

Toward a Theology of Worship That Is Pastoral and Sacramental
Model Theological Conference on Worship
Rev. Larry Vogel
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I. The Worship Dilemma

The city temple of Chiayi, Taiwan is a bustling place, built at great cost, ornate and gilded, full of the images of a thousand ancestor gods that you meet on ever-ascending levels. There is no set day or time to gather. People come as they have need to pray, make offerings, burn joss, kneel, and drop kidney-shaped Puay blocks to seek their future.

Houses of worship for the Hindu religion and Islam are just as impressive, although the practices there are quite different from those of a Buddhist Temple. Travel anywhere and you will find temples, by one name or another—and even by changing names. One of the largest mosques in the world was once a Christian church, Hagia Sophia. Temples, mosques, churches, shrines... whatever the name or practices, are all dedicated to one thing.

It is all *worship*, much of it strange to a Westerner, yet important because it reminds us of a critical truth: worship of some kind is a fundamental human trait. Luther explained in the Large Catechism. He says, “The Ten Commandments... are written in the hearts of all people.”¹ What we often call the “natural law,” that law written on the human heart, includes the third commandment. So Luther comments further on this matter (*Against the Heavenly Prophets*):

For to have a God is not alone a Mosaic law, but also a natural law, as St. Paul says (Rom. 1[:20]), that the heathen know of the deity, that there is a God. This is also evidenced by the fact that they have set up gods and arranged forms of divine service....²

¹LC III 67 (KW, 440).

²AE40:96-97.

Yet, the worship in the world's temples and mosques reminds us of something else. Worship which flows "naturally" from human beings is deeply misguided, or, as Luther put it:

Therefore it is also a fact that among those who presume to have natural reason or natural law, and boast of it, there are very many great and efficient natural fools. The noble gem called natural law and reason is a rare thing among the children of men.³

This may call to mind Jesus' words at a well in Samaria. As He told a woman "everything [she] ever did" (John 4:29), He added:

[T]he hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.... the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth. (John 4:21, 23-24)

Luther's comments and—more importantly—Jesus' words provide a good warning for us as we consider the theme of worship. Not just anything will do when it comes to worship. That's where the pastoral worship dilemma begins. It reminds us that true worship is serious business, because it is possible to worship falsely.

Consider two versions of false worship. First, there is that perspective which sees worship as all about what we do for God. We all know how easy it is for people to lapse into worship as a bargain or gift that we give to God—like we are proving ourselves—so that worship is all about us pleasing God, and thereby paying a debt.

A few actual quotes: "All He asks is an hour a week, so I make sure I give Him that." "I promised God that if He helped me get over my depression I wouldn't miss any more than one

³AE 13:161. See also his comments in LC I, 16-17: "Look, here you have the true honor and worship that please God, which God also commands under penalty of eternal wrath, namely, that the heart should know no other consolation or confidence than in him, nor let itself be torn from him, but for his sake should risk everything and disregard everything else on earth. On the other hand, you will easily see and judge how the world practices nothing but false worship and idolatry. There has never been a nation so wicked that it did not establish and maintain some sort of worship. All people have set up their own god, to whom they looked for blessings, help, and comfort."

Sunday a month.” Or, the one that made me cringe the worst: “Whenever I win [at the Atlantic City casinos] I know I have to go to church the next Sunday.” Such views all have in common the thought that worship is our service to God either to pay a debt or to insure future blessings. It’s nothing new. Psalm 50 addresses it (8-12)—but not approvingly:

Not for your sacrifices [*worship*, that is] do I rebuke you; your burnt offerings are continually before me. I will not accept a bull from your house or goats from your folds. For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the hills, and all that moves in the field is mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine.”

Philip Melanchthon addresses this in Confessions: “This is how God wants to be known and worshiped, namely, that we receive blessings from him, and indeed, that we receive them on account of his mercy and not on account of our merits.”⁴

Just as common is the view that sees worship as something that is all about pleasing people. It’s about getting high on the Spirit. The measure of worship is the level of intensity it generates—its ability to either motivate (or perhaps manipulate) me to the point where I can be entirely focused emotionally and experientially on the divine.

But Psalm 50 speaks of worship in the context of a low, not a high: “Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you and you shall glorify me” (15).

And, Psalm 51:15-17 also seems hardly to describe a “spiritual high.” “O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.... The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”

To make the goal of worship helping people to get onto a spiritual high just won’t do.

⁴ Ap IV, 60 (KW 130).

