

WORSHIP

WORSHIP BACKGROUND

Worship, or going to Church, is often the image associated with Christianity. Worship is often a person's first encounter with a church. For many it's their main involvement. For those who have been "going to Church" many years, worship may be routine.

What is Worship? Worship is "an expression of respect to a higher power" (Webster). For most religions, this means our response to the divine in respect for the benefits received or honor due to it.

(The Christian Cyclopedia, The Catholic Encyclopedia, The Dictionary of the Bible)

Biblical Basis. We worship because God commands it. " ...for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God" (Exodus 34:14). "And Jesus answered him, 'It is written, You shall worship the Lord Your God, and him only shall you serve'" (Luke 4:8).

Relationship. Because we know that our God is more than a dictator, worship is about relationship. Imagine a family gathering where the family patriarch is the main guest. There are greetings, sharing remembrances, apologies, "I love you," and sharing what is valued within the family. Everything in worship is done intentionally with God present.

Christianity is about living our life in a relationship with God. Relationships must be nourished. One needs to spend time with those who matter for that relation to grow and deepen. Worship is a fundamental and important way of nurturing a relationship with God.

Christianity is also about people's lives being changed through their acceptance of God's love and grace. The evidence of this change is "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23). In worship we come together to thank God for and to celebrate these transformations of ourselves, our neighbors, and the world.

Finally, worship is how we live our lives. The Formula of Concord says that "the ceremonies or church usages ...are in and for themselves no divine worship or even a part of it." That position comes from the Bible. "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me" (Isaiah 29:13). "In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" (Matthew 15:9). "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt-offerings" (Hosea 6:6). God is not happy if we only go through the motions of worship. It is also about living a life as a member of God's family with roles, responsibilities, and expectations associated with that relationship.

One may ask, "Can I be a Christian without attending Church? Can I worship on my own? If worship is about giving honor to God for what he has done for us, do I need to worship in Church?" From God's perspective, if we are worshipping only when we are alone, would he be pleased? Perhaps the question is, if God wants no one to be separate from him, can we worship alone? God wishes that no one feel trapped, alienated or unworthy. He wants everyone to feel His love.

MORE STUDY: LUTHERAN WORSHIP **The Ingredients of Lutheran Worship.** Worship in a Lutheran church is a time to come together as a community and share that time with God; to honor him, and to strengthen our relationship with him. Ultimately, there is no required form of worship. Styles, content, place, and participants all vary as greatly as the creativity of people who are moved by the Spirit. Understanding that, nonetheless, Lutheran worship builds on a heritage of faith stretching back to the early church and beyond to pre-Christian Jewish practice.

Lutheran worship has four main parts:

- 1) Confession (making things right with God)
- 2) Word (study of God's teaching)
- 3) Communion (remembering Christ and his Sacrifice as he instructed us to do)
- 4) Sending (preparing us to reenter the world to live lives which reflect Christ's will)

Lutheran worship expresses the basic beliefs about our relation to God within that structure. There is a seasonality which cycles through the important aspects of God's relation to people. There is a three-year cycle of Bible readings, called the Lectionary, which cover most of the important writings in the Christian faith. Each service also includes songs, prayers, and a message which are tied to these elements. Just as daily meals sustain us physically, these elements combine to nourish us spiritually by sustaining a sound understanding of faith basics and growing a strong relationship with God.

The Basics of Lutheran Worship:

The Confession. Our God is a God of Love and Grace. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16). God's Grace is expressed more clearly by Paul: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life" (Ephesians 2:8-10).

Sins separate us from God. That is why the service begins with a confession. The words used in the traditional invocation, quoted from 1 John, say it best. "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:8-9). Through the words of confession, we acknowledge our sin. We also rejoice in the fact that God has put us right with him! We are reassured that God is loving, compassionate and full of Grace. We can get back on track. There are no more barriers between God and us.

The Word. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, "the Word" means the will of God. The segment of worship around the Word is about hearing and reflecting on God's intent for us. Each worship will have a theme, which may be seasonal (see the end of the booklet for a description), may relate to one of the three-year-cycle, Bible passages used that day or may be selected for a specific purpose.

