

Using the Scriptures in the Church

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The primary use of the Scriptures in the church is in the worship service, the high point of the believer's life for the week. How that Word of God is used in the corporate worship, thus how God deals with us through our worship, makes all the difference as to how the worshiper will be directed in both his private and public life. For this reason, and for the sake of brevity, no attempt will be made in this essay to demonstrate how God's Word may be more effectively used in the general life of the congregation, viz., Bible Classes, Bible Information Courses, or in pastoral counseling.

In the worship service, and wherever the Scriptures are used, the truth of God's Word liberates the believer from sin and death which would enslave him. There all the purposes of the Scriptures, which make us wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus—teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness—are brought to focus. In the worship service, all of these purposes of the Word of God are utilized in varying degrees and intensity.

Since it is to be understood that the Word of God is the chief element in the worship service—the Christian could not conceive of it being otherwise—the worship service should let the word of truth speak. The Scriptures do not merely give the worship service its richness, beauty, and character, they provide the only justification for its existence. The Scriptures are not the tool of the worship service, but its pivot and foundation.

God's Word does not merely present to the believer certain historical events which must be believed, but offers Christ and his work to the believer as the sole reality upon which he bases his present and future life. This precludes that faith is an essential element of Christian worship, not after the fact, but before it. If to believe the gospel means to have Christ in our heart, to accept his merits on our behalf, and to live and die in connection with Christ, then, faith cannot exist without worship, and worship cannot exist without faith, and neither can exist without God's grace which comes through his Word. Obviously, then, the worship service is not to be merely a "refresher course" in Christian doctrine or a "remedial exercise" to be performed periodically, but the vehicle through which God comes to men in his own way, and on his own terms, to perform his action ministry of grace in the believer's heart.

The underlying theme of every worship service, regardless of its position in the church year, or the particular occasion to which it is dedicated, is exactly the message of the Scriptures, which is: The Grace of God in Christ. In revealing this theme, the worship service is not an end in itself, or an exercise in which the believer merely participates as a passive observer, but is an opportunity for God to do his work in man through his Word. Our worship is only in small part an offering we make to God. We should rather think of it as a gift that we receive from him. Its purpose is to let the Word of God become a part of the heart and life of each individual worshiper, for it is only through the Gospel that we receive the grace of God in Christ.

As Christ lives in his Word, and as the whole Word of God centers around him, so Christ lives in the worship service, using his Gospel as the power to change sinful hearts, to quiet troubled consciences, to inspire the spiritually apathetic, to minister to the poor in spirit, to strengthen faith, and to save the soul. A scripture-centered worship service will not simply inspire believers to accept the Word of God as it is preached, read, and sung, but to love Christ, to cherish the Word which reveals him, and to use that Word on their own initiative. As we worship, receiving the Word of God, our faith is created and strengthened, and we are set free from sin and death for him. Therefore, the worship service is an exposition and revelation of God's truth to believing hearts, so that their faith may be strengthened, their consciences healed, and their souls comforted in the midst of their own weaknesses and the temptations of the devil in this world.

It is just because the worship service proclaims the truth of God in his Word, that the service becomes a reception rather than an exercise. The cardinal truths of God's Word should stand out boldly and clearly in the worship service so that the believer may receive them as a part of his life, and so that he may take them home with him and use them. The Sunday morning worship service will profitably serve as the devotional guide for the life of the believer throughout the week. The ideal is that the main parts of the service, the introit which sets the day, the gospel and epistle lessons which highlight that theme, and the sermon which expounds that theme, become so impressed upon the believer's heart that he is able to draw from them during the week. In fact, properly exploited, the particular Word of God proclaimed in the worship service may serve as a familiar blue print for him to follow in his daily devotional life, a guide to help him direct his personal and private praise to God.

Since God has encouraged his people to sing to him, to come before his presence with thanksgiving, and to make a joyful noise to him with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, Christians realize that their corporate worship requires some order and form. The liturgical form of the worship service is the vehicle to carry out this instruction and to present the grace of God fully, completely, and interestingly to all worshipers.