Now, like most falsehoods, both perspectives have a good bit of truth. Worship *is* a work of sorts and it *is* intended to please God. Yet, this view fails because it ignores both our unworthiness and God's utter graciousness. God does want nothing less than sacrifices that are a "pleasing aroma" to Him (Numbers 15:3; see also Philippians 4:18). Yet, the prophets of Baal were utterly devoted to pleasing a god, even willing to slash themselves in the bargain (1 Kings 18), but neither their commitment (nor ours) is the final measure of worship that pleases God.

Similarly, making worship about pleasing people, being appealing to them, drawing them into an emotional experience is *not* entirely off-base. It's foolishness to ignore the very real need to engage in worship emotionally and experientially. If worshipping "in spirit" (small "s") means anything at all, it certainly means that our heart is in it, and... yes... we will often experience something of a spiritual "high." Yet, this view also only gives a piece of the truth, because there are too many ways to get high, including some that will kill you physically and others that will kill you spiritually. Israel was on a spiritual high beyond compare worshipping the golden calf at the foot of Sinai, but all of their emotion failed to honor God (Exodus 32).

Worship is serious business because if we gather apart from Christ and His Word, God will not be praised by such worship. His name will not be glorified. And those who participate will not be edified. That is why it's so important for us to think through worship, theologically, and therefore pastorally and sacramentally. It's also why I want to suggest a prayer for us each time we gather for worship. You've heard it before (but in a different context):

II. Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest...

So what is Christian worship about? Let's keep it simple. It involves Christians assembling together for a specific purpose—to be in the presence of Christ. We gather for worship because we want to be with Christ. Yet, we know that God's people have often gathered

in vain—think of the Corinthians’ gathering that Paul declared *not to be the Lord’s Supper*, even though that was their intent. What we need is Jesus’ presence—we long for Him to be with us.

“Come, Lord Jesus, be our Guest.” His presence means everything!

One could argue that—from this perspective—the very first Christian worship gathering assembled on a road and culminated in the town of Emmaus with the prayer: “Stay with us, for it is evening, and the day is almost over” (Luke 24).⁵ As that little assembly took place (compare Matthew 18:20), there were two things that marked the presence of Jesus: the Word which He spoke to those two disciples and the Meal that He shared with them, which opened their eyes. That happened because, although they had invited Him to be their Guest, He instead became the Host and let His gifts to them be blessed!

So notice, even though worship obviously involves us, it is nevertheless a completely gracious event. Christ gives and we receive. Luther noticed this in Genesis 4:26 where he discovered what he considered to be a “most excellent definition” for worship, namely, “calling upon the name of the Lord.”⁶ He connected that definition with Romans 10:13-14, which says, “For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?”

Luther saw the same truth in Jesus’ words to the Samaritan woman: “For from this you see that *true worship can be nothing else than faith*; it is faith’s sublimest activity with respect to God....”⁷

⁵ Gordon Lathrop, “The Shape of the Liturgy: A Framework for Contextualization,” S. Anita Stauffer, ed. *Christian Worship: Unity in Cultural Diversity* (Geneva, Lutheran World Federation, 1996), 68. See Arthur A. Just Jr. for a discussion of the table fellowship at Emmaus, *Heaven and Earth: The Gifts of Christ in the Divine Service* (St. Louis: CPH, 2008), 81-83.

⁶ AE 1:327.

⁷ AE 36:293, emphasis added.

In other words, *faith is true worship*. Where there is true faith in the true God, there is true worship. “Faith is that worship which receives the benefits that God offers.... God wants to be honored by faith so that we receive from him those things that he promises and offers.”⁸ And, lest we forget, genuine faith is astoundingly simple: believing acceptance of God’s gracious “promises and offers” in Jesus Christ. The reason for the Christian worship assembly is the Gospel—that Christ has died, giving His life for ours; Christ is risen, conquering death; and Christ will come again, for the final victory over Satan.

A strange thing occurs as we gather with Christ? The Guest becomes Host. Washing us clean and granting His Spirit, He speaks to us and feeds us. He gives the gifts that faith clings to for life and salvation, and for living and serving.⁹ What faith holds to is the specific promise by which we are called: the promise of forgiveness. Where is that promise given? It is given to those called together into a relationship created through water and the Spirit and nurtured by the Word and the Holy Supper.¹⁰

This cannot be overemphasized. True worship begins with faith—specifically, with faith in the one, true, Triune God, who has revealed Himself in the Word made flesh, Christ Jesus. So Jesus pointed the Samaritan woman away from place to Person. When she asked whether Samaria or Jerusalem was the right *place* to worship, Jesus told her to stop looking at geography because “the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:23-24).

Apart from faith, all worship is false—false because of who it worships, and false because of how it worships. Simply put: ***True worship requires true faith in the true God.***

⁸ Ap IV 49 (KW 128).

⁹ “It is by faith that God wants to be worshiped, namely, *that we receive from him what he promises and offers.*” Ap IV, 52 (KW 128).

