

# Reverence in Worship

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[Chicago Pastoral Conference, New Life Ev. Lutheran Church,  
Lake Zurich, IL, January 8-9, 2001]

I felt as Samson must have felt in the waning moments of his life—certain that a huge stone was about to crash down upon my head. It was 4:35 p.m. on Saturday, November 5, 1983 at Zion Ev. Lutheran Church in Winthrop, MN. I had just presented newlyweds Mr. and Mrs. Clayton Smith to the congregation. Horror of horrors, half of the people gathered for this service in God's house burst into audible applause. I stood there in stunned suspension. In spite of impending doom, I was unable to move. I was certain thunder was about to crash, lightning was about to strike, and the walls of Zion were about to become as the walls of Jericho. This was beyond doubt the end of the visible church of Zion, and perhaps the invisible one as well. Clapping in the house of God! At a worship service nonetheless! What audacity! What insolence! What irreverence!

And then, to add insult to injury, at our Church Council meeting the following Monday, one of the elders who had heard of this debacle berated me for bringing liberalism into the church by allowing the people to clap.

Thus began my battle to restore reverence to wedding services. Valiantly I fought that battle over the years. Every wedding became a contest between me and the congregation. As I looked out upon the congregation at a wedding service it was as though I saw them all holding placards shouting "We Are Going To Clap!" If only they would read the worship folder. There I had said it—ever so eloquently and even evangelically I was sure, but also very clearly—"Don't you dare clap in my church!" I tried all kinds of things. I even contemplated having the organist begin the recessional music before I allowed the wedding couple off the kneeling rail. Amazingly enough, people still managed most of the time to get in anywhere from a smattering of clapping to full fledged applause. And the battles I did win were Pyrrhic at best.

I have not given up the fight, but I have changed tactics. I do my best in the planning stages with the wedding couple to impress upon them that the marriage ceremony is a worship service. I do my best to make it evident to those gathered for the wedding that this is a worship service. And then I let the claps fall where they may.

Sometimes people clap. Sometimes they don't. Whichever they do, perhaps this is how they express themselves in their church or culture. Perhaps they are joining the psalmist in quiet meditation or jubilant praise. Perhaps they don't know what to do. Who am I to judge? Reverence is a matter of the heart. That is God's realm. "The Lord does not look at things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."<sup>1</sup>

And so we come to "Reverence in Worship." That is the assigned title of this paper as opposed to the title "orderly worship" that was on the agenda mailed to us. No doubt there could be a correlation between those two topics, but they could also go in different directions. One of the specific examples given by the essay committee in the assignment of this topic indicates the intent and sets the perimeters for this paper. The example was "how people dress for church." That sets "worship" in the context of "corporate worship." And it defines "reverence" as "expressions of reverence." With those perimeters, this paper approaches this topic with the proposal: reverence in worship is not an adiaphoron, but expression of reverence is.

The First Commandment requires reverence in worship. To fear the Lord is to revere him.

Hebrews 12:28 states: "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire."

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Samuel 16:7

Obviously both the First Commandment and this passage go beyond corporate worship. As Pastor Lauersdorf states in his People's Bible Commentary on Hebrews, "The word 'worship' is wider, including service in general. The grateful believer offers his life in service to God with reverence, with eyes cast down humbly in the presence of a holy God. He offers it also with awe, with diligent concern for avoiding whatever might displease his Lord."<sup>2</sup> This then becomes an argument from the lesser to the greater, or vice versa. If we are to revere God in every aspect of our lives, how much more so we should revere him when we step into his presence in worship. And that's what happens in corporate worship—we step into the presence of God. "Gathering for worship with fellow believers brings us together before the awesome God at Christ's cross. A Christian worship service needs to communicate the transcendence of the Living God. He is the Most High God who dwells in light unapproachable. At the same time he is Immanuel, God with us, to reconcile and restore us into communion with him. Awesome!"<sup>3</sup>

Is it any wonder the Psalmist says: "But I, by your great mercy, will come into your house; in reverence will I bow down toward your holy temple."<sup>4</sup> Not only is reverence required in worship, far above that it is our God with his mercy and grace that inspires reverence in worship. Thus, as Rev Bryan Gerlach, WELS Administrator for Worship, stated in an e-mail message when I asked him for some resources on this topic: "Awe and reverence are biblical categories, not merely matters of personal taste." Reverence in worship is not an adiaphoron.

But how do we express that reverence, especially the kind of expressions intended within the perimeters of this paper? And is such expression of reverence a "matter of personal taste" or not?

