

# The Importance of Public Worship in the Life of the Church

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## **Introduction: Back to basics**

When your essay committee asked me to speak on the importance of public worship in the life of the church, two things ran through my mind: Great timing for the introduction of the new hymnal in 1993, and great timing in preparation for the 75th anniversary of the Minnesota District of the Wisconsin Synod, also in 1993. The relationship of the topic to the new hymnal is obvious. But what has public worship to do with the Minnesota District?

At the time the Minnesota Synod was born Lutherans were scattered here and there across the Minnesota frontier without public worship. They longed for such fellowship. And when Pastor Wier gathered the first congregations in the Twin Cities for public worship, the foundations were laid for what was later to become the Minnesota District of the Wisconsin Synod. Humanly speaking, their work is why we are privileged to gather here today. But undoubtedly a review of the importance of public worship is necessary today for other reasons.

National trends today in American life are calling for a movement back to basics. Discontent with life in these United States in an age when we've never had it so good has caused us to pause and reconsider what's wrong. Why are things coming unstuck, nationally and in the church? Analyses and self-studies have unearthed a basic fact of life, that our problems are basic ones. In an attempt to identify the main problems facing the church in our day, the WELS Board for Parish Services recently suggested that we need to address such basic problems in parish ministry as the breakup of the family, me-ism, and materialism.

Back-to-basics movements are affecting life also in the political arena, as well as in education that supports it. National think-tanks and teachers' associations, for example, have called for a return to teaching a substantial core of history and geography in elementary education rather than the expanding horizons approach of the social studies. The reason? Children find it difficult to think in contexts, to think in the dimensions of time and space in which we live, to think chronologically and concretely. The problem was recently highlighted when a PhD candidate at the University of Florida was given a map of the United States and was unable to locate the state of Florida. Part of the problem is that special interest groups have so fragmented the learning process with their promotional literature that citizens of the United States no longer enjoy a common fund of learning and a common body of good literature as a common heritage.

What does all this have to do with the importance of public worship in the life of the church? You have probably anticipated the answer. A similar discontent and frustration is mirrored in the life of the church. Often the time and energy needed to carry out the basic preaching and teaching of God's Word are drained off by an inordinate number of meetings and churchly activities. The importance of public worship may recede from its vital place in the life of the church. The common fund of faith which unites Christians slips away from us because we neglect God's Word. At your invitation this presentation takes a hard look at our priorities in ministry and aims to indicate from Scripture and from the church's past how essential the church service is for the life and health of the church.

## I. Public worship in the church's life

As we search the Scriptures in this regard, we are impressed with a simple but basic truth: Public worship is the place where God meets his people and the people address God. Luther once observed, "The whole life and nature of the church is in the Word of God."<sup>1</sup> This means that as Christians we live by the Word. So Luther continues by stating, "God's Word cannot exist without God's people and God's people cannot exist without God's Word." They are tied together according to God's promise in Isaiah 55:11: "My word shall not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire."

As Christians, therefore, we live with God's Word and we live from God's Word. Private devotion is an individual responsibility. Public worship, however, is the privilege and responsibility of the church. In this larger assembly pastors, according to their call, hold a key position. In preparing for public worship each week, they want to take the entire congregation into account and to serve the needs of every individual in the assembly.

When the stewardship board of our local congregation discussed its goals, the first principle of stewardship was to bring people into contact with the Word of God in church services and Bible class. When people participate in public worship, God opens hearts to support his work with gifts of thanksgiving. That puts a special burden on the conduct of public worship and highlights its importance.

Practically speaking, the church service is the place where the pastor meets most of the congregation each week, where he can maximize the use of those talents and abilities which have been emphasized during his pastoral training, and where he can give the broadest application of God's Word. The pastor's personal Bible study, his past training in Bible interpretation, his search for insights gained from church history, his ongoing study of the doctrine and the confessions of the church, his application of principles of liturgy and sermon-making, and, above all, his discernment of Law and Gospel—all converge in public worship for the benefit of the congregation. Under God's blessing, he is concerned that the church service not be abstract, but meaningful and beneficial, that public worship is a time when we learn to know God and can worship him.