¹⁰ See Peter Brunner’s extended discussion of this thought in chapter seven of *Worship in the Name of Jesus* (St. Louis: CPH, 1968), 126-196.

Philippians 3:3 reminds us: “For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.”

It is because true faith is true worship that Paul can speak of the whole of the believer’s life as worship: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship (Rom. 12:1). Luther—commenting on the first commandment, and particularly the fact that it calls us to faith in the true God—says this: “you lay hold of God when your heart grasps him and clings to him.”¹¹

Slide 13: Where Christ is, there is Word and Meal

When Christ Jesus is at the heart of worship, then Word and Sacrament will be there as well, because these are the gifts our Guest-become-Host wishes to share with us. The Bible gives only general instruction on worship. There is no detailed “order of service” in the New Testament. What is emphasized is that as Christians assembled there were opportunities for faith to be created and nurtured, and there were opportunities for faith to be expressed. So Jesus commanded that His followers baptize in the Triune name and teach His Word (Matthew 28:19-20). When He first gave His body and blood with bread and wine, He told His disciples to “do this” as well, originating Holy Communion (see Luke 22:19-20). After His resurrection and ascension, Jesus provided the means by which people would continue to become His disciples, being baptized into Him (Acts 2:38), hearing Him (Acts 2:22) and eating and drinking His very body and blood (Acts 2:42; 1 Corinthians 11:23-25).

¹¹ LC I, 14 (KW 388).

Therefore it should come as no surprise that in the Christian church's history of worship the persisting pattern (the *ordo*¹²) is clear. Christian worship is built around the twin pillars of Word and Sacrament, which are the means by which the Gospel is made known to the world.

This is the pattern Justin Martyr described as basic to the Christian assemblies in the second Christian century.¹³ The same pattern had taken on a far more extensive order and precision in the *Apostolic Constitutions* of ca. 4th century.¹⁴ All known Christian liturgies in East and West thereafter shared this basic structure, so it is no surprise that the Reformers endorsed it.

Indeed, this persistent pattern is so critically important that it not only defines Christian *worship*, but also the Christian church itself. Melanchthon is simply repeating this truly *catholic consensus* as he says: “[The Church is] people scattered throughout the entire world who agree on the gospel and have the same Christ, the same Holy Spirit, and the same sacraments, whether or not they have the same human traditions.”¹⁵

Note Melanchthon's distinction. The pattern of Gospel and Sacraments, given by Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit, not specific human worship traditions, is the persisting pattern of Christian worship. This means, bluntly, that those who demand a specific set of liturgical traditions, depart from the Confessions and a 2000 year consensus. Just as bluntly, those who shape worship by minimizing either the Word or the Sacraments or ignore this persisting pattern of Christian worship also depart from the Confessions and that consensus.

¹² See Clayton J. Schmit, *Sent and Gathered: A Worship Manual for the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 25. Schmit (with many others) identifies a four-fold aspect to the *ordo*: gathering, Word, sacraments, sending and helpfully notes the importance of gathering and sending. However, as Simon Chan says: “The church throughout its history has recognized that this basic *ordo* consists of two parts: Word and Sacrament.” *Liturgical Theology: The Church as Worshiping Community* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 63.

¹³ Justin, *First Apology*, §67, in Cyril C. Richardson, ed., *Early Christian Fathers* (NY: MacMillan, 1970), 287.

¹⁴ Section 7, §52, in *Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol 7* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987 reprint), 421.

¹⁵ Ap VII & VIII 10 (*KW* 175, emphasis added).

Why is this important? Because Word and Sacrament equal Gospel. Melancthon pleaded with Emperor Charles V to understand that the Gospel, faith in Christ, is the heart of true worship:

We cannot condemn the voice of the Gospel.... What does denying that we obtain the forgiveness of sins by faith achieve other than to show contempt for the blood and death of Christ? Therefore we ask you, Charles, Most Invincible Emperor, to hear us out patiently and to consider carefully this most important matter, which involves the chief topic of the gospel, the true knowledge of Christ, and the true worship of God.¹⁶

We know how faith works. The Gospel alone engenders faith. And the Scriptures alone reveal the Gospel. Then what sort of public setting—what kind of “worship service”—will call forth, strengthen, and renew faith in Christ? It must be a service where His Word and, in particular, His Gospel is at work. So Paul urges: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God” (Col. 3:16).

“Faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the Word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). Neither a packed cathedral nor a packed “worship center” necessarily means there is true worship. It’s the Gospel—the Word of Christ, that has to be front and center in a gathering for worship so that people may believe, and, believing, will worship in spirit and in truth.

