

Studies in renewal

Study 8:

The Spirit of God and the worship of the church

By Rev HPV Renner, Brisbane Qld (1987)

What role does the Spirit of God play in the church's worship?
Does 'structured' worship restrict the activity of the Spirit?
What place is there in Lutheran worship for variety and spontaneity?
What are the dangers of person-centred worship?

The Spirit of God has been sent from the Father and the Son to be the Helper (*Paraclete*) of the church. His mission is to bear witness to Christ, to glorify Christ, to take what Christ has given and to pass that on to people (See John 15:26; 16:14; 16:13).

In order to do that, the Spirit gathers together believers in Jesus Christ for worship. In the worship of the church the life-giving Word, which the Spirit himself has given to the church, is read and proclaimed. This Word testifies of Christ (John 5:39).

In the worship of the church the Sacrament of the Altar is administered. Through it Christ comes to his church and is present to her. When Paul speaks of that sacrament, he tells how that which he gives he has received from the Lord (1 Cor 11:23–26).

In the worship of the church absolution is pronounced (John 20:22, 23). Through it the forgiveness of sins won by Jesus through his work of redemption is imparted. It is not without significance that Christ first gave his disciples the Holy Spirit before he commissioned them to forgive and retain sins.

GOD-INITIATED

It is important to note that Christian worship is God-initiated worship. Jesus Christ commanded his church to baptise and teach (Matt 28:19, 20). Jesus Christ instituted the Lord's Supper, instructing his church to celebrate it 'in remembrance' of him (Matt 26:26; Luke 22:19; 1 Cor 11:24, 25). Following the instruction of our Lord, the church proclaims and hears his Word and administers and receives his sacrament. Word and sacrament are the

great pillars upon which the worship of the church is based. They are the means by which Christ comes to his church. They are the means by which God gives the grace of forgiveness, life and salvation to his people. So Word and sacrament are the means by which the church as a whole and its individual members are renewed initially and continually. They generate and nourish faith in the people who worship. They call forth in worshippers confession of sins, confession of faith, praise, adoration, supplication, intercession, and discipleship with its dedication to service.

The worship of the church, then, is a God-initiated event, in which space is given for the Word of God to be read and proclaimed, and the sacraments of God to be administered. Worship is a God-initiated event in which the people assembled are also given space to respond to the gift of Word and sacrament by which God has enriched them.

For study:

1. What does God give his people in the worship of the church?
How does he do this?
Through whom does he do this?
2. How do God's gifts, imparted to his church in worship, affect the worshippers?
How do we express those effects most appropriately in public worship?

Vital in the event called worship is the role that the Spirit of God plays.

- He provides the Word that is proclaimed (2 Tim 3:16).
- He guides and directs and gives necessary gifts to the ordained preachers of the Word.
- He creates faith in the hearts of those who hear the Word (Rom 10:14–17).
- In the sacred Scriptures he faithfully transmits and preserves Christ's instructions about the administration of the sacraments.
- He also creates faith in the hearts of those to whom the sacraments are administered.

The Spirit of God is concerned that the church, Christ's body, should grow and be built up through the proclamation of the Word and through the administration of the sacraments. Nothing should be permitted that hinders or distorts the proper use of the means of grace. Hence the Spirit is concerned that good order and structure are created in which the Word is faithfully proclaimed and the sacraments are administered according to Christ's instruction. He is concerned that the forms used in worship are appropriate and adequate forms for the Word to have free course within the assembled congregation, and for the fullness and richness of God's grace to be poured out upon the worshippers.

The Holy Spirit has given clear and forceful instructions about proper order for worship through his apostle Paul, who wrote to the Corinthian congregation when it was experiencing growth-restricting difficulties and disturbances in its worship (1 Cor 14). For example, where there was disorder in the congregation in the proclamation of the Word - with regard to speaking in tongues (1 Cor 14:6–11) and to taking turns at addressing the congregation - Paul arrested chaos and restored order through a series of instructions. He permitted the edifying flow of the Word.

Because there is always the Corinthian danger of chaos and disorder taking charge of the worship of the church and impeding the flow of God's Word, our church has been careful in

shaping its acts of worship to follow the guidance and instruction of the Spirit given in 1 Corinthians 14. She is concerned to let it be seen in her 'orders' of service that the God whom she is worshipping is not a God of confusion, but of order (1 Cor 14:33, 40). A well-'ordered' act of worship ensures free course for the Word of God, the 'correct' dispensing of the sacraments, and the curbing of the spirit of chaos. It facilitates the building up (edifying) of Christ's body, the church.

For study:

3. Read 1 Corinthians 14.
What dangers and disturbances to public worship does Paul address?
What instruction does he give?
4. Why are good order and structure important in public worship?

SOME DANGERS

There is a danger in the church, however, that form and order may become a goal in themselves, rather than the means for attaining the goal for worship. Where that happens, 'rigid ritualism' takes over. Precise adherence to the details of the ritual is seen as absolutely essential to proper worship, and this is taken to such an extent that the content of the Word and sacrament suffers.

Closely related is the danger of mechanical repetition and re-enactment of an order of service (Matt 15:8), which can reduce the act of worship to something approximating a magical event. The church needs order and structure for its common public acts of worship, but always and only with the aim of an edifying, life-giving and life-sustaining meeting between God and his people.

