

## O COME LET US WORSHIP OUR GOD

Today we address a topic that has divided denominations, split congregations, and left laity and clergy shaking fists and hurling insults at each other. While blood has yet to be shed, enough has been said to fill many volumes of books. This topic has left people denying the faith and salvation of anyone who dares to disagree with them. What am I talking about? Worship! Worship forms, liturgies, and music. Worship battles are anything but praising the LORD!

Our Gospel lesson for today is John 4:1-30. Usually when one hears a sermon on John 4, it is either about Jesus offering living water to the woman at the well, or on four steps of evangelism that Jesus so easily executed. But worship? Yes, worship! Lutherans are not the only ones who have been divided over the subject of worship. The ancient Jews and Samaritans were very much divided on the topic of worship, too. The Samaritan woman recognized that Jesus was a prophet when he told her that she had been married five times and was now living with a man to whom she was not married. She responded asking Jesus a question about worship. No, she was not trying to change the topic or distract Jesus. Rather she felt the weight of the guilt for her sins. She desired to find true and full forgiveness. In essence she asked, “Where can I find forgiveness for my sins: on Mt. Gerizim, or at the temple in Jerusalem?”

While all the prophets were associated with the temple on Mt. Moriah in Jerusalem, where the Jews worshiped God, the Samaritans worshiped God on Mt. Gerizim. The Samaritans were “half-blooded” Jews. They accepted only the five books of Moses as God’s Word. What really divided the Jews and Samaritans was the argument, “Which location is the legitimate place to worship God?” Notice that Jesus does not get drawn into the argument that “my way, my place, is better than your way or your place!” Where one worships God is not the important issue. True worship is not determined by the place, but true worship is worship done in spirit and truth!

King Solomon once wrote, “**There is nothing new under the sun.**” So it should not really surprise us that sinful minds still argue about worship today. And the topic that divides our Synod and other denominations today is one of “worship style” – traditional or contemporary; liturgical or praise;

the organ or a band. To add to the insanity of it all, each “side” tends to be arrogant in its claim, “Our way is right and your way is wrong!” Oh, the things we do in the name of God!

Lutherans, out of all Christians, should know that such arguments show a lack of understanding of what is the true church. In the Augsburg Confession, Article VII, which identifies the true Church, we read, “*For the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions or rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be alike everywhere.*” In the Epitome of the Formula of Concord, in Article X which deals with Church Usages and Adiaphora (things neither commanded nor forbidden by God’s Word), we read, “*We believe, teach, and confess that the community of God in every locality and every age has authority to change such ceremonies according to circumstances, as it may be most profitable and edifying to the community of God. But in this matter all frivolity and offenses are to be avoided...*”

Now I must confess, I have seen both contemporary services and traditional liturgical services, and both that did little to edify! I nearly died of boredom in some liturgical services because they were not done with excellence and joy. And I have regrettably attended some contemporary services that were a total disconnect without reason or decency. When it comes to worship there are three things that many people do not understand. **First**, worship is NOT entertainment. It is work and participatory in nature. **Second**, in worship, God comes to us with His blessings and we respond with thanksgiving and obedience: God acts, we react. Worship is not about us: it’s about God and His love for us in Jesus Christ! And **third**, worship is to be uplifting. Just read the Psalms! Knowing God loves and forgives you should make you feel better leaving than when coming to worship. I mean, should you feel worse after worship? People have different tastes, likes, and styles, and that’s alright. That does not mean ours is right and all others are wrong. You can have a preference for a worship style. I have my preference of worship. And it would probably shock you! Whatever style we do as a congregation, whether it is our favorite or not, we must strive to do our very best because we’re doing it for the LORD who in His love for us gave His best in sending Jesus to die for our sins. In worship I strive to be like St. Paul, and try to be “**all things to all people in order that I might save some!**”

Looking back at his conversation with the woman at the well, Jesus said that neither location nor, by inference, style makes true worship. Rather as Jesus said, **“The time is coming and has now come when he true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.”** Note the “s” in spirit is lower case. It refers to the spirit of the worshiper, not the Holy Spirit. True worship centers on the worshiper’s spirit, which is moved by the Holy Spirit. One can put his soul into worship and it could still be false, self-centered, and hypocritical. It could even be idolatrous. It must be coupled with truth. This truth is God’s revealed truth, brought to us through the work of the Holy Spirit. This truth is always and only associated with Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Thus, if sincere contact with God is to be made in worship, if worship is to be genuine, then the worshiper’s spirit and God’s truth must be joined together.