No true worship without true faith. No faith without Jesus. No Jesus without the Gospel that makes Him known. No Gospel without the scriptural Word and the Word-powered Sacraments that Christ has given us. Clearly, the heart of the Church’s regular worship assembly must be the Word of Christ in reading, preaching, song, and sacrament.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ap XII, 2-3 (*KW* 188, emphasis added).

¹⁷ Some qualification is in order. None of this denies that one can worship alone—giving true honor, praise, obeisance, to God. Nor does this deny that there can be true worship when a group of Christians gather to sing and

III. Pastoral Theology of Worship

Now ask yourself the Catechism's second favorite question: "How is this done?" How do we get the Gospel? We hear it! We hear it as it is read. We hear it as it is preached or taught or explained. We hear it while water is splashed, sprinkled, poured, and cascades over people in the Triune name. We hear it invite us to eat and drink more than eyes can see, or tongues can taste. That is how it is done! This is why the Confessions say that those are the things that mark the spot where the church is (AC VII).

Pastor is just another word for shepherd, so our pastoral theology must be learned from the Good Pastor, the Good Shepherd, Christ. We have to start where the Good Pastor/Shepherd starts and then follow in His way of pastoral care. In that regard, I want to suggest that we summarize His pastoral priorities in three principles: *the missional principle, the doctrinal principle, and the vernacular principle.*

A pastoral theology of worship must begin with *mission*. Where there is no flock, there can be no worship. The Good Shepherd spent His entire earthly ministry on a mission of gathering lost sheep to Himself. By faith in Him, worship began.

Together with His forerunner, John the Baptizer, Jesus calls us to faith with a call to Baptism (see John 3:22)! The good Shepherd sends His under-shepherds out on a mission of baptizing and teaching (Matthew 28:19) and as He pours out His Spirit at Pentecost what immediately follows is the Shepherd's voice coming through His apostles saying "Repent and be

pray and give praise, whether it's around a campfire or singing the daily office in a monastery. Where there is true faith, there will be true worship. But the question before us is what the *church* needs to offer in its *regular worship service* in order to instill and enhance the faith that worships in every place and setting.

baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).¹⁸

Worship begins with Baptism because there the new birth and faith itself begin. Lutheran theology is built on a baptismal foundation. Justification is kept clear of decision theology when it is connected to Baptism, where Christ calls us, washes us, rebirths us, and renews us utterly by grace, thus enabling genuine faith in His promises.

Baptism isn't magic, it's mission. It happens because our Shepherd seeks the lost to be baptized and believe, to grow in faith, and to come and worship. That was the mission He engaged in during His earthly sojourn and it is the same mission that He conducts through His under-shepherds and the priesthood of all believers.

The worship assembly can grow only as the Body of Christ shares the message of Christ. There is no worship without mission for the Chief Shepherd is on a mission of life and salvation. Moreover, it is the missional principle which prevents us from turning Christianity into a Sunday-morning-only affair. We leave Sunday worship to continue to serve God on His mission in the coming week. We go to our homes and to work and to play, on a mission, to live the life of faith—faith active in love—faith active in the daily worship of word and deed.

Second, because Christ *alone* is the Good Pastor there is also a *doctrinal principle* for worship. One incarnate Lord and one blessed Triune God, means one truth, and one church. A principle of liturgical theology is that the way you worship directly connects to the way you believe and the way you believe directly connects to the way you worship (*lex orandi, lex credendi*).

¹⁸ On the connection between Baptism and mission in the early church, see E. Glenn Hinson, *The Evangelization of the Roman Empire: Identity and Adaptability* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1981), 73-96, 213-222.

Luther objected to medieval Roman worship, but *not* because it was anchored in Word and Sacrament. He jealously guarded and enhanced that structure. He objected because it communicated false beliefs. The Roman Mass's prayers honored saints but demeaned Christ. It claimed to give a sacrifice to God rather than thankfully receiving the gift of Christ to us. But Luther also objected to Zwingli's doctrinal innovations regarding the Lord's Supper and their corrupting influence over the church's faith and worship.

We cannot divorce doctrine and worship. That, of course, is one of the main reasons that preaching is central to worship. But if preaching is to be rightly doctrinal, it has to be Christ-centered and biblical. The Reformation principles of Christ alone, grace alone, and faith alone all require an attention to Scripture alone—and that thoroughly connects us again to worship.

If Christ is to be our Guest and Host in worship, then we must let Him have His say. That means, first, reading the Bible aloud in worship. A disciplined, structured, carefully presented reading of Scripture is vital to worship in Jesus' name. He opened the whole Scriptures to the Emmaus disciples (Luke 24:32) and then reminded the whole assembly on Easter evening that the entire Old Testament speaks of Him (Luke 24:44). Provision for Bible reading that covers the whole of its rich diversity is not optional for worship. Although no one may insist that the lectionaries *must* be used, this obviously is an argument for them or their equivalent in our churches.