God does not give a lot of explicit direction on how to express reverence when standing in his presence. Moses does come to mind. God did tell him, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground."<sup>5</sup> We would quickly maintain, however, this was a cultural thing. If people showed up for church barefoot today we would quickly hang out a sign "no shoes—no service." Pray we shall never have to deal with the issue of "no shirts."

Perhaps among the most prescriptive passages on worship are Jesus words to the Samaritan woman: "Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."<sup>6</sup> Reverence is certainly included here for part of worshipping "in spirit" is the opposite of a mechanical worship, a mere going through the motions of certain rituals and ceremonies. But it goes far beyond that. The heart of Jesus' message here is that worship is a matter of the heart. Pastor Gary Baumler states in the People's Bible Commentary on John, "The Father seeks true worshipers, as, even at that moment, he was seeking to reach the heart of that sinful woman. She need not go to a certain place to find God and be cleansed. 'God is spirit' and not confined to any one place like Gerizim or Jerusalem. When God reached her spirit with his truth, her worship could begin. Once she, in faith, accepted God's forgiveness offered in Jesus, she could raise thanks and praise to God for his great mercy and love."<sup>7</sup>

Will not the heart of faith that reveres God and worships him reverently reveal itself outwardly? Indeed it will. The problem is, God has not established a standard of outward expression of reverence by which we can judge the reverence expressed by the heart. Thus the expression of reverence is a matter of adiaphoron. For us to establish standards by which to judge expressions of reverence is to overstep our bounds and leads to all kinds of difficulty.

In an article entitled "Observing Lent: Fasting and Bodily Preparation," F.H.O. Jungkuntz, after trying to balance the pitfalls and the benefits of fasting, makes the statement: "Concerning further 'bodily

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<sup>2</sup> Page 169

<sup>3</sup> "Informal Formality" by Rev. Roger Huffman, WELS worship website 4 Psalm 5:7

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 5:7

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 3:5

<sup>6</sup> John 4:23,24

<sup>7</sup> Page 67

preparations' one confronts a veritable Pandora's box."<sup>8</sup> I shall open that lid only slightly to show its truth and hopefully not to let out more than a couple of worms.

According to *Christian Worship: Manual*, standing is an expression of reverence. "The congregation stands for the reading of the Gospel. In the past soldiers put down their weapons and kings removed their crowns when the Gospel was read. Christ—his life, his words of law and gospel, his suffering, his death, his resurrection, his ascension, his assignment to his Church, his promise to return - is the center of the Gospel. The faithful have waited for this moment, this reading. They stand in reverence."<sup>9</sup> We have one man at Trinity who does not like this. The first time I met him, shortly into our conversation, he asked, "Why do we stand in church when the gospel is read?" Probably it was the tone of his question that prevented me from jumping in with both feet and instead saying, "Why do you ask?" His response was quick, "because we are to show reverence for the Gospel. Is not all of the Bible God's word and equally important? Why should we revere one part over another?" If standing is an expression of reverence, why do we sit at all when we have come into the presence of God in worship? If standing is an expression of reverence in worship, and a wedding service is a worship service, why do we stand when the bride enters the church? Why do people stand in some of our churches when mourners enter or exit the church at a funeral service? Is there any confusion here? A by-product of establishing standards where God has not.

We have three people in our congregation that cross themselves when they enter church, during the service when the pastor makes the sign of the cross, when they are at the communion table, etc. Two of these people come from Catholic backgrounds. (That statement is rather fraught with judgment, isn't it? But I had never seen this in a Lutheran church before I came to Trinity.) The third person was raised in a conservative Missouri Synod background. He is a member today of WELS because of the liberalism in the LC-MS. The first time I noticed him cross himself was at the first communion service I was a part of at Trinity. My thought was, "Oh, man, and this guy is on the Board of Elders!" This man is a unique person. He is a free thinker but very orthodox. He loves tradition and yet promotes change. And he is one of the most devout Christian men I know. He truly lives his religion. I have watched him in worship make the sign of the cross. When he ushers and approaches the altar to light candles before the service, or extinguish them afterwards, he stops at the center and bows before the altar. All this is very evident yet not in any way obtrusive. I have come to admire his expressions of reverence in worship. Were I to perform the same expressions, it would be hypocritical. A by-product of establishing standards where God has not.

I asked our ILHS basketball coach why he had the players dress up the day of a ballgame. He said, "I believe in dressing for success. When they dress up they feel good about themselves and will play better. It helps them focus on the fact they have a game that day. It draws attention to the students around them that there is a game that day." That answer did not surprise me. I was a little surprised there was no mention of fine dress reflecting respect upon our school that those athletes would be representing at the game. (This observation is not meant to be critical.) I also asked him how the athletes felt about having to be dressed up. He said, "Oh, they completely agree with it." Then he smiled and added, "They also know if they don't dress up they will run laps." Hooray for the law—adiaphora's worst enemy.

