

Worship the Lord

No.55, July 2012



Confessional Perspectives on Worship

Freedom and Love

By Stephen Valleskey

How will we worship? The question is not new. The particulars may be changed and the question framed in ways different from earlier generations, but the question itself is at least as old as the Reformation with its clear enunciation of the principle of Christian freedom. For centuries the forms of worship had been centrally mandated in the church, so it ought not surprise us that, with their new-found freedom in worship, the heirs of the Reformation would struggle to define how free is free.

This is the first in a series of articles in *Worship the Lord* on charting our course in worship. I don't think anyone in WELS will dispute that where we need to be in worship is on the "middle ground" between legalism and license, not slipping into any extreme on either side. Just what constitutes that middle ground is another matter. But I think all will agree that we will not find the middle ground anywhere but in renewed study of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions.

In this first article of the series, we explore how the biblical concepts of freedom and love help to shape worship for us. Many other concerns, scriptural and confessional, play in, but here we deal simply with freedom and love. Luther captured the tension between these two principles in his familiar paradox:

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.
A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all
(LW 31, 344).

The free lord upholds the principle of freedom; the dutiful servant the principle of love. Both are at work in the believer simultaneously. In 1 Corinthians 10:23, the apostle expresses the tension between the two principles in this way: "'Everything is permissible'—but not everything is beneficial. 'Everything is permissible'—but not everything is constructive" (cf. also 1 Corinthians 6:12).

I write from the perspective of a pastor with forty-five years in parish ministry who is still active full-time. In this time I have

prepared well over 3,000 services of congregational worship, keenly aware throughout of who we are as confessional Lutherans within the conservative Reformation and mindful of the pastoral heart of Luther who was solicitous that the faith of God's people not be disrupted by "new and unusual" methods of worshipping God (LW 53, 19). All this would contribute to a conservative bent. While in my first parish, I studied organ under Heinrich Fleischer in a masters program at the University of Minnesota and learned to play and love the great organ literature of the church, adding a layer to this writer's conservative make-up.

At the same time, seven of those forty-five years of ministry were spent as a missionary in Central Africa, something that tested much of what I understood to be proper liturgical worship as we struggled to help our African brothers find their way in worship. Back in the 1960s, I participated in the annual Liturgical Conference at Valparaiso University (Kurt Eggert also was a regular attendee) and was exposed to the thinking that produced the new Lutheran service books of the last quarter of the 20th century. The critical need for language updating and for a new song and fresh ways of expressing our worship was brought home to me. These things made me open to worship reform. From my pastor-father I learned early on evangelistic zeal which has led to a commitment to winning souls alongside doing good liturgy.

A New Series

This issue begins a new series to explore various confessional perspectives on worship. May God grant that study and discussion of these confessional perspectives contribute to God-pleasing worship, to synodical unity, and to spiritual impact within our congregations and communities. Stephen Valleskey has served Abiding Word, Houston, Texas, since 1982, a congregation blessed with regular growth and, usually, double-digit adult confirmations.—Bryan Gerlach

Continued on next page

Questions about Christian freedom surfaced long before the Reformation. Already in New Testament times, the freedom we have in Christ was tested in a number of ways. Jesus observed the Sabbath, but he did not permit himself to be legalistically dominated by it so that he could not do good on it (Mark 3). The Jerusalem Council respected the scruples of those abstaining from meat of strangled animals, etc., while insisting on the freedom of the gospel (Acts 15). Paul refused to have Titus circumcised in defense of Christian freedom, something he was not about to yield for a moment (Galatians 2). But Timothy, to the contrary, Paul had circumcised, freely yielding Christian freedom so as not to cause offense (Acts 16). In matters of order in worship (1 Corinthians 14), in the administration of the Sacrament (1 Corinthians 11), and in choices whether to eat or not eat meat sacrificed to idols (Romans 14; 1 Corinthians 8), we find the themes of freedom in Christ or foregoing freedom out of concern for the weak, taking offense and giving offense, freely interwoven.

*The free lord upholds the principle of freedom;
the dutiful servant the principle of love.*

Voices for freedom in worship will argue that worship forms that are not culturally sensitive can impede the gospel and hinder the Holy Spirit's work of converting souls and building the church. Since there is no ceremonial law or canon law in Scripture that governs New Testament worship, the form of our worship is an adiaphoron. We are free to pick and choose forms that least get in the way of the Holy Spirit's work in a given place and culture, so long as the gospel is proclaimed in its purity and the sacraments administered according to Christ's form and order (Augustana, VII). The gospel in 21st century America needs to be presented in a culturally-appropriate way. Those who would burden the church with archaic worship forms are killing the church—at least the church of pure, undiluted grace.