Doctrinal worship also requires scriptural preaching, which means carefully and prayerfully crafting sermons that are biblical, timely, and engaging. Preaching must be biblical—anchored in the truth of Scripture and therefore doctrinally sound, properly distinguishing law and Gospel—centered in Christ. Yet, good preaching also has to connect with the daily lives of

listeners, involving the realities of our world, and engaging hearers in the challenge and joy of the Gospel's impact in our lives. Good preaching is vital to good worship.

Ironically, current Evangelical worship style—despite a heritage of *sola Scriptura* and preaching that sometimes puts us to shame—now frequently includes only a single, often quite brief, Scripture reading. On the other hand, Roman Catholic worship has an extensive exposure to Holy Scripture through its lectionary, use of biblical canticles and psalmody, yet it continues to tend to give minimal attention to solid, scriptural preaching.¹⁹ One would hope that Lutheran churches could learn from both Evangelicals and Roman Catholics and would make it a priority *both* to provide the whole counsel of God by widespread and generous reading of Scripture in our services *and* by engaging, biblical preaching.

Not only Scripture reading and preaching, but also worship customs affect doctrine. Worship customs, while adiaphora, are not insignificant. Meaningful customs also communicate Christian truth. When worship practices focus on the Triune God, faith in the Trinity is nurtured. Churches which seldom commune lose their appreciation for the importance of Communion... and so forth. Clearly, worship and doctrine are always connected.

This is so because the One we worship came into our flesh not merely to display His divine power in miraculous deeds, but teaching and proclaiming truth to the world. The doctrinal principle, in the end, is simply about authenticity to the real Christ.

Thirdly, there is *the vernacular principle*.²⁰ As people, languages, customs, cultures, education, etc. all change, so must the outward forms of worship change, so that real people are

¹⁹I rather frequently visited a Roman Catholic church in NJ where my wife played the organ for many years. I don't think I ever heard a sermon of more than eight minutes or one that actually engaged either the Scriptures or the hearers. David S. Luecke observes the potential for making liturgy and preaching an either/or proposition in *Apostolic Style and Lutheran Substance: Ten Years of Controversy Over What Can Change* (Lima, OH: Fairway Press, 1999), 76-79.

²⁰See Lamin Sanneh, *The Gospel Beyond the West*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003).

able to believe and so worship. Remember Luther's insistence that reform of the church would require two specific tasks: vernacular Scriptures and vernacular liturgical forms. The Pentecost story should drive this home. When God the Holy Spirit miraculously enables Jews to speak to Parthians, Medes, and more in their own, native tongues (Acts 2), we should take note!

The church is required to use the vernacular, the common language of people. The vernacular principle requires that we communicate in a way that hearers can understand. This is Paul's "becoming all things to all people" (1 Cor. 9:22) and, no matter how badly that phrase can be misused, it is still God's own truth. If what I say and do as the leader of public worship makes no sense to those who are present, faith will not be nurtured in that setting.

Worship practices can and often *must* therefore change to suit the needs and tastes of Christian people. Melodies and songs may change. Dress may change. Decorations may change. Our confessions are clear about this and remind us that we dare not break our unity over such changing human customs:

For this is enough for the true unity of the Christian church that there the gospel is preached harmoniously according to a pure understanding and the sacraments are administered in conformity with the divine Word. It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that uniform ceremonies, instituted by human beings, be observed everywhere (AC VII, 2-3, KW 42).²¹

Luther put this into practice. He removed everything unbiblical from the Latin Mass of his day. Later he provided a German Mass, substituting new compositions for traditional liturgical components. And when the church of Württemberg, Germany consulted with him about the propriety of their simplified form of worship which was, structurally, closer to the services

²¹ In addition, see Melancthon's further comments: "These varied for good reasons according to the circumstances, sometimes in one way, and at other times in another. Likewise, some churches excommunicated others on account of such traditions as the observance of Easter, images, and similar things" (AAC VII/VIII, 32, KW 179-180). See also Article X of the *Formula of Concord*.

designed by Zwingli than those of Wittenberg, Luther told them that they were not required to structure their worship in Württemberg the way he and the people of Wittenberg did it.²²

Things therefore can and should change if what we are doing in public worship fails to communicate. This does not mean that a little mystery in a worship setting is a bad thing or, in my opinion, that historic western liturgical practices should be changed. But it does mean that what we do, whether “traditional” or “contemporary,” should be evaluated according to how effectively and faithfully it communicates the gifts and guidance of Christ.