Some of these same young men who will appear in coat and tie on game day appear much differently at church. If they are being taught to "dress for success," and to focus on the task before them, and to draw the attention of others around them, that perspective could carry over into worship very nicely, or very self-righteously. However, adding the stipulation—ten laps around the church pews if you don't wear a tie—won't determine the proper motive in the heart.

There is, of course, another aspect of worship and likewise of adiaphoron to take into consideration. That is our fellow Christian. Corporate worship is also for the benefit of fellow believers. "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God."<sup>10</sup> "Let us not give up meeting together, as

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<sup>8</sup> WELS worship website

<sup>9</sup> Pages 173,174

<sup>10</sup> Colossians 3:16

some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”<sup>11</sup> We gather for worship to praise our God and also to encourage one another in our faith and life. Certainly we want to be reverent in worship so that we encourage and do not discourage one another.

But whose standard are we going to use to determine if what a person does is reverent and encourages or if it is irreverent and discourages? After our joint Reformation service at which our high school students served as ushers, I was talking with two staunch elders of Trinity (both in age and stature). One said, “It is so nice to see the young people involved in the church. But you know, pastor, you should establish a dress code.” Because I know this gentleman well and know where he is coming from, I could say to him, “You know, you’re right. Let’s you and me take off our ties.” He laughed and shook his head and said, “I know, I’m old fashioned.”

When God has not established standards it all becomes very subjective, does it not? And then it becomes a matter of whether a person is giving offense or someone is taking offense. We have a man at Trinity who is offended because the pastors greet the congregation before the worship service and the congregation responds to that greeting. He is also offended by that “new” hymnal, by people who receive the communion wafer in their hand, and by parents who take their children to the staffed nursery during worship. I suspect his “offense” falls into the category of a former neighboring pastor of mine who was fond of saying, “Most of the time when people say they are offended they are just downright irritated.” Nonetheless I admire this man at Trinity, he still comes to church, albeit deliberately five minutes late so he doesn’t have to hear the greeting.

Is greeting the congregation reverent or irreverent? Does it encourage or discourage? “The postmodern church shopper needs to see our joy of worship centered in this article of justification. This joy will show itself in how we conduct our service, how we sing our hymns, and how we eagerly accept the blessings that come in Word and sacrament. ‘Be all that you are!’ is our slogan as we conduct our lives of worship to the Lord in the article of justification. Warm and friendly welcomes will be given to all who gather around us in worship, for we live and breathe the declaration that we have been declared righteous. If the postmodern people see this in us, they will stop, look and listen to what we have to offer.”<sup>12</sup> “Good liturgy is not tied to the forms of the past or to unchanging wording. Nevertheless, often we will produce better results by revitalizing time-tested forms than by latching on to the latest fads. Is a choreographed exchange of ‘Good mornings’ really an improvement over the exchange that has marked the entry into worship for centuries: ‘The Lord be with you.’ ‘And also with you.’ Which greeting better conveys the reason we have come together? Which better conveys the hopes and goals we share in this hour?”<sup>13</sup> Warm and friendly welcomes? Or time honored greetings? Or both? You be the judge.

If expressions of reverence are not an issue in your congregation, obviously don’t make it one. If they are an issue, then it seems the issue has to first of all be identified. Are people being irreverent in worship? If so, instruction on worship is necessary. Are people not meeting certain standards of reverence? If so, perhaps the question needs to be asked, “Of whose standards are they falling short?”

I suspect there is another deep seated concern attached to this topic. That is, the fear that in the changing church demeanor we are experiencing, such as more casual dress, clapping, the requests for “contemporary” worship, etc., our people are being influenced by and our worship will be influenced by the trend in many churches today of worship being more oriented toward human beings and their experience rather than toward God.