To appreciate the importance of public worship in the life of the church, we need to ask ourselves a basic question: What is the church? In the New Testament the church is never referred to as a building as we commonly do. When New Testament Christians read Paul's letter to the church in a certain place, a building was farthest from their mind. In fact, the Romans scorned Christians as atheists because Christians had no temples or statues. Their god, in Roman eyes, was non-existent, a figment of their imagination. By Roman definition, Christians were atheists, a people without a god.

But Christians understood the word for church differently. They used the word for church from the Greek Septuagint. The Greek word *ἐκκλησία* (from which the term *ecclesiastical* comes) meant to call people to assembly, as Greeks did for their political gatherings. Christians adapted the word and understood the church to be an assembly of people who come together, not to hear a political speaker, but to hear the Word of God and to worship him.

Now we can understand the excitement and importance of the early Christian gatherings and why the writer to the Hebrews admonished believers: "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing" (Heb 10:25). Christians assembled in public worship to exercise the fellowship of faith, to be built up in faith in their LORD, to hear the preaching of God's Word, and to receive the sacraments mandated by Christ. Here they sat at Jesus' feet and received the one thing needful. They learned to know God and understand life.

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<sup>1</sup>*Luthers Werke*, WA 7, 720.

They experienced what the psalmist meant when he wrote concerning the easy ways of the wicked: "When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny" (Ps 73:16,17).

## **II. Worship life in the Old Testament church**

All of this talk might go right over our heads unless we learn to know what public worship is all about. In a word, it is about imputation. Imputation is that magnetic field around which all worship revolves. Imputation is that double action of God which makes the work of Christ concrete and meaningful. Imputation is that joyous exchange through which we are justified by faith. Imputation lies at the heart of the gospel because it tells us how sinners become saints and whores become brides of Christ.

We've singled out the word imputation because, though biblical, it's hard to grasp and infrequently used in our teaching. The meaning of imputation is clarified by three striking pictures.

The first picture comes from accounting. In terms of credits and debits, God credits Christ's righteousness to our account (Gen 15:6). The second picture—and the one that is most understandable—is taken from the law court. There God, the heavenly judge, pronounces us righteous for the sake of Christ (Ro 8:33f). But the third picture is one which was most familiar to Jews in the Old Testament and in which they were exercised daily. This picture comes from the worship life of Israel and involves the imputation of righteousness in a liturgical setting, as we will explain.

To understand imputation and its relationship to public worship, we must go back to the time when God formally established Old Testament worship at Sinai. There on the mountain God instituted three significant things for the life of Israel: the law, the priesthood, and the tabernacle. The law prescribed the forms of holiness for God's covenant people. The priests administered the ceremonies of the law, and the tabernacle was the place where the ritual took place.

On the tabernacle grounds the main part of worship took place at the altar of sacrifice. Here God foreshadowed the coming of the Savior as a sacrifice for the sins of all people. Here at the altar of bloody sacrifice the people were declared righteous in God's sight and legally freed from the guilt and bondage of sin. Here on the tabernacle grounds the promise of grace once given to Abraham was reinforced by the sign-language of sacrifice. The five steps of the animal sacrifice vividly portrayed God's justification of the sinner.

How was this done? Through the atoning sacrifices the people of Israel learned the meaning of imputation. Imputation, as St. Paul indicates in his letter to the Romans (Ro 3 and 4), lies at the heart of our justification before God. The children of Israel were taught justification in a most concrete and personal way. A brief review of the worship life of Israel will help us to understand what happened.

Originally imputation meant to charge something to another, especially in the case of a fault or a crime. In Israel's case, such a transfer occurred in the sacrifice. God accepted the transfer of a person's guilt to the animal, and the animal's innocent death took away the person's guilt. This double action is the exchange which lies at the heart of God's acceptance of the sinner.

But, more importantly, the exchange in the sacrifice foreshadowed the great exchange brought about by the work of Christ. This exchange occurs when Christ slips on our finger the wedding ring of faith and unites us to himself as a bridegroom is united to his bride. He takes away our sin and gives us his righteousness in exchange. What joy this royal marriage brings!