The great Lutheran theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, R.C.H. Lenski noted, *“Without spirit worship becomes formalism, mere ritual, and observance; without truth worship becomes an abomination to the LORD.”*

Our Lutheran communion service follows the historical, Christian communion service that in part dates back to the early church. When it is done properly it is anything but formalism or ritualistic. It contains eight parts or actions that take place in which God acts or speaks, and we react and respond. Understand that the parts can be spoken, chanted, or even sung as hymns. These eight parts flow very logically and are arranged to prepare us to rightly hear the Gospel’s proclamation and receive the Sacrament.

The first part is called the PREPARATION. When we come to worship God we have a problem: our sin! God is holy and stays apart from sin. If God is to come into our presence in worship, we must repent of our sins and receive His forgiveness. So we make confession and hear the announcement of forgiveness. Only when we are forgiven our sins can we enter God’s presence.

Forgiven, we now enter the presence of God in the second part, the ENTRANCE. This section may include a psalm and usually has a song or hymn of praise, expressing the joy of being forgiven and with God. Either a hymn, the Glory in the Highest, or the Feast of Victory conveys the message of praise. It often concludes with a prayer that summarizes or collects the thoughts of the theme for the day.

Once in the presence of God, we now listen as God speaks to us in the third act of worship. This is called the WORD. It includes the readings of the Scriptures, the Creed, and the sermon which is the proclamation of the Gospel. **It is the proclamation of the Gospel that marks the first of two high points in worship.** Luther, in explaining the meaning of the Third Commandment, tells us to “gladly hear and learn the Word of God!” I pray that when you hear a sermon, you will learn something new about God’s love or will for you. When I read the Gospel, where do I do it? Wonder why? In the historical Christian communion service, the Gospel was read in the middle of the sanctuary to symbolize Jesus coming into our midst with His Gospel. We stand for the Gospel out of reverence for Jesus who comes to us in His very words.

Having received direction from God in His Word and the message of His love in the Gospel, we respond by giving thanks. This is the fourth part of the service: the THANKSGIVING. This includes the offering and the prayers of the church. (Tongue in cheek: *When I dated my wife, she was a Methodist. Going to worship with her I noticed that the offering was **before** the sermon. When she worshiped with me at Memorial Lutheran Church, she noticed the offering was **after** the sermon. When she asked why, I replied, “That way we will know, based on how good the sermon was, how much to put into the plate!”)*)

Now we prepare for the second high point of the service: the reception of the body and blood of Jesus in the LORD’S Supper. We now enter the fifth part of the communion service, the PREPARATION FOR THE SACRAMENT. This may include the Preface, the Proper Preface, and the Lamb of God, or *Agnus Dei*. It always includes the Words of Institution, the very words that our LORD Jesus spoke on the night He instituted the Sacrament.

The sixth part, the SACRAMENT OF HOLY COMMUNION is the **second high point of the service**. Here we receive the true body and blood of our LORD in, with, and under the bread and the wine. Here our LORD Jesus gives us the blessings of His forgiveness of all our sins, strength to live our faith in our daily lives, and the promise of eternal life. Often hymns are sung during the distribution.

The SACRAMENT OF HOLY COMMUNION is followed by our giving thanks to God for His wonderful and gracious communion blessings. This

part is called the THANKSGIVING FOR THE SACRAMENT. We respond to God's gifts with a song and a prayer of thanksgiving.

Now we come to the final part of worship, the DISMISSAL. If one think this means he is dismissed from the LORD, he is wrong. The word "*dismissal*" comes from the Latin "*to send.*" We are now sent out by God to share His Word and His grace with others through our words and good deeds.

This is a brief summary of the historical Christian worship service. While in our Gospel freedom we are free to worship anyway that is "**decent and in good order**" this is the way Lutherans usually worship. Yet this is not a divine law, and even Luther, in his German Mass, or communion service, did not include all eight parts in this order. Check it out our next communion service as see if you can find the eight parts.

Let's not let the devil destroy our worship through arrogance, false perceptions, or self-righteous hypocrisy. Worship is not to be judgmental of others nor an attitude of "it's my way or the highway!" Remember, true worship does not depend on the location or the style or form. True worship is in spirit and truth. Worship is a time for us to hear and receive God's love, forgiveness, directions, corrections, and reassurance. Worship is a time for us to receive, respond, encourage each other, and praise, thank, and celebrate the love of God in Christ Jesus His Son.

Worship is a wonderful gift of our LORD. Let us join with the Psalmist who wrote both, "**Come, let us make a joyful noise unto the LORD!**" and "**I rejoiced when they said unto me let us go into the house of the LORD**" (to worship.) Let us worship our God in spirit and in truth! In Jesus name, Amen.