

Theology of Praise and the Divine Service
Iowa District East – LCMS
Worship Committee
September 2015

Preamble

Jesus came into the flesh to serve. He suffered, died, came back to life and ascended into heaven to declare victory over sin, death and the devil. Because of what He did for us, the Lord serves us through His gifts each Divine Service. He serves us through the preached Word, through Holy Baptism and His Holy Supper and through Holy Absolution, the forgiveness of sins. In each Divine Service, God is serving us and from that the Lord calls us to go forth in service – in sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving to Him and in loving service to one another.

Theology of Praise

In his commentary on Psalm 51 Martin Luther said:

The proper subject of theology is man guilty of sin and condemned, and God the Justifier and Savior of man the sinner. Whatever is asked or discussed in theology outside this subject, is error and poison. All Scripture points to this, that God commends His kindness to us and in His Son restores to righteousness and life the nature that has fallen into sin and condemnation.¹

When we consider a theology of praise, this definition and focus is no different. To properly understand what praise is we first must begin with who we are as fallen men and who God is as the righteous and holy One.

Once this has been established then we begin to see the great grace and mercy shown to us in Christ and from this salvation that God grants we confess before him and men what he has done. The word “confess” means to say back and to confess the faith is to say back what God has revealed to us in his word about ourselves as sinners and the redemption of Christ for us. A theology of praise is a theology of our salvation. Biblical praise then is a confession saying back and proclaiming in word or song of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ Jesus. Praise is not merely saying or singing nice words about God but there is a real proclamation involved. The call to repentance pierces hearts stained by sin and the deliverance in the words of forgiveness comfort and gives peace to the conscience that only God can give.

Time and again through the Scriptures we see this upon the lips of God’s saints. The Old Testament is rich in this praise of the Lord in such instances as the Song of Moses, the Song of Hannah, as well as the numerous canticles throughout the historical and prophetic books. The deliverance of God is extolled in these Old Testament examples of praise and point God’s people to his coming Messiah. In the New Testament we have rich praise in Zechariah’s Benedictus, Mary’s Magnificat, Simeon’s Nunc Dimittis, Paul’s Christ hymn in Philippians and countless others. In all of these the proclamation of what God has done in Christ is what shines forth. The actor in all of these instances and through the Bible as a whole is God the justifier of man the sinner. This is the praise of God, which the Church continues to proclaim through her liturgy and hymns to the present and even into all eternity with “angels and archangels and all the company of heaven.”

¹ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 12: Selected Psalms I*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 12 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 311.

Definition of Choir

The word “choir” usually refers to a group of people who sing together, sometimes in union, but more often in parts, and, in most cases, with more than one singer to a part. It may indicate a certain type, such as “children’s choir” or “male choir.” Note that a caution applies to the names of choirs, as names represent an exclusive identity, and as such need to be accurate, such as “adult choir.” It is best to avoid labels which properly apply to the church at large, such as “The Redeemed.” In large-scale musical works, such as oratorios, the word “choir” is used to specify those sections written specifically for such a group.

In the Divine Service the role of the choir is twofold: first to lead and support the congregation in the singing of hymns and those parts of the liturgy designated for them; and second to teach the congregation new hymns and liturgical settings that may not be familiar to them. The choir’s role is not to entertain the congregation, but to enrich their worship by leading and teaching.

Space and Orientation in Worship

In liturgical congregations, the pastor is often thought of as the leader in worship because he stands in front. However, the primary duty of the pastor is to stand in the stead of Christ (as a servant of the Word), speaking Christ’s Word to the people and giving His gifts. Jesus said to His apostles, “The one who hears you hears Me” (Luke 10:16). On the other hand, the people primarily stand as receivers of God’s gifts and as priests of God, offering sacrifices of prayer and thanksgiving (1 Peter 2:9–10).

Therefore, when it comes to liturgical orientation the pastor generally stands in front facing the people, addressing them with God’s own speech. The chancel should be reserved for the work of God carried out through the Office of the Holy Ministry (Augsburg Confession, Article V). The people face the pastor and the altar as they respond to God’s Word with confession, thanksgiving, and praise. As holy priests the people face the altar to offer their living sacrifices.

This should also inform the use of space and the orientation for other leaders in worship. As worship is primarily the offering of the people (not the work of the pastor), organists, choirs, choir directors, soloists, etc. may all be considered leaders in worship. They serve and guide the people in their worship of God. The balcony (or another suitable location in the nave) should be provided for other leaders in worship. They stand with the people and should not face the people, nor turn their backs to the altar, because they are not speaking in the stead of Christ. Rather they are aiding the people in their priestly work, offering praise and thanks to our gift-giving God.

Does Music or Style Become a Means of Grace?

In short: no. The Lutheran Confessions speak of the means of grace as the Gospel delivered in Word and Sacrament. The Confessions consistently teach against the “enthusiasts” who teach that the Holy Spirit works in the human heart apart from the Word and the Sacraments. Music, apart from the Word, is not a means of grace since it cannot bring Christ to us.

We can, however, speak of music as a vessel in which the means of grace are delivered. In Christian worship, the Gospel message is sung and the Sacraments are delivered in the context of liturgical celebration, which frequently employs music and song. Music is not a means of grace but it should be used to *adorn* the means of grace. Just as the Church seeks to use architecture and visual art in the service of the Gospel, so music should also be its servant.