Please note: this sword cuts two ways. Neither so-called traditional or contemporary approaches to worship automatically provide effective or faithful access to Christ and His gifts. Each pastor and congregation need to evaluate their worship according to this principle.

These pastoral principles may enable us to consider certain *pastoral realities*. We struggle because many theological and practical realities often seem to conflict with one another in the realm of public worship.

Let me start with the challenge of the mission of the church and a desire to enable growth. We recognize that the Great Commission is Christ’s command to all of us, and that no Lutheran can ignore it. Most of us long for our churches to grow numerically, as we see in Acts, and we recognize that worship will be a huge factor in growth. We want our services to attract people, not repel them. We want seekers to find solace and strength. We want people to come to Christ. But we also want to be faithful to the promises of Baptism, confirmation, and ordination. We want to be biblical and confessional. Hence, questions about worship “style and substance” or form and content continue.

²² Unpublished paper by Lucas Ogden in correspondence from Deaconess Irene Campbell, em., May 18, 2008. See also David S. Luecke, *The Other Story of Lutherans at Worship: Reclaiming Our Heritage of Diversity* (Tempe, AZ: Fellowship Ministries, 1995), 85-86.

In this context, we recognize the needs of the world around us, especially those just coming to faith. People need a service that makes sense, that lifts their hearts to the Lord, that includes singable songs and has words that they can follow. Consider two examples from my own ministry experience in New Jersey. “Anna’s” first language was Haitian Creole and, like our other Haitian members, she often had difficulty following songs or hymns—with one exception. Anna memorized and sang loudly the Kyrie, Sanctus, Agnus Dei and other standards of the liturgy. “Shann,” on the other hand, was a newly baptized young woman and the liturgy hard for her while she loved the simplicity of praise songs. Both Anna and Shann needed to be fed by the Good Shepherd, but their needs are different. Under-shepherd pastors and their congregations have to know the people of their communities and worship practices have to adapt to them.

You can’t please everyone, by any means (nor should you try), but if you’re consistently using music or worship practices that too many people do not appreciate, you’ve put a roadblock in the way of worship. Sinner-saints are the only people who attend our churches. You can teach and guide and develop growing appreciation for things they don’t know or don’t like, but you cannot run roughshod over their tastes or the customs they find comfortable.

Then there’s another issue for many churches: the capabilities of musicians and pastors. It’s one thing to have instruments, its another to use them well. Staying within the limits of the musicians available is a critical issue for pastors and worship leaders. It means letting go of a lot of idealism and holding on to what can be done well, no matter how simply. And it’s not only the musicians who have limited capabilities, most of us pastors have minimal training in liturgical theology and worship practice. At a round table discussion with STL faculty last summer, faculty members commented that there was minimal attention to the theology and practices of

worship in the curriculum. Pastors often face worship questions without a clear theological perspective or much knowledge of the ways they might practically address worship needs.²³

Christian worship wants Christ to be heard (John 10:27). Those who believe respond, because faith cannot be silent. Faith confesses—that is, it acknowledges the truth both of our unworthiness and of the grandeur of the Holy Trinity. Faith confesses both individually and corporately. Both the “I” and “we” of faith need expression, so that worship practice provides time for personal and individual confessions of sin and faith, and also for the corporate confessions. It is especially important for the Creeds—which not only include a given congregation, but also the whole church of every era—to be confessed.

We also sing and make music (Psalm 101:1) in the presence of Christ. We praise the Holy Trinity and we petition God’s help according to our own needs and on behalf of others. Variety of customs for prayer and song is both a theological matter and a cultural one. To worship, for example, in India or China or Africa is to discover that even where a liturgical framework remains constant, styles and practices of song and prayer are completely reflective of customs that enable people to respond with deep gratitude and genuine expression. Such differences are *theologically* necessary, for insincere prayer and praise is no better than pagan babble (Matthew 6:7). We should not be either surprised or divided by the fact that our churches in the US, with their great diversity of settings and backgrounds, would also practice significantly different ways of prayer and praise.

It is in the area of what we are here calling the “pastoral” dimension of the theology of worship that I want to recognize the validity of those LCMS brothers and sisters who have sought to gain worship insights from Evangelicalism. They have done so in order to let the voice

²³ With respect to that, let me say just in passing that both the Council of Presidents’ “Theses on Worship” and a little book by James Waddell are both helpful. See <http://www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/Worship/Theses%20on%20Worship.pdf> and *A Simplified Guide to Worshiping as Lutherans* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009).

of the Good Shepherd be heard. They have, rightly, recognized the need for a “service of the Word” which is responsive to the needs and desires of our present-day people, culture, and communities. *While we may not agree with all of the practices which result, we should not fault either the concern or the effort.*

IV. Toward a theology of worship that is... Sacramental

A Lutheran theology of worship also has to be sacramental, and that starts with Baptism. Holy Baptism connects most directly to the Word of God, as I have already noted. In the missional Word, Jesus the Good Pastor makes us His disciples through Baptism and teaching. He calls us to know His truth—to observe all that He has commanded (Matthew 28:20), to hold fast to the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27), and daily to die to sin and rise to new life (Romans 6:1-4). Therefore all our sacramentology begins with Baptism.