Love takes a different tack. Love of the brotherhood will lead us in Christian freedom to use agreed-upon worship forms so as not to create offense and confusion in the church. The Confessions lead us to value a worship which connects us to the church of all time and which helps our members, as they move between churches, readily to identify who we are by the worship forms we hold in common. Worship in the New Testament may be an adiaphoron, but as Luther intimated in a letter to Melanchthon of August 26, 1530, nothing in the church is purely a matter of indifference. Everything that we do in worship affects the brotherhood. Untoward license in worship shows little consideration of the weak who may be led to stumble and fall through our carelessness. Music in worship that is too closely associated with undertones of secular culture may interfere with the gospel and obscure its message.

So we deal with the biblical principles of freedom and love as we plan our worship, and these two are in tension. Christian theology will work not to resolve the tension but to maintain it. Classic heresy in the church is holding strongly to one truth of Scripture at



the expense of, and to the damage of, an equally valid scriptural truth. The heresy of Jehovah's Witness and other anti-trinitarian groups is that they hold so strongly to the biblical truth that God is one that they drive out the equally biblical truth that Father is God, Son is God, and Holy Spirit is God. Calvinist heresy is to hold so strongly to the biblical truth of particular grace as to deny the equally biblical truth of universal grace. That kind of heresy can arise also from a careless setting of freedom against love or love against freedom in our worship.

The Apostle Paul sets the tone for New Testament worship with his clarion call to freedom in Galatians: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery" (Galatians 5:1). The "burdening" of the church to which Paul alludes is the Old Testament ceremonial law under which the Israelites had been in bondage. The mere thought of sinking back again under that intolerable load strikes Paul as inconceivable. Old Testament legal regulations governing worship were a part of that burden.

Old Testament worship was, in fact, strictly regulated by God. August Pieper notes: "In Israel all worship and ecclesiastical activity was regulated by legal precepts in the most minute detail. . . . All of this was directly prescribed by God, or at least carried out in accordance with God's will, down to ribbons and tassels, pegs and hooks; and all of it was legally just as binding as the Ten Commandments themselves and for Israel belonged to the Torah, the law, the law of Moses and of God" (*Are There Legal Regulations in the New Testament?* p. 3; available at wlsessays.net).

But what of our New Testament worship with candles and albs, the Divine Service and occasional services, the elements that may or must be present for a proper service of worship to God, the signing of the cross, liturgy that is sung or said, the choice of musical instruments (organ, piano, keyboard, harp, guitar, trumpet, timpani, snare drum), the use of choir or lectors or cantors, liturgical colors, the calendar and lectionary that sets the course for our church year, acolytes, crucifers, processions? Has not the Lord prescribed for us how to carry out our divine worship?

We are free to pick and choose forms that least get in the way of the Holy Spirit's work in a given place and culture.

The answer is a simple no. The New Testament knows no outward regulations of its worship that correspond to what we find in the Old Testament. "Apart from the sacraments there is nothing pertaining to the church and its activity that has been prescribed as to outward form; no form for the worship service, the sermon, the prayers, the liturgy, the singing; also no time, no frequency, no duration, no prescribed order of worship. Yes, not even for the worship gatherings themselves, for gatherings of any kind is there any explicit regulation. After the Lord gave the church the Gospel and the sacraments, and his Holy Spirit, he left all outward forms and arrangements, everything of a ceremonial nature, to the free determination of the church governed by the Spirit" (. . . *Legal Regulations*, p. 12).



So how would we see the biblical principle of love dealing with the freedom we have in Christ in our worship? We are not talking about the Hollywood version of love as a squishy, warm, romantic feeling, but love in its best Old and New Testament sense as an active force, something that does not just feel but acts and does. This kind of love is by no means a compromising element that limits or squelches our freedom, but a powerful, active principle that guides us in worship as in all aspects of our Christian life.

Love plays a unique role in the divine system of things. The Bible does not merely say that God is *loving*, but "God is *love*" (1 John 4:18). This is unique in descriptions of God's attributes. When the apostle lists qualities of Christian life, he concludes by saying "over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity" (Colossians 3:14).