Old Testament worshipers were not deprived of that joy. Daily on the tabernacle grounds they preenacted the coming of Christ. Before the worshiper's eyes the sins of the Israelites were shifted to an animal and the animal's life-blood was used to cover the worshiper's sins. In the transaction God declared the sinner righteous, and the sinner lived in the faith that what happened was certain.

He could have such confidence because the entire ritual was rooted in the promise of a Savior once given to Abraham. The blood of the animal in itself did not cover his sin. All the blood of bulls and goats could not do that (Heb 9). But the blood of the animal foreshadowed the real sacrifice that came through the Savior. Because of this promise Israel's worship differed completely from pagan sacrificial rituals. The five steps of the ritual proclaimed the difference.

Here's what happened. Under the Mosaic Law the sacrifice was essentially the work of God. In step one, the consecration of the animal, the sinner selects an unblemished animal from the flock and presents the animal for sacrifice to the priest. This action takes place by God's designation and the animal is set aside for God's purposes.

In step two the offerer (or priest) then presses his hand firmly on the head of the sacrificial animal and imputes or transfers his sin to it. By this action the animal, now officially removed from the possession of the worshiper and devoted to God, is appointed to be the vehicle of the sinner's guilt. It is God's own sacrifice.

In step three death contends with life. The animal is slaughtered by the priest and dies. But the victory belongs to life because, as God sees it, the animal's death is a means to obtain the blood.

In step four the streaming blood of the slaughtered animal is immediately caught in a basin and is continually stirred by the priest's finger to prevent clotting. Blood symbolized life and the shed lifeblood is used as God explained in Leviticus 17:11, "The life of the creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life."

With step four the transfer is complete. The shed blood forms a covering over the sins of the worshiper. According to the Lord's ordination, the life-blood of the clean and guiltless animal is substituted for the person's own death and vicariously imputed to the guilty sinner. The worshiper is declared free of sin. He is justified freely by faith in God's word and promise. "This faith," as our Lutheran Confession states, "is imputed to us for righteousness."<sup>2</sup>

The life-blood is then ritually sprinkled on the altar, on the inner curtain, on the incense altar of the holy place, or before God's presence on the mercy seat in the holy of holies. According to God's promise, the animal's death has brought the believer life and its lifeblood has been substituted for the believer's death.

In step five the burning of the fat and flesh of the animal follows as prescribed. The pungent smell of burning body parts creates an odor well-pleasing to the Lord (Ex 29:18). No wonder the Apostle Paul, schooled in the Jewish worship, could enhance the picture of God's triumphal procession by writing to the Corinthians, "Thanks be to God who through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life" (2 Cor 2:14,15). Now we know what a Christian smells like and understand why he gives off the aroma of faith that he does.

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<sup>2</sup>*Augsburg Confession IV.*

The Israelite worship service has ended dramatically. In the court of God's law an exchange has taken place. The guilty is declared not guilty for the sake of the substitute. By the singular gift of God's grace, the worshiper trusts this is so. In the court of God's law, the guilty sinner lives in wonderment at God's act of love and offers thanks and praise for his grace and mercy. The guilty sinner is sentenced, but not to the death which he deserves. His sentence is commuted to life with God. He goes home in peace.

### **III. Worship life in the New Testament church**

Why have we dwelt on this Old Testament worship scene so graphically? What does the Old Testament ritual have to do with public worship today? Did Jesus not free us from the bondage of the Law? Does not the letter to the Hebrews explain in detail that Jesus did once-and-for-all-time what the Israelite priests needed to do daily? The answer is, "Surely he did." "Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes" (Ro 10:4).

Marcion, a pious humanist in the early church, asked all the same questions and then proceeded to jettison the whole Old Testament as obsolete for Christian worship. For him the bloodthirsty God of the Old Testament was out, in favor of the New Testament God of love. Marcion became a "spirit-filled" moralist and was declared a heretic.

But Jesus did not dismiss the public worship of God in the Old Testament. On the contrary, by actively doing all the ceremonies and rituals of the law and fulfilling them through his perfect life and death, he set aside the old forms of worship which foreshadowed his coming. When the real thing has come and the person has arrived, the shadow of things to come passes away into insignificance, as the Apostle Paul very carefully explains to the Colossians (Col 2:17).