In this context, however, I want to emphasize the Sacrament of the Altar. It was during the breaking of bread that the Emmaus disciples knew the Lord Jesus. That is to say, as Jesus and the two disciples sat at meal, the meal they shared was sacramental, a Lord’s Supper. I say that because Jesus’ bodily presence was made known in the breaking of the bread.

It should not surprise us, then, that the central tradition (or, persisting pattern) of Christian worship, from the beginning, is not only intent upon hearing the chief Shepherd’s voice in reading and preaching, but is also intent to share in His Supper. That one or the other—either the service of the Word or the service of the Supper—has been emphasized above the other at various times and places is part of the pendulum swing of church history. But the neglect of either the preaching of Christ or His Holy Supper is a mark of great danger for the church.

For that reason, we can be grateful for the Lutheran way of Word and Sacrament. Despite the medieval neglect of preaching and Rome’s corrupt understanding of the Sacrament of the

Altar, Lutheran Reformers did not react by minimizing the importance of the Lord's Supper. They restored the Scriptures to their place and reinvigorated preaching with the Gospel. Luther and Melancthon emphasized the Scriptures and preaching, but also tenaciously continued to uphold the importance of Holy Communion. Remember these words?

Our people have been unjustly accused of having abolished the Mass (i.e., Communion). But it is obvious, without boasting, that the Mass is celebrated among us with greater devotion and earnestness than among our opponents. The people are instructed more regularly and with the greatest diligence concerning the holy sacrament.... In this way, the people are drawn to Communion and to the Mass.²⁴

Please note: Lutheran insistence upon the Lord's Supper is not primarily for the sake of retaining a correct doctrinal formula. The correct doctrine of the Supper is vital, but it is not for the sake of dogmatics alone. It is so that people will be "drawn to Communion!"

Our theology of worship must be sacramental because Christ is sacramental. Christ is the incarnate, flesh and blood God-with-us. He gives His body and blood. Christ bids us to eat and drink. Christ tells that whatever else we may do to remember Him, nothing is more important than eating His body and drinking His blood, simply believing His promises. Therefore a Lutheran theology of worship must be sacramental, focused on the Sacrament of the Altar, because there Jesus feeds us. We take and eat His very body. We take and drink His very blood. A couple of years ago I was privileged to preach to a packed congregation of about 300 in Kollegal, India and then to assist the pastor at the Altar. In India all receive from the chalice, but their lips do not touch the cup. As the people kneel, they throw back their heads with eyes closed and mouths open and the pastor pours from the chalice the blood of Christ into their open

²⁴AC XXIV, 1,7.

mouths. Their devoted communion brought to mind Jesus' Word about the Father feeding little birds in the nest.

As His Father feeds the little birds, so the Son feeds His flock. The One we invite to be our Guest longs to be our Host at His Table—to be Priest and Victim. He longs to give His Body and Blood, forgiving the very sins we have come to see anew as He has opened our hearts to understand the Scriptures. He longs to feed us with the fruit borne by the tree of the Cross.

Our theology is also sacramental in order to be truly eucharistic. The Lord's Supper is pure gift, given without demand. To the hungry comes His "Take eat" and to the thirsty His, "Take drink." "Given and shed for you." Only one response is in order after that: you say Thank you!. You give thanks, which is all eucharist means. We give thanks because the gift is nothing less than *forgiveness*—remission of sins for which we can never atone—remission freely given. We give thanks because we have nothing else to give but gratitude.²⁵

Where faith has genuinely received such gracious gifts, it cannot help but be eucharistic—that is, thankful to God. Such eucharist/thanksgiving, will show up in worship, but *also in daily life*—an attitude of gratitude revealed in how we live with those around us.

Finally, our theology of worship includes the Lord's Supper in order to be communal. It is easy for the service of the Word to be quite individualistic and cerebral. I listen and consider the readings and sermon and look for application in my life. Sometimes I engage in little more than mental jousting against the preacher to fend off his ideas, good or bad. Sometimes I listen with a critical ear, sometimes with a hungry heart, but always quite individually. Such is the focus in the service of the Word. And that is all well and good. But it is not enough

²⁵Note, "God wants to be worshiped through faith so that we receive from Him those things He promises and offers" Ap IV 49.

