release?

I'm not sure that they always do, irrespective of the type of service one might be attending. Could it be that one of the reasons is that our preaching of the Law has also lost its

vividness? The interplay between Law and Gospel is, of course, another rhythm that plays itself out in the service. And I would suggest that part of the reason for the Gospel not being recognized in all its sweetness is that our preaching of the Law is not presented in its full bitterness. Don't get me wrong; there's plenty of preaching of the Law. But is it a Law that kills? Or, as the sainted Kenneth Korby once put it, have we defanged the Law so that all it can now do is gum us to death? In other words, does the Law as it is presented not only in our preaching but throughout the service only make us feel somewhat bad or annoyed by our shortcomings or does it nail us to the wall and strip us bare of all our excuses and false pretences? Only that kind of preaching of the Law will cause us to flee into the arms of our Savior.

One of the reasons why I believe the church's historic worship pattern and forms are still of great value to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is that they deliver to us the wisdom of the ages. Through a process of repeated use and constant refinement and distillation, we are inheritors of a treasure that has served Christians well for more generations than we can count. That doesn't mean that the church doesn't have something new to add in our own day. My concern is that in many instances the baby has been thrown out with the bathwater. Rather than build on the church's rich heritage, the consensus is that we have simply outgrown them and have, therefore, moved on to new pastures. Sadly, the church was presented with a false choice: either move on or remain stuck in the past.

I would urge a third way...to drink deeply of the treasures of the church and then to build on that solid foundation. If you use the church's hymnal as your primary worship resource, make sure that you use it in all its fullness. Just using the book doesn't guarantee that worship will be rich and full or that it will serve the people as well as it might. It's a denial of God's gifts to think that we can just worship the way we did in the 1950s when everyone was using the same book and supposedly worshipping the same way.

And if you don't use the church's hymnal, I would urge those of you who plan and lead worship to be well acquainted with it anyway. You owe it to yourselves to know the breadth and depth of our heritage. I think your own worship planning will be the richer for it.

If you will permit me one more comment, not so much in response to the presentation but a general observation. One of the hallmarks of contemporary worship movement has been the desire for creativity. Why say something the same way when it can be recast in different language, hopefully to catch the worshiper's attention and keep his or her interest? It's true that repetition can become rote. But it's also true that no repetition risks leaving our people with nothing to hold on to. I think it's a positive development that the ecumenical creeds are appearing with more regularity each week rather than newly minted confessions of faith. How about doing the same thing with the confession of sins? If you're going to prepare a new confession, why not use it for a number of weeks, like the whole season of Advent or Lent? Allowing the people of God to grow into a text is not necessarily a bad thing.

And finally, two postscripts. First, if you are going to write any type of congregational response, do so with a bit of fear and trepidation. Putting words into the mouths of the faithful is not an inconsequential thing. If there's anything I learned from our work on *LSB*, it's that words do matter and that the choice of words must be done with great care and humility.

And second, another value of repetition in worship is that it enfranchises the greatest number of people. You can only participate in constantly new confessions and responses if you are able to read and keep up with the pace of the congregation's participation. If you have reading disabilities or are one of the millions of functionally illiterate adults, you're constantly relegated to the ranks of the disenfranchised. And for those who use the hymnal, that means not being afraid to sing hymns with refrains now and then.