

Worship the Lord

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In the House of the Lord: A Bible Information Class

By Michael Zarling

It is in the house of the Lord where we meet our God. We have an intimate conversation with him. We tell him our greatest and darkest secrets. He declares how much he loves us through his Son living, dying and rising for us. We tell him our desires and our fears. He admonishes the proud, soothes the hurting, and comforts the despairing. We let him know that so much of our lives are lived apart from him and his will for our lives. He invites us to dine with him at his holy table.

All of this is done in one place—in the house of the Lord.

As King Solomon was building the temple in Jerusalem, he realized the immensity of what he was building for God. He prayed, “Will God really dwell on earth with men? The heavens, even the highest heavens, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built” (2 Chronicles 6:18)! The heavens cannot contain our Lord. Yet he still deigns to dwell among us in his temple, his church, his house.

Perhaps Jacob was the first to grasp the depth of God dwelling on earth among his people. After Jacob’s dream about the connecting of heaven and earth, he prayed, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it.” He was afraid and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven” (Genesis 28:16-17).

The worship services in the house of the Lord are where the people to whom we minister—both members and visitors—meet their God face-to-face. They hear his voice through spoken, sung, and read Word. The people respond with their prayers and praise. God gives his sacraments. The people present their offerings. The people come into God’s presence with the invocation of the Triune God and they leave God’s house with his threefold blessing.

Most people—perhaps even our own long-time members—may not realize how much is being taught in every worship service. The ancient liturgy of the Christian church answers many questions with which people wrestle. Questions about the nature of God are answered in the Invocation and Benediction of the Divine Service. Inquiries about the love of God are fulfilled in the Confession and

Absolution. Challenges toward the divinity of Jesus are countered in the creeds. Debates about homosexuality or the divine callings of men and women are confronted in the Marriage Rite. Uncertainties about life after death, heaven and hell are made certain in the Funeral Rite.

I believe that almost every question people may have is at least introduced—if not answered outright—through the liturgy. That is why an adult confirmation class or Bible Information Class (BIC) on the basic doctrines of Scripture has been developed based upon the elements of the liturgy of the Christian Church.

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The old thesis *lex orandi, lex credendi* (“The law of prayer is the law of belief”) remains true. *In the House of the Lord* is based on this thesis: “What we believe influences how we worship. And how we worship reflects what we believe.” What this BIC attempts to do is to walk students through the liturgy, while at the same time teaching them the doctrines that each portion of the liturgy proclaims. As the students become more comfortable with God’s teachings, they become more comfortable in God’s house. And vice versa.

Pastor Zarling, a 1996 graduate of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, served as a home missionary for eight years in Radcliff, KY. He currently serves at Epiphany Church and Wisconsin Lutheran School in Racine, WI. He has given presentations on the BIC described in this article at the seminary’s Mission and Ministry event and at the WELS national worship conference.

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In the *House of the Lord* includes these lessons.

1. Invocation – Trinity
2. Confession, Absolution and Kyrie – Law and Gospel
3. Gloria in Excelsis – Praise and Worship
4. Word and Sermon – Scripture, truth, false doctrine, and Christian fellowship
5. First Article – Creation, evolution, and preservation
6. Second Article – Redemption, justification, and the two natures of Christ
7. Third Article – Sanctification, conversion, and faith
8. Offering – Stewardship
9. Prayer – Lord’s Prayer
10. Baptismal Rite from Occasional Services – Baptism
11. Communion – Lord’s Supper and communion fellowship
12. Song of Simeon and Benediction – Peace and evangelism
13. Marriage Rite – Blessings of marriage, roles of men and women (also discuss living together, homosexuality, etc.)
14. Funeral Rite – Death, resurrection, and Judgment Day

Each lesson contains a student’s guide with questions and Bible passages. Throughout the lesson, the Bible passages establish the basis for God’s doctrine. Then the student sees that doctrine revealed in the text of the liturgy that is presented at the end of each lesson.

All the lessons close with a hymn used as a prayer. This helps familiarize the students with the hymns, teaches them to use the hymns as prayers (either spoken or sung), and demonstrates that our hymns also contain and teach God’s doctrines just as much as the liturgy.

The course contains a teacher’s guide for each lesson. Each lesson also has an accompanying Google presentation complete with questions, pictures, illustrations, and videos.

My favorite part of the course is the homework. Since people learn in different ways, the class is written in two different styles. The lessons are taught using a catechetical method. The homework is taught using a more narrative method.