What Jesus did is to give a new reality to public worship for Christians. That new reality is his own person, who comes to us, no longer through the slaughter of goats and heifers, but through the preaching of the gospel, through baptism, through the Lord's Supper, through the ministry of the keys. In order that public worship might not end up in spiritualistic abstractions, our Lord Jesus ordered the growth of his church through the means of grace which he himself mandated.

Talk about powerful means for church growth. The gospel is dynamite, "because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Ro 1:16). If we do not get the impact of the statement from St. Paul because it seems too abstract and impractical, we need to revisit the tabernacle grounds. The sight of the Jewish worship service with its heifers and goats will jar us out of our dream world to the real world of God.

And then we must follow with a visit to Calvary. There, on location, we learn that the great exchange of guilt for freedom was not transacted easily, as simply as an erasure on a banker's ledger. God does not work that way. The sight of Jesus on the cross should shake us out of our fantasies into the real world of God's love. There, on the cross, the holy and innocent Son of God covered our guilt with his lifeblood. This was not an animal, but the LORD who came from the Father's side.

What Jesus did in God's court was not easy or automatic, mere child's play for a superman. The transfer cost God his life. "We are redeemed by God's own blood," as Paul explicitly stated to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:28). The message about Christ, the atoning sacrifice for the sins of mankind, stands at the center of New Testament worship and leads us into the sanctuary of God.

In the sanctuary we learn to know God. We come face to face with God in his Word. The real presence of God in his Word is a biblical truth. Apart from the Word, we can never see God face to face as he is. If God

were to appear to us in this assembly today in his unveiled majesty without the covering of his Word, we could not stand the sight. We would all die.

Moses once tried to see God. In a moment of excitement at Sinai, Moses asked to see God's face. "Now show me your glory," he begged. It was as if Moses were saying to God, "Let me look at you as you really are in your bare majesty." But God turned aside the request in no uncertain terms: "I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence....But...you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live" (Ex 33:19,20).

God's name is enough for us in public worship. It is enough that we invoke his holy name and begin our service "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"—and then proceed to interact with his name in confession and absolution, in law and gospel, in sermon and Supper, in blessing. God's name is not merely everything that God stands for, it is God himself under the veil.

That was the lesson Moses was to learn directly. After his request God directed Moses to stand in the hollow of a rock and assured him he could see his back, but not his face: "When my glory passes by, I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by," God said. "Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen" (Ex 33:22,23). The lesson strikes home for our public worship of God.

In the sanctuary we see God's backside, as it were. We get to know him as he passes by us. From the rear, we can behold him without being afraid. As he passes us in history, we get to know him by name. When he comes to Bethlehem, we do not have to shield our eyes. He accommodated himself to sinners' eyes and wrapped himself in our flesh and blood so we would not be frightened. "The Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us," St. John explains, and "we have seen his glory, the glory of the only begotten who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (Jn 1:14, author's trans.).

With the advent of Christ we have come full circle in our quest to understand the importance of public worship in the life of the church. Believers no longer need to slaughter the best of the flock in atoning sacrifice. The Lamb of God is the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. Graphically, vividly, and painfully the great exchange has taken place—the imputation. God laid on him the iniquities of us all and gives us, in return, his righteousness as the atonement cover for our sins. This is the heart and core of every Christian public service. Take Christ from public worship and what remains is empty ritual.

Before Jesus left, he saw to it that the church would not be without his presence. In effect, he constituted the New Testament worship of God. To assure us of the Father's love, he did two things. He sent the Spirit and he crafted the means of grace so that in, with, and under these means his presence would remain with us.

Up to the time of Jesus' ascension, New Testament believers lived with God present in their midst. After all, Jesus was Immanuel, "God with us," and the believers relied on him for righteousness. But at his departure Jesus did not leave believers without a comforter to call them to the Father's side. He sent the Holy Spirit to confirm their faith. "I tell you the truth," he explained, "it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you" (Jn 16:7).