Things change when the chief Pastor/Shepherd gathers His disciples and invites *us* to His Table, along the way *teaching us to pray in plural to our Father* to give *us* our daily bread, to forgive *us* our trespasses, and to lead *us* not into temptation, but to deliver *us* from evil. Then we come together to His table. We eat from His bread and drink from His cup—and we who are so different and disparate, well, *we* are one bread and even one body!

Earlier I noted that I believe it is good that we are trying to learn some things from Evangelicals about the service of the Word. I believe the opposite is true, however, in terms of the sacramental side of the theology of worship. What seems obvious to me is that Evangelical practices regarding the Lord's Supper are inherently weak, because the theology of the Lord's Supper in Evangelical circles is simply empty.

Maybe it takes a Pentecostal to remind us of this. Simon Chan, a Pentecostal theologian who has written a wonderfully thought-provoking book on “liturgical worship,” can say without qualification, “the church becomes the one body of Christ by *eating and drinking the body and blood of Christ.*”²⁶ Amen, brother Chan! There, at the altar, we don't just take Communion, we become a communion. In Communion we come out of our individual isolation and participate with the communion of saints, singing with all God's saints and even the angels of heaven. “Do this!” says Jesus. So there can be no real theology of worship that is not sacramental, eucharistic, and communal—and, of course, thereby also Pastoral.

We will not learn good sacramental theology or practice from Evangelicals. Evangelical teaching and practice regarding the Lord's Supper is hollow. Lacking in the substance of the Sacrament—the faith that Christ gives us His body to eat and His blood to drink—it is left with nothing but an outward shell. Evangelical theology promises a bread and a cup filled with

²⁶ Chan, 29, my emphasis, also 64-70. See also his *Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998), 109-112. See also Schmit, 70-72.

nothing but carbohydrates—empty of Christ! Evangelical practice can only lead us away from the Sacrament. Without the Lord’s Supper our services are handicapped and our people are left with words alone when Christ’s Word invites them to have more than words. Without a proper attention to the Word and Sacraments, we lose something central to Lutheran identity and the Christian faith.

I believe there is a *vocation*—a special calling—for the Lutheran church today, and, specifically, for our Synod. It is to be a church that is both emphatically evangelical and catholic. No Evangelical group in the world holds a higher understanding of Holy Scripture than we do, acknowledging its full inspiration and inerrancy. Our church body has repeatedly emphasized both firm biblical doctrine and the necessity and validity of vigorous evangelism and mission. We have held fast to the Gospel—to the good news of forgiveness, life, and salvation purely by faith in Jesus Christ our Savior. These are strong and healthy evangelical traits!

But we are more. We are a church body which has insisted on retaining the Sacraments of Christ. We hold fast the promise that discipleship begins with Holy Baptism. We have not neglected the assurances of baptismal regeneration or of the peculiar power of the Keys, by which sin is forgiven. We have continued to confess the ecumenical creeds and the classical formulations of the early church regarding the Trinity and the two natures of Christ. And, apart from all the rest of Protestantism, we have retained the belief that Christ is truly and substantially present in His body and blood in the Holy Supper. These are strong and healthy catholic traits!

And no one else in all of Christendom holds them all together at the same time. It is vital that a Lutheran witness, which holds these evangelical *and* catholic traits together in one confession not only speak such a confession in our theology, but also live it in our worship. Ironically, while many Lutherans have been looking toward Evangelicalism to get pointers in

how best to worship, many Evangelicals have been trying to restore sacramental worship in their churches. Other Lutherans have been looking toward Rome learn how to worship, all the while Rome is trying to learn how to preach. We could be the church tradition that holds these two worship emphases together, in the creative tension and balance that best feeds genuine faith and inspires true spiritual worship. But that can happen only as we reclaim and hold fast to the Lutheran tradition of both pastoral and sacramental worship!

Such worship that is word *and* action—pastoral and sacramental—is from Christ. He intends to produce worship which does not stop with words on Sundays, but continues, by virtue of His sacramental action, to promote the daily worship of our lives (Romans 12:1). Worship in Baptism, Word, and Supper doesn't mean that Lutherans will be completely traditional in practice. Nor does it mean that Lutheran will be purely Evangelical in "style." Lutheran worship will be both pastoral *and* sacramental. *Both/together; not "either/or"*—that is Lutheran worship! It is the kind of worship Luther spoke about: "And whatsoever is done at such a gathering of the congregation or church is pure and holy and divine—a holy Sabbath whereby God is worshipped in holiness and people are nurtured by Him."²⁷

²⁷Sermon from 1544 (WA 49:593f.) quoted in *Day By Day We Magnify Thee*, [Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1982], 375. (Courtesy of Deaconess Irene Campbell.)