



What About . . .

Lutheran Worship

Why does our Lord gather us for worship?

The most precious gifts and treasures our Lord gives us are His forgiveness, life and salvation. Through His innocent life and bitter sufferings and death, Christ has purchased and won us from sin, death and the devil. Through Jesus Christ, all the sins of the world were paid for and the wrath of God was appeased. Christ has reconciled the whole world to God.

Jesus Christ serves us again and again as His Gospel is proclaimed, as His people are baptized and as His Word is read. He serves us as His forgiveness is pronounced and penitents absolved. He serves us as He gives us His body and blood under the bread and wine to eat and to drink. This is how our Lord gives us forgiveness, life, and salvation. What a blessing it is to be called and gathered for worship by our good and gracious God!

What is at the heart and center of Lutheran worship?

Lutheran worship puts the focus squarely on Jesus Christ, who is present for us and with us through His Word and Sacraments. Lutheran worship is, therefore, Christ-centered, not man-centered. When we are gathered for worship, we are not contemplating some far-off Christ or meditating on abstract concepts, or pondering various principles for living. Neither are we in church to be amused or entertained. Christ is living and active among us, right where He has promised to be in His Word and Sacraments. Jesus said, “Lo, I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). When He gathers us around His Word and Sacraments, He fulfills this promise to us once again.

What is the basic pattern or “rhythm” of Lutheran worship?

Here is how our hymnal *Lutheran Worship* describes it: Our Lord speaks and we listen. His Word bestows what it says. Faith that is born from what is heard acknowledges the gifts received with eager thankfulness and praise. . . . Saying back to Him what He has said to us, we repeat what is most true and sure. . . . The rhythm of our worship is from Him to us, and then from us back to Him. He gives His gifts, and together we receive and extol them. We build one another up as we speak to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.

What does “Divine Service” mean?

Historically, the phrase used to describe Lutheran worship is Divine Service. This helps us understand the rhythm of worship—that it is first and foremost God serving us with His gifts, and then our service to Almighty God in thanksgiving and praise for all He has done. This rhythm of God giving His gifts and our giving Him thanks is conveyed aptly in the term, Divine Service.

The Divine Service is a “holy” time, meaning a time “set apart.” It is a time to be set apart from the workaday world—a time to spend with our Lord. Indeed, in the Divine Service we are gathered together in the presence of the holy, almighty, ever-living God, and thus we are part of a time of “heaven on earth,” as our Lord forgives our sins and gives us new life today, and eternal salvation with Him forever. This understanding of the Divine Service explains why many who experience Lutheran worship for the first time describe it as dignified, reverent and sacred.

What does Lutheran worship look and sound like?

Lutherans use orders of service common throughout the history of the Western church. The two main parts of the Divine Service are (1) the proclamation of the Word of God, and (2) the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. Other orders of service used in the Lutheran church feature a more extended service of the Word as well as times of prayer, such as the services of Matins and Vespers, Morning and Evening Prayer, Compline, and the Litany.

In Lutheran services, pastors and congregations sing or speak the liturgy back and forth or together. Congregational singing of hymns has always been a hallmark of Lutheran worship. The best of musical traditions, both ancient and modern, are embraced by the Lutheran church in its worship, with an emphasis on congregational singing, reinforced by the choir.

Our pastors wear special clothing called vestments. These garments cover the individuality of the man and emphasize the sacred duties of the office he has been given to carry out. Throughout the course of the church year, an appointed order of readings and prayers helps the congregation focus on the major events in the life of Christ and how those events affect us today. Preaching, usually based on the appointed lessons, is a hallmark of Lutheran worship, distinguished by a clear presentation of God’s Law and Gospel.

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Lutherans may stand, bow or kneel at various points in the service to express reverence and devotion to the almighty Triune God. Pastors make the sign of the cross over the people, and the people may sign themselves with the cross at various times as well.

Lutheranism has continued to make use of beautiful ecclesiastical art such as statues of Jesus, the apostles, and other important figures in the Bible or church history. You will find in many Lutheran churches altars, candles, paintings, statues, crucifixes, symbols, stained-glass windows, processional crosses, banners, and other forms of art and decoration. All of these lend beauty, dignity and reverence to the service. They help us to focus our attention on Christ and His gifts. Some Lutheran churches are elaborately decorated and richly ornamented. Others are more plainly adorned. We make no fixed rules about such things. We rejoice in our Christian freedom to use all manner of reverent artwork and decoration to glorify and praise God.

How does Lutheran worship reflect Lutheran theology?

How a church conducts its worship is a reflection of what it believes, teaches and confesses. It is difficult, therefore, to retain the substance of Lutheran theology while at the same time embracing non-Lutheran styles of worship. It is important to remember that Martin Luther sought to reform—not to reinvent—the church and its worship. Luther knew that the Gospel was the heart and center of the Divine Service. He changed only what contradicted or diminished the Gospel. Luther never did away with faithful, Gospel-centered and historic worship practices and ceremonies of the church.

Why are common orders of service in our Synod such a blessing?

There are two extremes to be avoided in answering this question. The one extreme would be the view that every congregation can do whatever it wishes, however it wishes, without any regard for the other congregations of our confessional fellowship. The opposite extreme would be the view that everyone in the church must do precisely the same thing every Sunday, without any deviation, variety, change or difference. Neither of these extremes is appropriate or acceptable, and certainly not Lutheran.

Our Synod has always been concerned that—for the good of the church—uniformity in liturgical practices be maintained so that we confess our distinct, unique Lutheran faith boldly in a country where our church is surrounded by so many non-Lutheran churches. Uniformity in doctrine is reflected in uniformity in practice. Our Synod's first president, Dr. C. F. W. Walther, had this to say about the value of uniformity in worship practices:

We are not insisting that there be uniformity in perception or feeling or taste among all believing Christians—neither dare anyone demand that all be minded as he. Nevertheless, it remains true that the Lutheran liturgy distinguishes Lutheran worship from the worship of other churches to such an extent that the houses of worship of the latter look like lecture halls in which the hearers are merely addressed or instructed, while our churches are in truth houses of prayer in which Christians serve the great God publicly before the world. Someone may ask, “What would be the use of uniformity of ceremonies?” We answer, “What is the use of a flag on the battlefield? Even though a soldier cannot defeat the enemy with it, he nevertheless sees by the flag where he belongs.” We ought not to refuse to walk in the footsteps of our fathers.

But isn't Lutheran worship German?

Sometimes we hear people conclude that because the Lutheran Reformation began in Germany, Lutheran worship must, therefore, be German. This is a very common misunderstanding. The fact of the matter is that Lutheran worship throughout history has included hymns, canticles and orders of service that find their origins in the early Christian worship of the Near East and even further back to the worship of the Jewish synagogue as it developed from ancient Jewish temple worship. Thus, Lutheran worship is rooted in thousands of years of tradition and reflects the contributions of many ethnic groups: African, Asian, Middle-Eastern, Spanish, Greek, Italian, French, German, and American as well. It is definitely not the case that Lutheran worship is German.

Conclusion

As we find ourselves being gathered by our Lord for worship at the dawn of this new millennium, we realize that we join our song with angels, archangels and all the company of heaven from millennia past who are gathered before the Lamb upon His throne and worship Him both day and night. As our Lord gathers us for worship Sunday after Sunday, we join the entire company of heaven in praising our good and gracious God. The saints on earth and the saints in heaven praise Him who is the beginning and the end, the first and the last, the Alpha and Omega, even our Lord Jesus Christ, who with the Father and the Holy Spirit reigns as one God, world without end.

“To Him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” (Rev. 5:13).

— Dr. A. L. Barry
President

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