Each homework lesson gives a brief history of a portion of the liturgy. Then it allows the student to read the Bible passages or accounts from which the liturgy is derived. For example, to learn about sin and forgiveness, the students examine David’s confessions in Psalms 32 and 51. To learn about the *Kyrie*, they hear blind Bartimaeus and the tax collector cry out, “Lord, have mercy on me.” To learn about the *Gloria in Excelsis*, they hear the song of the angels, the cry of John the Baptist, and the praise of the saints in heaven. In lessons 5 through 7, the students study each person of the Trinity in depth by using the articles of the Apostles’ Creed. In the homework, they examine the Bible passages that support each phrase in the articles of the Nicene Creed.

The homework intentionally connects the student with a portion of our Lutheran Confessions or the Large Catechism. There is a Bible passage to memorize to reinforce the lesson. There are daily Bible

readings scheduled so that throughout the course of the 14 lessons, the students read Matthew through Romans.

There are a number of strengths to this course. Students acquire a deeper appreciation for worship and the liturgy. They are able to unite what they do on Sunday morning in church with what God tells them in his Scriptures. They come to understand that what Christians do in worship is not made-up or concocted. The themes in worship and even words come directly from Scripture. The course purposefully connects new Christians with how Christians were worshiping centuries and even millennia ago.

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The course is designed for “old-school” students with lessons and homework printed on paper and everything kept in three-ring binders. However, since the entire course is on Google Drive, the lessons and homework can be shared with students so that they can bring a laptop or tablet for taking notes and doing the work. I have used both methods in teaching the course to my adult and youth confirmants.

In teaching the course to my confirmation students, I email the lesson and homework to them before class. They then take notes using their Chromebook in school and do their homework on their laptop at home. They email their notes and homework to me to grade. I can teach the six chief parts of the Catechism in a creative way through the liturgy.



Because I haven't had too many tech savvy adults in class yet, I still print the lessons and homework for them. However, since I'm currently working with a few high school and college students, they bring their laptops or tablets with them to class. I can email them the lessons or they can use the link on Google Drive to access their lessons and homework. We spend about 15 minutes at the beginning of each class looking over the homework together and then about an hour and 15 minutes working on the lesson.

There may be some perceived weaknesses in the course. This course does not really address the Ten Commandments. After all, the commandments are not a part of the liturgy. However, specific lessons may include reference to the commandments: lesson 3, commandments 1-3; lesson 5, commandment 5; lesson 8, commandments 7, 9, 10; lesson 13, commandments 4, 6, and 8. I do include the commandments and spend more time on the Lord's Prayer and the Keys when teaching the course in my confirmation class. Nor does the course teach Bible history. The goal of the course is an introduction to doctrines which are then reinforced by the liturgy. Biblical history will come in subsequent member classes.

Some pastors who have used my course have noticed that there is a lot of information, videos, pictures, etc. They wonder how I can get through everything in an hour and a half. I admit that whether I'm preparing a lesson for coaching soccer or teaching a class or writing a sermon, I like to have more than I might use. Then I can reduce where necessary. Because I have used the class with adult non-members in BIC, adult members in Sunday morning class, and with youth confirmants in our grade school, each lesson contains a lot of information or modes of delivering the information. Some fits one age group and audience better than others. If you choose to use the course, please feel free to cut, adapt, and add to make it more specific to your church and ministry. The course is consciously written

without numbered questions so that it may be easily adapted. I have illustrated lessons by using pictures of our sanctuary, paintings, and stained glass windows. It may be helpful to substitute images from your church.

It is in the house of the Lord where creature meets Creator, the mortal encounters the immortal, and the temporal experiences the eternal. Therefore, everything we do in the house of the Lord is significant. Perhaps with this BIC, you can reinforce this significance so that your students can understand that *what we believe influences how we worship and how we worship reflects what we believe*. Then we can all rejoice with Solomon and Jacob at the immensity of meeting our God in his house.

I offer sincere thanks to Rev. Dale Reckzin for the initial structure for this BIC and to Prof. Tom Kock (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary) for direction in many of the questions and answers. Also, thank you to the members and adult confirmants of Epiphany, as well as the confirmation students of Wisconsin Lutheran School in Racine who allowed me to field test this course with them. Together we have all gained a deeper appreciation for worshiping together in the house of the Lord.

The entire course is available on Google Drive: <http://tinyurl.com/inthehouseofthelord>.