At the same time, we may remind ourselves continually that the external ceremonies, traditions, and forms connected with our use of the Word of God in the church cannot create faith, but merely serve as a skeleton for the Word of truth which alone creates faith. We are not redeemed by doing, but by receiving. Nor should the liturgical order of the service be confused with the worship itself, anymore than the scaffolding needed for the construction of a building is to be confused with the building. When the scaffolding is stripped away, the building stands alone. So, when the scaffolding of liturgical forms is stripped away, or changed, the Word stands alone in its truth and purity.

A worship service, then, should be carefully planned as a coordinated vehicle for the grace of God in his Word of truth. The service should not be thought of as a scrap book for which parts of the Bible are cut out and pasted together so that the worshiper's attention is directed first to this, and then to that specific truth. Rather, the worship service should be viewed as a work of art in which each segment is molded to the next to make up the whole, and proclaim the general theme for every worship service: The Grace of God in Christ. So, we might compare the worship service to a painting that consists of subject matter, design, color, shadow, texture, and even frame. The subject matter is a specific Word of God for that day, clearly set forth in the introit which serves as the theme for the worship of Christians on a given day in the church year. The design of the service is carried out by the propers, the Scripture readings, and responsive reading. The sermon provides the texture, for here the theme and subject for that service is superimposed, so to speak, on the hearts and lives of the hearers. The color and shadow of the service are supplied through the hymns and prayers of the congregation, through which the believers join one another in singing hymns and spiritual songs, making melody in their hearts to the Lord in response to the grace He has bestowed upon them in Christ. The invocation and benediction form the frame for the service, for the one sets the tone by calling upon the almighty, triune God to be present in the worship service, and the other implores his continued blessing after the corporate worship is concluded and the private worship begins.

A special word is in order here about the sermon as a part of the worship, since it is the high point in the service and the principal vehicle through which God's Word is expounded. Since the sermon is a revelation of God's grace, it belongs, not to the preacher, but to the people, and is properly considered a part of their corporate worship. As the hearers receive it, they make it their own. One preacher describes the sermon in this way: "A sermon is not primarily a man telling us what he thinks about the state of the world, what he thinks of us or our duties in life. It is not even primarily telling us what he thinks about God or Christ or charity or prayer. A sermon is man's speaking to prepare the way of God's speaking." God speaks to the assembled congregation through the sermon. As a corporate act of worship, the sermon turns the believer's heart and thought to Christ, and through him to the hope and assurance of eternal life.

As an integral part of the worship service, therefore, the sermon should be in harmony with the general tone or theme struck by the service theme, the introit, the propers, and the Scripture lessons. A congregation

that has been taught to worship intelligently is led by each part of the service to direct its worship into a particular channel, and should not be required to change directions when the sermon begins. The task of the preacher is to make clear the distinction between law and gospel in respect to the service theme, to emphasize the work of Christ for us, to proclaim justification by faith, rather than justification by works. It is through the sermon that the worshiper is led to understand these distinctions.

When God's Word is not used carefully and precisely to expound the theme of every worship service: The Grace of God in Christ, the emphasis may be transferred from God's grace to man's work, unduly emphasizing the sacrificial element more than the sacramental element of the worship. An illustration of this may be drawn from the traditional propers and scripture readings prescribed for a major portion of the church year.

The Christmas cycle, including Advent, the festival itself, and the Epiphany season present the drama of God's grace as it is revealed in Christ who fills us with light and life. In the Easter cycle, that theme: God's Grace in Christ, should shine through with even greater luster, for the risen Savior seals and guarantees our redemption by assuming his glory in his human nature. Unfortunately, this continuity is not clearly reflected in the traditional propers, Scripture readings, and sermon pericopes, since they mirror the influence of the medieval church.

In that church, Lent was made a time of penitence, and Easter became little more than the recognition of the historical fact of the Lord's resurrection. With that emphasis, it seemed that the church of those days took off the garment of the righteousness of Christ and clothed itself with the garment of penitence. This was a departure from the attitude of the early church, that is, the church before medieval times, in which the object of the Lenten season was not to emphasize the consciousness of sin, but a consciousness of the grace of God. The message of Christ's passion was that whoever had suffered the loss of grace through sin was to repent and be re-established in that grace by receiving the pardon of Christ and the new life in him. Easter, then, is more than the observance of an historical occasion (like the 4th of July); it is the great festival of grace which is guaranteed to us in the triumphant resurrection Christ. The whole six weeks after Easter is a period of rejoicing over the pardon extended to us in Christ, and that long period of the church year following the Trinity Festival was meant to reveal that grace in the active daily life of the believer. Thus, the grace of God is the focus of the entire church year and every Scripture is used to proclaim that grace.