- Love will acknowledge that the form of New Testament worship is an adiaphoron. Worship itself is not an adiaphoron; the form of it is. Old Testament worship was strictly mandated in its many details; New Testament worship is lived in the freedom of the gospel. "Christ is the end of the law" (Romans 10:4) and of every attempt to legally mandate a form of worship.
- Love will keep us from name-calling and making caricatures of each other's positions. Not every attempt at introducing new ideas in worship is to be dismissed as "*church growth*." To find benefits and value in traditional liturgical worship is not necessarily *restitution*. The 19th century framers of the Common Service were not engaged in *restitution* of a worship form they found in 16th century Europe. They looked at what they considered the best of the liturgies that were in use in post-Reformation Lutheranism, excluding liturgies from southern Germany that, under the influence of Bucer, were more Reformed than Lutheran. They assessed frequency of use of worship elements and made choices for the Common Service. *Restitution* would be more akin to going back to TLH 1941 and adopting wholesale, without discernment, the p. 5 and p. 15 liturgies as the only way to worship.

The Confessions lead us to value a worship which connects us to the church of all time.

- Love will eschew false dichotomies such as the one sometimes contrived between liturgy and outreach. In his comments on the Symposium on Worship and Outreach at the seminary, President Mark Schroeder said, "The symposium reminds us that Lutheran liturgical worship and a commitment to reach the lost are not mutually exclusive" (*Together*, 9-20-2010). One can be committed to the historic liturgy of the church and at the same time be fully committed to winning souls.

Continued on back page

- Love will teach us not to fear freedom but embrace it. Confessional Lutherans will continue to use the drawings of love, not law, to pull those who use their freedom to experiment at the edges of legalism or license back to the cherished and solidly Lutheran middle ground of worship. "Legalism, even in defense of the gospel, is still legalism" (Tiefel, James, *The Liturgy and Its Use in Our Church*, p. 14). Confessional Lutherans will continue to promote the Sacrament in a way so as to increase hunger and thirst for it. But legal inducements to a more frequent communion have no place.
- Love will lead us to talk to each other, listen to what each other has to say, keep open the channels of communication. In his little book, *To Understand Each Other*, Swiss doctor Paul Tournier says, "Listen to the conversations of the world, of nations as well as of individuals. For the most part they are conversations of the deaf with the deaf. Everyone speaks and no one listens." "We understand," Tournier notes, "when we have the will to understand." Tournier illustrates this by a transatlantic flight on which he and his American seatmate discovered they were both medical doctors. Tournier says that though his American counterpart spoke only English, and he spoke only French and German and no English, it was amazing how well they communicated with each other because they had the will to understand. Worship concerns do not degenerate into worship wars when we talk with each other and listen to each other and cultivate the will to understand.

Love will eschew false dichotomies such as the one sometimes contrived between liturgy and outreach.

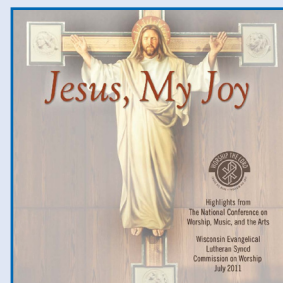
What will a Lutheran worship that is free and governed by love look like? In this we cannot yield:

- It will be a worship characterized by a clear presentation of law and gospel, with the justification of the sinner by grace through faith at the heart and core.
- It will be a worship that is, first, the service of God to his people through Word and Sacrament, and only secondarily the response of our prayer and praise. "For the Lutheran . . . the worship service is primarily a service which God renders to us, a way by which he bestows his grace to us, the high point of which is the Sacrament, which, viewed as our activity, is a seeking for grace, an enjoyment of God" (Pieper, August, *The Difference*

between the Reformed and the Lutheran Interpretation of the So-called Third Use of the Law, p.4). This does not mean that there cannot be occasional services where prayer and praise are the main thing. But the *Hauptgottesdienst*, the principal worship service, will always give the most prominent place to God's saving service to us through Word and Sacrament.

- It will be a worship that will give first place to the gospel as the first criterion to which all elements of worship must be subjected. Anything contrary to the gospel is to be rejected. Anything damaging to the gospel, or over shadowing the gospel, or obstructing the free flow of the gospel likewise must yield. "Therefore everything that is inconsistent with the Gospel of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Spirit effective in it must be excluded from the form of worship" (Brunner, *Worship in the Name of Jesus*, p. 223).
- Worship that is free and governed by love will never lose sight of the confessional truth that the marks of the church are not to be sought in a uniformity in externals, but in the proclamation of the gospel in its truth and purity, and in the right administration of the Sacraments.

Next issue: Professor Joel Otto will look at how the Lutheran Confessions help us steer a middle course in worship.



A double CD of highlights from the 2011 worship conference is available from NPH. Some audio excerpts are available at <https://connect.wels.net/AOM/ps/worship> as well as some full tracks for free download—sermons as well as music. Look under "What's New?"