There is still another danger in the church, namely, that the act of worship becomes very person-centred; that is, governed by needs that a person or group of people may feel at the given time, and so structured that only those needs are met. For example, some people may feel very strongly the need for warmth and love. The acts of worship which they shape and the words and content that they put into worship are heavily weighted both to express that need and to meet it. Others may feel very strongly the need for joy and happiness. Their worship is full of actions and words that are meant to stimulate and express joy.

Unfortunately, person-centred worship, while it focuses on needs that are felt acutely, so often does not meet the needs that God in his understanding of us knows to be most urgent. Christian worship, initiated by God, addresses the comprehensive range of human needs, in particular, the deepest and most fundamental of human needs, namely, the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.

A further danger is that worshippers, meeting as a congregation, feel the need for what is called 'spontaneity'. By 'spontaneity' is meant the subjective, on-the-spot gushings - doing one's own thing without the discipline or control of theologically grounded thought and planning. Some people claim, and even demand, the 'freedom' to express themselves as their mood or emotion of the moment dictates. They wish to see spontaneity expressed both in God's communication to them and in their communication to him. For some of them spontaneity is a sign that the Spirit is at work. Formal aspects of worship are criticised as dead, void of the Spirit's influence. Not only does free reign for spontaneity frequently result in an act of worship being reduced to chaos; it also too easily opens doors for spirits other than the Holy Spirit to take charge of the worshippers.

For study:

5. Which of the dangers listed above require most attention in your congregation's situation?
6. How can the above dangers best be overcome?

Some charismatically inclined Christians feel the need to give prominence to 'speaking in tongues' and to 'healing' as central features of Christian worship. It is important here to stress that the Word and the sacrament are the central, God-appointed features of public Christian worship. Speaking in tongues may be useful for personal edification (1 Cor 14:4), but not for corporate congregational edification. It does not assist the free flow of God's Word to the assembled congregation (1 Cor 14:9–12.); it does not contribute to the building up of the body, which is the deep concern of St Paul. The practice of physical healing, though it addresses a human need, is not vital to our salvation. It is not a sacrament.

Note: For further comments on speaking in tongues, see Studies 1, 2 and 6 in this series. For further notes on healing, see Study 7.

COMMON PUBLIC WORSHIP

Christians should distinguish between 'common public worship' and 'private worship'. Common public worship is worship conducted in the context of a congregational assembly. It is worship designed to involve the whole congregation. Private worship, on the other hand, is the worship that an individual, or a group of likeminded individuals (e.g. youth, fellowships, students, etc.) engages in.

It is important that orders of service used for common public worship are agreed upon by the worshipping congregation. Where there is church fellowship with congregations in other locations, it is important that all the congregations forming a synod or 'wider' church have commonly agreed orders of service for worship. A multiplicity of orders creates confusion among worshippers moving from congregation to congregation and makes it difficult for members from one area to feel at one with, and at home in, the company of worshippers from another area. Christians of a common faith need to remember that commonly agreed upon orders of service help to unify them. Their common orders are public confessions of faith: they are theology prayed and proclaimed in concord.

Orders of service for common public worship need to cater for the fact that the people using them may be of varied backgrounds, with a variety of tastes, especially in art forms. Christian love demands that the service orders express common ground for the variety of members. Private worship, on the other hand, may be expressed in a wide variety of forms. It caters for the tasks and needs of individuals or groups of like-minded individuals.

In spite of what has been said, orders for common public worship should make room for variety, not only in the 'propers' (parts of the service which change from season to season and Sunday to Sunday, such as the introit, collects, etc.), but also in the hymns and prayers. Our own Lutheran orders for common public worship make room for quite a deal of variety.

Acceptable 'spontaneity' (see above) is quite another matter. Where it is allowed in the common public worship, it should be 'ritually controlled', i.e. the time allowed for it should be managed, the people permitted to express spontaneous aspects of worship should be selected, and the type of spontaneous action should be under the management of the presiding celebrant. It should be self-understood that all aspects of the worship - actions and utterances alike - whether structured or spontaneous, should be in accord with the sacred Scriptures and the Confessions of the church. Probably one of the safest areas of spontaneity

is prayer, provided that the Spirit-recommended controls are maintained (cf. Matt 6:1ff). Congregations themselves may be at different stages of development, and able to accommodate variety and acceptable spontaneity at different levels.

For study:

7. Discuss the following statement: 'To allow freedom for the Spirit of God to work in worship adequate room must be given for spontaneity.'
8. Study the 'Order of Service with Holy Communion' from the Lutheran Hymnal pp 1–17. Discuss the reasons for the inclusion of the various parts of the service (e.g. Confession and Absolution, Creed, Collect, General Prayer).

PRIVATE WORSHIP

Private acts of worship, the prayer services, praise services, Bible studies, auxiliary/fellowship devotions, etc., should never be in conflict or competition with acts of common public worship. Rather, they should grow out of and be stimulated by the common public service and be rich in the theological content that characterises it.

When acts of private worship are hailed as more 'satisfying' than, or are regarded as 'preferable' to, the act of common public worship, or when they are set in opposition to the common public service, they may begin to fracture the 'unity of the Spirit' and cause schism in the Body of Christ. This would be a sign that they are not shaped and conducted under the guidance of the Spirit of God.

REMEMBER

The Spirit of God is crucially active in the worship of the church.

- He provides the Word of God, which is the content of the church's worship.
- He guides the church in the shaping of its public acts of worship.
- He creates the faith, which determines the 'mood' of worship (e.g. reverence, sorrow, joy, jubilation), and which creates the context for worship, namely, love of God and the fellowman.
- He unites believers as a body around the Christ, to whom he testifies, and whom he seeks to glorify in the worship of the church.