Luther sums up well the role of music for the Church, “Use the gift of music to praise God and him alone, since he has given us this gift.”² Music serves to elevate both the Church’s proclamation and her prayer. We are invited in the Divine Service, “Lift up your hearts.” Good music will assist the worshiper in raising heart and mind to things above. It is a means to an end. Dr. Carl Schalk makes this point regarding the Lutheran chorale: “The chorale was a means of involving the gathered assembly specifically in the historic liturgy of the Western Church.”³

What then should we use as criteria for selecting appropriate music for the liturgical celebration? This question assumes that not every kind of music should have a place in Christian worship.⁴ In considering different styles of music, we might ask whether the music serves to invite man into the mysteries of Christ or invite mere sensuality or emotionalism. There is nothing wrong with music evoking emotion. The music used for Holy Week, for example, undeniably sets an appropriate “emotional” tone. One would not expect the same music on Good Friday and Easter Sunday! Emotion is not the problem unless its evocation becomes the end-goal of Christian worship. We might also ask whether the music we use is adorning the Word or superseding the Word by making a statement in and of itself.

The Church’s music should also be distinct. When we come to church, we should be keenly aware that this is not just an extension of the ordinary. Rather, the music used in church should alert us to the fact that we are in the presence of the Holy. This does not mean we need to shun all things new and return strictly to Gregorian chant or German chorales. In every age, the church has produced distinct music that can still be used today and can continue to be added to. As new music is written, though, the goal should not be to imitate the music of pop culture. Rather, our music should perpetuate that distinctly “holy culture” of the people of God.

In summary Dr. Schalk offers this succinct description of music in the Lutheran congregation:

In the Lutheran tradition [Christian song] is characterized by such terms as doxological, scriptural, liturgical (in the sense of reflecting the church’s desire for ordered Eucharistic worship within the rhythms of the church year, and the regular praying of the office within the rhythm of the day), traditional (in the sense of building on the best of the past), eclectic (in the sense of absorbing whatever styles, techniques, or practices may serve it best), creative, participatory, and aspiring to excellence in both conception and execution.⁵

Is This a Work?

The confessional understanding of worship is explained clearly by Melanchthon in The Apology of the Augsburg Confession: “Faith is... a desire to accept and grasp what is offered in the promise of Christ. This obedience toward God, this desire to receive the offered promise, is no less an act of worship than is love. God wants us to believe Him and to accept blessings from Him; this He declares to be true worship.”⁶ Melanchthon also contrasts true worship with ceremonies which arise from a lack of faith: “The world judges... about all works that they are a propitiation {atoning sacrifice} by which God is appeased... But because works cannot pacify the conscience, men constantly choose other works, make up new devotions, new vows... beyond God’s

² Quoted in *Lutheran Worship History and Practice*, ed. Precht, Fred L., CPH, St. Louis, 1993, 245.

³ *Ibid.*, 247.

⁴ For example, Joseph Ratzinger treats the topic of rock music in his book *The Spirit of the Liturgy*: “Rock...is the expression of elemental passions, and at rock festivals it assumes a cultic character, a form of worship, in fact, in opposition to Christian worship. People are, so to speak, released from themselves by the experience of being part of a crowd and by the emotional shock of rhythm, noise, and special lighting effects.”

⁵ *Lutheran Worship History and Practice*, 245.

⁶ Apology of the Augsburg Confession (Tappert edition), Article IV, par. 227-228.

command, in the hope of finding some great work that they can set against the wrath and judgment of God.”⁷ Melanchthon characterizes this search, saying that they “insist so bitterly on certain” ceremonies.⁸ We therefore understand “Divine Service,” as God serving man, thus His work, rather than ours.

Worship consisting entirely or primarily of thanks and praise reflects a different understanding. First the emphasis is on our doing, not on our receiving, for it turns the service around, as if hearing the gift of God’s Word depended on our prior piety, and thus fails to be true worship. Giving thanks should properly occur after receiving a gift, otherwise it becomes part of the work of begging. Secondly, the vehemence with which its advocates insist on a new model of worship as necessary to reach their particular generation denies our universal fallen human nature. God’s gifts are to all human beings, male and female, young and old, rich and poor, educated or not, all of us without exception being sinners. We all need the same Word, the same Law, the same Gospel, the same Water, and the same Body and Blood. We need to acknowledge these, our needs, as we receive their fulfillment in Christ in our meeting together. This should be done as Luther tells us in Freedom of a Christian:

*The very highest worship of God is this, that we ascribe to Him truthfulness, righteousness, and whatever else should be ascribed to one who is trusted. When this is done, the soul consents to His will. Then it hallows His name and allows itself to be treated according to God’s good pleasure for, clinging to God’s promises, it does not doubt that He who is true, just and wise will do, dispose, and provide all things well.*⁹

Harmony of consistency

As members of the parish we come together for divine service to worship our gracious God. In this service the pastor stands in the stead of Christ as he proclaims God’s word, hears our confessions and absolves our sins, administers the sacraments, and leads us in prayer. We respond by receiving absolution, hearing God’s word, and offering our thanksgiving and praise.¹ Consistency in worship takes the diversity of the gifts and talents in the parish and forms one cohesive community. Any irregularity in what the congregation prays and sings will disrupt this harmonious community. In Ephesians 4 and I Corinthians 11 & 12 St Paul tells us that the church is the one body of Christ who eats the one body of Christ in divine service.

The divine services for any given Sunday of the church year should be the same in all the services. There should be the same readings and the same sermon in all services, thereby showing respect and appreciation for the Lectionary. The music should be the same in all the services: appropriate for the season and offered humbly and respectfully to lead the congregation.

⁷ Ibid. par. 212

⁸ Ibid. par. 236

⁹ Freedom of a Christian, tr. W. A. Lambert and H. J. Grimm, LW, vol. 31.