- 1) The Readings, together with the Gospel, are selected as part of a three-year cycle of readings which covers most of the main texts of importance to the Christian faith. Each passage will tie to a theme of the day. Some readings may be omitted when there are time constraints.
- 2) The Old Testament Passage is taken from the portion of the Bible predating Christ; this passage is also part of the Jewish Bible today. The Old Testament records God's relation to Israel through history.
- 3) The Psalms are also from the Old Testament and are traditionally chanted. They are hymns used in ancient worship.
- 4) Epistles are letters written by early Church leaders. These letters are part of the New Testament portion of the Bible. The Epistles instructed and encouraged the early Church. They also helped define our understanding of Jesus as well as the purpose of the church.
- 5) The Holy Gospel (good news) is a reading from Matthew, Mark, Luke or John, the books of the New Testament which describe Jesus' life and words. The congregation usually stands for the reading to honor the person of Jesus.

Sermon. "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). The sermon has been an important part of Lutheran worship. It is usually based on one of the

Biblical passages. The Lutheran sermon takes advantage of the extensive theological studies Pastors conduct before qualifying for their position. They take inspiration from God's word to apply it to the life of listeners.

The Creed. A statement of faith is used as a response to God's word. The two creeds most often used are the Apostles Creed, dating back to the first or second century as a baptismal confession, and the Nicene Creed, developed in the fourth century to define the shared Christian faith.

Holy Communion. Communion, or the Eucharist, was established by Jesus at his last meal celebrating Passover with his disciples. Families, countries, and religions typically have historical events which have strong meaning to them and give them a shared identity. The Eucharist is a defining heritage for Christians. The heritage is made of the history around the meal itself, the drama contained in that history, and the significance of Jesus' life and death which is reflected in that historical drama.

The historical event took place on Jesus' final trip to Jerusalem. As part of Jewish tradition, Jesus celebrated the Passover meal (see Exodus 12) with his close disciples. Jesus anguished over his knowledge that he would be betrayed by one of his friends, abandoned by the rest, and subjected to a painful death. During the meal celebration, Jesus took bread and wine, referring to them as his body and blood, and implored the disciples to remember. On that same night, Jesus was arrested. The following day, he was tried, tortured, and executed by the slow, torturous method of crucifixion.

He was hastily buried that same evening on the day Christians refer to as Good Friday. Two days later, he was resurrected from the dead and appeared to a number of his followers.

The significance for Christians is that Jesus asked that the purpose of his life and death be remembered when we eat and drink. The meal is celebrated because Jesus asked us to do so. Jesus' words at the meal about the bread and wine are steeped in layers of meaning that ultimately point to the new relationship created, the 'New Covenant,' between God and us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Christians believe that God became a true human being so that he could fully reveal the relationship he intended to have with us. That relationship is not about being good or working hard to believe, nor does God wish to see anyone oppressed, alienated, victimized, made to feel meaningless, or separated. God wishes us a life of companionship with him. The disciples saw God's intent in the person of Jesus. How appropriate that God's desire for a life in companionship with us be expressed in a meal!

The Sending. The congregation is now dismissed with a thanksgiving, a blessing, and a reminder that we are now to go into the world to do the works of our Lord. There are many blessings for the end of the service, but the most common is the Benediction from Numbers. It is also the oldest archeologically-documented biblical passage. A 7th century BC fragment containing the passage was found in a tomb in Jerusalem. "The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, "Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them, the LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace." So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them'" (Numbers 6:22-27).

A DEEPER LOOK-. DISCUSSION

- 1) **What is Liturgy?** Liturgy (*leitourgia*) is a Greek composite word meaning originally a public duty, a service to the state undertaken by a citizen. Literally, it is the work of the people. It generally describes the form that our public, corporate worship takes.

Forms of worship in major religions expresses a reality of the divine as shared by believers. The form can take many expressions and still express the same reality. Lutherans emphasize aspects of a Christian understanding of reality which are particularly important to us. What do you think they are? How is this different from other denominations?

- 2) **What are the best times for worship?** What difference does it make? What difference could it make to you? To others? To seekers? To God?

- 3) **Does traditional Lutheran worship have any place in our lives anymore?** What is worship to you? What parts matter? Do you believe that your feelings on worship matter in God's sight? Why would "traditional" lose its place in modern worship styles? Based on those considerations, should we work to preserve traditional worship? Should we work to actively change worship?

- 4) **Who is worship about?** How does that matter when considering worship styles?