

THE ROAD WHERE FAITH IS FOUND

THE HOLY MEAL THAT YOU COMMAND

EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN WORSHIP • 467

RECLAIMING OUR BIRTHRIGHT:
PICKING UP WHERE WE LEFT OFF IN 2002



In 2002, the ELCIC's Program Committee for Worship invited a number of bishops, pastors and teachers to write a series of pastoral letters under the title "Reclaiming Our Birthright: Pastoral Letters on the Every-Sunday Celebration of Holy Communion." Introduced by Bishop Raymond Schultz, the letters had a two-fold thrust: They were designed to assist pastors and congregational leaders in their reflection and teaching on the matter of every-Sunday Holy Communion and to help the people of God to faithfully and deliberately reclaim their baptismal birthright. The essays are available on the ELCIC + Worship Matters page at Lift Up Your Hearts www.worship.ca.

Pastor Paul F. Bosch writes...

Only the Church prays. In our society, there are other institutions that counsel people in distress: psychiatric services, counseling centres. There are other institutions — our courts, our agencies of law and governance — devoted to social justice and to the welfare of the poor or disadvantaged. There are still other institutions in our society — our civic bureaucracies, presumably our politics — that devote themselves to changing that society, making it more humane. But it's only our institutions of religion — for our purposes here, the Christian Church — whose major mandate it is to gather to pray.

This is not to suggest that any of the other functions listed above are unworthy, or even necessarily beyond the concern of the Church. Yet it is worship alone that is unique to the Church's mission as Church. Holy Communion is the corporate expression of the Church's public witness. It is The Meal That You Command. See the marvelous new hymn in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, 467, stanza three.

Worship matters. You could take those two words as qualifier and noun. But I prefer to understand them here as a complete sentence, noun and verb. Out of all the competing and worthy mandates for our existence as Church, what matters among us is... worship. So Holy Communion belongs among us as Standard Operating Procedure, each and every Sunday morning, for reasons advanced in an earlier *Worship Matters* essay entitled *In the Beginning*. (See the 2002 *Birthright*

series of *Worship Matters* essays mentioned above.) Does your parish offer another form of worship on Sundays than Eucharist? Then you have some homework to do. (*Augsburg Confession*, Article 24.)

The rite for Holy Communion in our new *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* is splendid. You'll find it faithful to previous versions of this rite, in *Lutheran Book of Worship*, and *Service Book and Hymnal*, and even beyond, into our storied past. At the same time, you'll find it congruent with the forms for Lord's Supper in the worship traditions of other Christian churches. It's faithfully Lutheran and at the same time thoroughly ecumenical.

One of its distinctively Lutheran aspects is its designation. We call it Holy Communion. Not Eucharist. Not Mass. Not Lord's Supper. Not Divine Service. Among us it's Holy Communion. We do well to honour that designation, and use it exclusively in parish print materials. Each of these other designations is perfectly acceptable in other contexts. But there are some very persuasive theological and practical reasons for our "Lutheran" choice. It's the best of them all.

Because worship is so characteristic of the mission of the Church, what we do in worship will necessarily define who we believe ourselves to be. We cannot avoid showcasing our theology-of-Church — our ecclesiology — in what we do on Sunday morning. I write these paragraphs to examine and extend that conviction.

Let's examine, then, some principles basic to our ecclesiology and basic also, therefore, to our understanding and conduct of worship. If worship is our chief mandate as Church, what are some implications of that mission, that mandate? I'll suggest that, for us, Holy Communion is A) Participatory, B) Egalitarian, C) Corporate, D) Inclusive, E) Authentic, and F) Gospel-centered.

A) Holy Communion is Participatory, not presentational. In preaching and in prayer, Holy Communion assumes faith. Corporate prayer and preaching in the context of Eucharist is always from faith to faith. The worship leaders, the preacher each Sunday, will assume there's faith in those they're addressing, faith in those whose prayers they're leading. Evangelism and "evangelistic" witness belongs, Monday through Saturday, in the workplace, in the streets, in the home. But on Sunday the community gathers for faith to be edified, for those foundations of faith to be built up. (*1 Corinthians* 14:26.)

Yet also at the same time, we'll assume there's at least a measure there of un-faith, doubt, despair. And not only "out there" in the assembly, but also in here, in the preacher's own breast, in the pastor's own heart! The task of worship is to build: To edify, that is, to build up, whatever faith believers bring to the worshipping assembly — including the sometimes-feeble faith of the believer who happens to be the preacher today, or the worship leader!

But worship won't be a performance. It won't be presentational, in the sense of leaders and preachers presenting something to an assembly that they themselves do not already possess. Worshipers themselves constitute the most important "actors" in this drama. Worship leaders are simply prompters to the people's prayers, the cheerleaders to the team on the field. Worship is meant to be unmistakably participatory. When you enter a church building as worshipper, you should feel invited "on stage."

B) Egalitarian, not hierarchical. Once again, our buildings so often betray us. A hierarchical view of the Church is a constant temptation in nave-and-chancel buildings. Up there in the chancel with God are the really holy people, the really holy stuff, the really holy action. Down here in the nave are the rest of us, the unwashed peasants. You can preach about the Priesthood of All Believers until you're blue in the face: Your building always argues against you. It fairly hollers "Hierarchy!" It's part of the preacher's job to argue against that sectarianism. To remind worshippers that Christian worship is meant to be egalitarian. (*1 Corinthians* 12:12-27.)

So, there's a long tradition of *mystagogic* preaching in Christian history. That's preaching that explains

and interprets worship to worshippers, why we do what we do in worship. It's especially appropriate during the Easter season. Would it be prudent for each parish to plan a deliberate program of *mystagogic* preaching, especially during the seven weeks of Easter, but perhaps at other times as well?