A review of *In the House of the Lord*

Having taught through a portion of this class, I'm very thankful to Pastor Zarling for writing it. The outline and additional worship-related content have proven especially helpful for students coming from a non-liturgical background. Together, we have all learned a deeper appreciation for why we do what we do as God's family on Sunday morning. The additional video clips help to illustrate Scriptural truth by drawing in a point of contact from everyday life, while the snapshots of Epiphany's artwork help to highlight the desire for excellence in artwork and symbolism which characterize proper Christian piety. The course content is flexible and adaptable, but the genius is in its outline—showing that everything we do in worship both reflects what we believe and has application to a Christian's life outside of the worship service.

– Rev. Peter Hagen, Shepherd of the Lakes,
Fairmont, MN



In the March 2014 issue of *Worship the Lord*, Pastor Phil Hirsch wrote about teaching confessional perspectives to the congregation. He mentioned Pastor Wade Johnston's Bible Information Class material that uses patterns of worship to teach both doctrine and worship. "The result of such catechesis is that doctrine and worship reinforce each other every Sunday." See www.christsaginaw.com/webdocs/Liturgical%20Catechesis.pdf. Johnston, now a professor of theology at Wisconsin Lutheran College, comments on his experience with this approach.

For five months now I've been a professor and not a parish pastor. I teach, and I guest preach, but I no longer lead worship. My life is no longer in rhythm with the church year as it once was. It is a particular benefit of pastoral ministry to live on the basis of a calendar formed and imbued with the life, ministry, and saving work of our Savior. I give thanks daily that I am now the hearer of a pastor who takes that calendar seriously and unpacks it for us, giving us our Jesus as the Scriptures present him each week.

One of the most fulfilling aspects of my parish ministry was preaching and teaching the liturgy. No, I didn't preach or teach the liturgy as a thing—it was not the object of my preaching. But the liturgy shaped and provided the timely channel for my preaching. Rather than trying to outdo the liturgy in order to make the Word relevant, I early on learned that the liturgy's relevance consistently outpaced my own. Sinners came. Sinners were absolved. The feast was celebrated. God's promises were sung with the angels on Christmas, at Isaiah's call, and in St. John's Revelation. We confessed the Lamb with John the Baptist, who gave his head but donned a crown. We welcomed Christ into our presence with the Palm Sunday crowd. We delighted to take hold of Christ our Savior and were prepared to depart in peace with Simeon.

In my experience, limited though it was and yet ten years long, my people were sincerely interested in learning why we did what we did on Sunday. And once they did, they were earnestly eager to do it the next Sunday as well. In my time in Saginaw, I baptized and confirmed a number of adults. I found that those with whom I used a liturgically oriented catechetical curriculum ended up more regular in their attendance and more committed to Lutheranism.

I've always been skeptical of taking advice for parish ministry from someone not in the parish. You should probably be even more skeptical. Nonetheless, I encourage

you to teach your people not only what we believe but also why we do what we do in worship. As Matthias Flacius Illyricus reminds us, the liturgy is doctrine for the eyes. What we do teaches. Why not help our people understand that, so that more than the sermon serves a didactic and kerygmatic purpose on Sunday mornings?

Those interested in the Zarling and Johnston resources can also gain ideas from *Myth or Faith: A Fresh Look at Christian Doctrine*. This is a revision of *The Doctrine in the Liturgy* by Donald Deffner (1988) released by CPH in 1995. Ideas may be woven into any Bible Information Class. From the introduction:

Church doctrine is to be related to worship

We are not concerned about doctrine as an end in itself, but about doctrine coordinated with and integrated in the worship life of the individual.... We work toward leading the individual in living a "sacramental life."

The liturgical service is still the church's primary teaching opportunity, especially for those involved in little else in the congregation during the week. It must be meaningful and relevant to their daily lives in the richest and fullest sense. We need to see "the doctrine in the liturgy"—and how the worship service is the focal point and power supply for our life all during the week.

"Often [worship education] is still the biggest blind spot in many a church's educational program."

As people become members of a local congregation, they need to be instructed in the worship life of that community; otherwise, they may remain illiterate worshipers for some time to come. Likewise, many adults who have been members of a Lutheran congregation for many years also need instruction in the liturgy so that they might better understand their liturgical heritage. Often this is still the biggest blind spot in many a church's educational program. In this course we place a major emphasis on doctrine as it is reflected in our liturgical worship so that the worship life we share might be enriched.