In order to continually emphasize the grace of God revealed in his Word, each worship service should be so constructed that the mercy and loving-kindness of God is evident to every believer. Some practical suggestions may be made to demonstrate how this may be attempted.

Each worship service may be printed in its entirety, with the exception of the scripture texts and hymn stanzas, so that it may be revealed visually how the Word of God is expounded on a given worship day. Thus, the service bulletin may be used as a devotional guide during the week for the private worship of the believer. He may easily call to mind the topic, theme, and substance of his Sunday worship. The service bulletin may also be used as a devotional guide for shut-ins and those in the hospital. They are sharing *in absentia* the worship of their congregation. An added benefit is that the service may be altered frequently for convenience, or effect, without interrupting the flow of the congregation's worship. For example, a baptism may be placed after the service prayer, thus demonstrating that the sacraments are a vehicle of God's grace to be used in the midst of the corporate worship, or, for convenience, it may be placed at the beginning of the service on a Communion Sunday.

The service may be divided into three or four main sections, and so labeled. Under four major divisions, we may outline the service in this way: The Confession of Sins, The Day's Worship, The Word is Proclaimed, and The Closing Service. Let us see how the Word of God can be effectively used within the scope of this worship outline, touching only on the major points of interest for the sake of brevity.

Since every worship service has a theme or topic, I believe it should be clearly stated in the bulletin as the Service Theme. All worshipers know, and prepare to receive, the particular Word of God designated for that

day's worship. So the Service Theme for *Rogate* is **Prayer**, so stated; for *Cantate*, it is **Praise God For His Marvelous Works**.

For the confession of sins, it seems appropriate that the congregation use the Confessional Collect, to which the Pastor responds with the absolution pronounced in the same form as on Communion Sundays. Children and non-Lutheran guests are more aware of the confessional nature of this part of the service when the formal absolution is pronounced. We are emphasizing that we come to church, not because we are good people who want to proclaim our moral integrity, but as sinners who need, seek, and yearn for the grace of God.

Traditionally, the introit was a remnant of a psalm, or other Old Testament Scripture, an antiphon (a short verse of musical introduction), and the thought for the day, generally couched in a psalm verse. Since many of the traditional introits do not clearly state to modern worshipers the theme for the worship, I prefer to use a Scripture text which clearly indicates that it is the source of the Service Theme for the day, whether this Scripture is drawn from the Old or New Testament. We want to emphasize that a particular Word of God is the subject of our worship for a certain day, and we should state that Word clearly and unquestionably.

The Gospel and Epistle lessons should be chosen to expand the worship theme, and an Old Testament Lesson may be added at certain times of the church year, like Lent or Advent. It may seem appropriate to use two Gospel lessons or two Epistle lessons on occasion when the theme of the service is more clearly expanded, taught, or proclaimed by their use.

These few examples are meant to demonstrate that each worship service should be based on a specific Word of God, stated clearly in the introit in God's own words, which indicate the Advent of God's grace in the corporate worship. The introit, accompanied by the Service Theme, is the pebble dropped in a pool of placid water, with the Scripture readings, the gradual, the sermon, and the prayers as the ripples which emanate from that Word. No worshiper should leave the service unable to state clearly the topic of that service, and its relevance to his life and soul.

God's Holy Word is the priceless treasure of the Christian Church, which the Christian congregation is to preserve in its truth and purity, and which it is to transmit from father to son. The church can do this best when it uses the Scriptures as the pivot of its worship, thus permitting God to convey His grace from generation to generation as he has done among our fathers. Our God's own instruction concerning the use of His Word should be reflected in our worship service.

"My people, listen to my instruction, pay attention to what I say.

I will open my mouth with a story and speak of the ancient mysteries that we have heard and known and our fathers told us; which were not hidden from their children but told to the next generation; about the Lord's wonderful deeds, his power and the marvelous things he did. How he ordered our fathers to teach their children, so a coming generation would know it; and children yet to be born might grow up and tell their children to put their trust in God and not forget the things God did." (Ps 78: 1-7.)

And that's the truth that sets us free!