C) Corporate and communal, not individualistic. This issue is a thorny one. We have yet to learn, most of us, the very specific constraints and expectations of corporate worship, and how corporate prayer differs from private personal prayer. (*1 Corinthians* 14:6-16.)

In many worshipping assemblies, for example, during the reading of Scripture you can observe worshippers reading lections silently in their seats, while a Lector reads them aloud publically. Besides being simply and appallingly impolite — an offense to the hard-working Lector — does this not betray an individualistic understanding of worship? (I'd remove all pew Bibles, in the Church of my fantasies. Or I'd encourage the aurally challenged to arrive at worship early enough to read the lections privately before worship begins.)

Another example: The choir, in too many parishes, has all the fun singing, while the people themselves remain passive spectators. In truly corporate worship, the assembly's chief and indispensable "choir" will always be the people themselves. This is not to deny an active role in worship for voices more trained or experienced. But the people themselves, in the assembly itself, ought to be let in on the fun. In our society today, group singing is a distinctly counter-cultural experience. Can't we rightly expect of a congregation some hymn alternation? Some coaching in part singing? A canon? A round? Even some *parallel organum* on a plainsong melody, like *Veni Emmanuel*?

Still another example: I've noticed it too often. Presiding Minister and Assisting Minister (or Acolyte) standing side by side at the singing of a hymn, each clutching a separate hymnal. And each fumbling separately for the correct page when the next hymn is called. Would it be too much to expect to see worship leaders actually serving each other? Actually sharing a single hymnbook? Actually prepared with the right page when the other returns from being busy elsewhere? Then we might even notice worship leaders modeling what they preach: Christian service. Are worship leaders who neglect or refuse this simple courtesy guilty of compromising also their own profession of faith?

D) Inclusive and catholic, not exclusive. This is another difficult goal to achieve. The Church I cherish is made up of rich and poor, young and old, black and white, left wing and right wing, gay and straight, "Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female". (*Galatians* 3:26-28.) Anything less than that kind of diversity is simply not a Christian Church. If these disparate populations are not actually present in your parish from week to week, you'll have to invent them. To pretend they're there in front of you, in all their differences. Preaching and worship leadership in such a polyglot setting can be a nightmare. But who said the pastor's job was supposed to be easy?

Example: In the assemblies of many congregations, worshippers are expected to read aloud long paragraphs of printed texts: prayers, psalms, litanies, liturgical responses, responsive readings. Do these expectations subvert the Church's catholicity? The Church of my fantasies includes the blind, the illiterate, the aged with poor eyesight, little children who have not yet learned to read. Do our expectations about corporate reading in worship signal exclusivity? "This Church is only for middle-class, literate, sighted adults. All others need not apply."

Again: Should not all Church buildings be wheelchair-accessible? Are we subverting our ecclesiology when we expect aged worshippers to climb steps into an elevated chancel to receive Bread and Cup at the Communion? When we expect the aged or infirm to kneel for Communion? (I'd abolish kneeling altogether, in the Church of my fantasies! The Creator I know in Christ takes no pleasure in watching a beloved Creation grovel.)

E) Authentic, real, and beautiful. You often hear the motto of the Benedictine order repeated as a

sentiment applied to Christian worship: “To God the Highest and Best!”. That’s a splendid sentiment, and I wouldn’t want to deny it. But it’s people, not God, who need “quality” in life — our “highest and best”. And the Word may speak in many “languages” and tongues: music, movement, symbol, art, gesture, posture, position, facial expression. However we perceive what happens in worship, it would be a tragedy if we perceived anything there as fraudulent, as in-authentic. (*Psalm 51:6; Psalm 84.*)

The human heart is nourished only by the authentic, the real, the beautiful, not by their opposites. We’re surrounded today by the tacky, the ugly, the fake, the phoney, the “virtual”, the fraudulent. These may feed, but they do not nourish.

Example: Are we subverting our ecclesiology, our understanding of what it means to be Church, when a drum-set and electronic speaker boxes dominate our worship space? When images on an enormous projection screen obscure or minimize the visual importance of Table, Ambo, or Font?

Another example: Are we compromising our ecclesiology — our reverence for the Bible! — when a Lector reads Scripture publically from a flimsy paper pamphlet, rather than a handsome bound volume or lectionary?

Still another example: Does a Public Address system insulate worshippers from the truly authentic? Does it interpose a distasteful distance between speaker and hearer — the speaker here in the chancel moving lips, a disembodied voice addressing you from a box on the wall of the nave? Has the naked human voice been transmitted to worshippers in the context of yet another electronically manipulated “virtual” experience? In a word: Does a PA system introduce fraudulence into the experience of worship? Might that fraudulence be, in some cases, a necessary fraudulence?

F) Finally, Christian worship is Gospel-centered. It is not entertainment, nor moral uplift, nor advice for self-improvement or success, nor hell-fire scolding. In the words of a respected teacher, the witness of the Spirit is always Christo-centric. But Christ came “to show us the Father”, so it is also always the-ultimate. And it comes to us in human shape. It is anthropo-morphic. (*1 Corinthians 11:23-26; 1 John 1:3.*)

When worship does consist chiefly of entertainment, moral uplift, advice for self-improvement or success, or hell-fire scolding, to the exclusion of Gospel, is our worship compromised? Will preaching, among us at least, be textual, lectionary-based preaching? And when necessary also *mystagogic*?

My prayer is that Christian worship, in every place, may one day exhibit these qualities. Sooner rather than later!

Fondly, Paul.

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Pastor Bosch offers teaching about Christian worship and the preparation of liturgy in a series of monthly essays called Worship Workbench available at Lift Up Your Hearts www.worship.ca .