These are legitimate concerns. The dangers are immense. “Informality without formality tends to reduce Jesus to my buddy, just one of the guys. Treat the Son of God like that and pretty soon the people will start telling Jesus what he should have taught. They’ll start demanding answers from Jesus on their terms, forgetting that his ways are untraceable and unfathomable. This kind of service cultivates self-worshiping fools who find awe in a mirror.”<sup>14</sup> Michael Horton, a pastor of the Christian Reformed Church, in his book “In the Face of God” states in analyzing the ills of today’s worship trends, “We’re no longer sinners, but seekers. We want to

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<sup>11</sup> Hebrews 10:25

<sup>12</sup> “Not Ashamed of the Gospel in a Postmodern Age” by Rev. Steven C. Degner, AZ-CA District website

<sup>13</sup> “Approaching a Majestic God” by Rev. John Brag, WELS worship website

<sup>14</sup> “Informal Formality”

find a God who will not surprise us, especially a deity who comes not ‘in the spirit of the day,’ as in paradise, to judge us for our rebellion, but one who is quite manageable, affable, and friendly— ‘one of the boys.’...Today we value sincerity above truth; feeling over reality. As long as people are honest, God will accept them, we reason, regardless of what they believe about him or how they intend to be (indeed, whether they even think they need to be) reconciled to him... It used to be that theological liberals were accused of getting rid of the doctrines that accent God’s distance from us—doctrines such as the Creator-creature distinction, original sin, judgment, wrath, hell, and the like... Today, these criticisms could almost equally apply to mainstream evangelical preaching, teaching, writing, worship and evangelism. God is increasingly trivialized, as he is brought down to our level. As he goes down in our estimation, so we rise. In the end, God seems more user-friendly, more approachable, more like us, but less worth worship or entrusting with our eternal destinies.”<sup>15</sup>

What is the antidote to such irreverent worship and expressions of reverence? At the risk of over simplification, let us make worship reverent and the expressions of reverence will take care of themselves. Here are some suggestions that have been offered.

Robert Webber suggests, “Restore a sense of awe and reverence, mystery and transcendence. It was agreed that a frivolous attitude too frequently appears in the social chitchat before the service, in overextended announcements, and in too causal an atmosphere projected by the minister. The key to changing this lies in the attitude and actions of the minister. The demeanor of his voice and body language can create a sense of the holy. The congregation must then follow his lead and act with a sense of hushed silence, a reverential awe, an appropriate fear.”<sup>16</sup> I realize this gets into a very subjective area. After all, some pastors, it seems to me, want to get the service over with as quickly as they can; some pastors, it seems to me, are so pietistic I’d like to light a fire under them; if only they would all do it like me and while wearing a black gown too! The point is, let each of us do what we believe is going to express reverence, do it well, and not sit in judgment on others.

Here is a plug for holding steadfast to liturgical worship. “The spirit of liturgical worship runs counter to the entertainment-hungry mentality of our society. Much contemporary worship emphasizes being moved or entertained by platform-led performances. Contemporary worshipers may at times be confused with an audience filing into a talk show to be dazzled by the bubbly personality of the emcee. The character of good liturgy on the other hand, is that it de-emphasizes individuals and unites worshipers in corporate praise of a majestic God. It directs less attention to human feeling and to individual desires and more attention to the majesty and goodness of God. Liturgical worship recognizes that although God is our truest friend, he is not our ‘buddy.’ He is a holy God, who is to be feared.”<sup>17</sup>

Above all else proclaim God’s word and administer God’s sacraments in truth and purity. “Our worship is poor because our knowledge of God is poor, and our knowledge of God is poor because our preaching is poor. But when the Word of God is expounded in its fullness, and the congregation begins to glimpse the glory of the living God, they bow down in solemn awe and joyful wonder before his throne. It is preaching which accomplishes this, the proclamation of the Word of God in the power of the Spirit of God.”<sup>18</sup>

If the kind of worshipers the Father seeks are those who worship in spirit and in truth, there is only one thing for us to do—preach the Gospel. It is only through the means of grace that the Holy Spirit will touch the spirit and heart and soul of people to create, nourish, and strengthen faith in Jesus the Savior. Then worship can happen. Then worship will happen. And it will be in awe and reverence.

If the Holy Spirit touches a person’s heart with the Gospel, which he promises to do, and the worshiper approaches the Lord’s Holy Communion table with a penitent heart to receive the assurance of forgiveness why should I be inclined to, in fact how dare I, suggest that he go home and change clothes whether he be dressed in shorts and t-shirt or coat and tie? And if he has blasphemed the Holy Spirit so that he comes to the Lord’s Table but not in spirit and in truth, I am not going to know that regardless of how he is dressed. Reverence comes from the inside out. I cannot force it from the outside in. “The Lord looks on the heart.”

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<sup>15</sup> “In The Face of God” by Michael Horton, Word Publishing, 1996. pages XVI-XVII

<sup>16</sup> “Worship Old and New” by Robert Webber, Zondervan, 1982, page 194

<sup>17</sup> “Approaching a Majestic God”

<sup>18</sup> “Between Two Worlds” by John Stott, Eerdmans, 1982, pages 82,83

“Awe and reverence are biblical concepts...” And that’s where I would stop.