The purpose of the Spirit's work is not to glorify himself, but to give our worship of God its meaning. The Spirit's work is Christ-directed and gives us new life by reference to Christ's work. The marvel of the work of the Triune God is that three persons do not work independently of one another but act in concert. The Spirit works through the Word and brings us to the Father.

This unified work of God gives unity to our church service, as it gives unity to the church. Jesus gives us details of the Spirit's coming when he says, "When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the

Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will testify about me" (Jn 15:26). In this way Jesus, who himself is God's Word in person, comes to us in the assembly of believers.

For this reason Jesus accompanied the sending of the Spirit with the establishment of the means of grace. Before he ascended to his Father, he gave us his gospel mandates: preach and teach the gospel everywhere; make disciples from all nations by baptizing and teaching them; confirm the faith of believers by the ministry of the keys and the Holy Supper.

These mandates are formative for public worship. Our church service takes its shape around them because God works through them in the congregation. We are a sacramental church, that is, a church in which God's Word and sacraments are the chief elements of public worship. Sacramental worship sets us apart from all free-wheeling TV evangelists and from the testimonials and self-dramatizations of sectarian churches. After we have attended the worship service, we can say, "I have walked with God today."

In view of this revelation of the divine God in our midst, we cannot help but respond, "Amen, LORD, so let it be." Our songs of praise and gratitude echo our heart's joy and thanksgiving. With angels, martyrs, and all the company of heaven, we join to sing or say, "Glory be to God on high! Holy, holy, holy is the LORD God Almighty." With all penitents on earth we plead: "Lord, have mercy on us! Christ, have mercy on us and give us your peace."

Like the Old Testament worshiper, we can leave the assembly of believers in peace, at peace with God, at peace with ourselves, and at peace with the world. By the joyous exchange we have been thrust from death to life. By the imputation of Christ's work our sentence has been commuted to life with God. We are strengthened in this faith as often as we hear his Word, as often as we are absolved from sin, as often as we partake of Christ's body and blood. As a body is energized by food, we are energized by God's Word.

Now, "in view of God's mercy," we can return home "to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God-this is our spiritual act of worship" (Ro 12:1). We can use these energies in service to God and our neighbor. Our whole life becomes fragrant and sweet-smelling to God. Faith gives our life its energy, and love gives our life its bouquet, its fragrance.

### **Afterword: the communion of saints**

We cannot close our thoughts on public worship in the life of the church without focusing on the fellowship of believers. Fellowship is a tricky term. It means to share, to have something in common. In the modern church "fellowship" often means rubbing elbows with other Christians or joining together in Christian activities. But when the early Christians spoke of the fellowship of the saints, they were in a worship setting. Here the holy Christian church, as the fellowship of believers, shared the Word with one another. They held in common what they were given by Christ.

Not that Christian get-togethers were wrong or useless. Such gatherings were most beneficial as an exercise of Christian sharing and caring. Christians can and should enjoy one another's company in the household of faith. The Corinthian Christians had get-togethers called love-meals, a sort of congregational pot-luck at a time when the wealthy could share food with others who had none to share.

But when it came to worship, the Corinthian Christians united in sharing what God had given them. At one point in the love-meal, bread and wine from the table were set aside for God's purposes by consecration. The pastor then summoned the worshipers to receive the earthly elements now sacramentally united with

Christ's body and blood. As the deacons came to distribute the holy communion to the assembly, he called out: "Τα αγια τοις αγιοις" "Holy things to holy people."

These words, according to Werner Elert,<sup>3</sup> found their way into the Apostles' Creed. The holy Christian church is the communion of saints; we share holy things. Public worship is the place where Christians share God's Word and sacraments and respond to God with petitions and with prayers of thanksgiving. The time spent in preparation and conduct of public worship is priority time. Its importance for the growth and unity of the Christian church cannot be overestimated.

For an age of fragmentation and frustration, God gave the church the directives to concentrate on basics. May God also give us the strength and will to keep the importance of public worship a priority in the life of the church! The cause is his.

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<sup>3</sup> Werner Elert. *Abendmahl and Kirchengemeinschaft in der alten Kirche hauptsachlich des Ostens*. Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1954, esp. pages 12-16.