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**A LUTHERAN APPROACH TO THE THEOLOGY OF WORSHIP**

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**1 The divine mystery of Christian worship**

- a. In holy baptism people are drawn into the fellowship of the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
  - Through the Holy Spirit, the risen Son of God gives them the privileges of his sonship (Rom 8:14–17; Eph 1:5; 13,14).
  - Through the Son, the Holy Spirit gives them access to the Father's gracious presence (Rom 8:14–16; Gal 4:6; Eph 2:18)
  - The Father accepts those who come to him through the Spirit in the name of his Son, and he receives them as his children (John 16:23–27; Gal 4:4–7).
- b. Since the Triune God is present and active in Christian worship, such worship is a divine mystery. Only because the Triune God has worked faith in human beings, drawn them into fellowship with himself, and initiates them into this divine mystery, can they truly worship him (Apol IV, 49, 154; XXIV, 27).
  - In his sacred word God reveals the mystery of divine worship and shows the church how to worship him (Col 3:16; Apol XXVIII,69,70; LC I, 16, 17).
  - Through baptism he has given them the right and privilege to approach him in worship (Gal 3:25–27; Heb 10:19–22; LC III,36).
  - In the holy supper his faithful people receive the body and blood of their Lord for the forgiveness of sins and as a wonderful pledge and foretaste of the consummation of divine worship (1 Cor 11:26; Rev 19:6–9; Apol XXIV, 49; SC VI, 1–6; LC V, 64).
  - Through these means the Holy Spirit empowers them to call on the name of the Triune God and to receive his gifts (1 Cor 2:12; 12:3; AC XXI,3; Apol XXIV,26,29,88).
- c. Through divine worship the communion of saints participates in the divine, eternal life of the Holy Trinity, in which the Son glorifies the Father (Heb 2:12), as the Father and the Spirit glorify the Son (John 16:14; 17:1).
  - God's people praise the Father through his Son (Rom 16:27; 2 Cor 1:20; Heb 13:15; 1 Pet 4:11).
  - Through the Son they already now join with the angels in their eternal praise (Rev 5).
  - As beggars before God who depend totally on his grace, they glorify their risen Lord even in suffering and persecution (Matt 5:3, 11,12; 1 Pet 1:6–8; 4:12–14).
  - Essentially divine worship is doxology, ie the eternal praise of the Triune God as God (Rom 11:36; 16:27; Jude 24,25; Rev 5:13; 7:11,12; Apol XXIV,25,74; LC I, 84).

## 2 The means of worship

- a. Human beings do not determine how to worship the Triune God; all such self-determined worship is idolatry (AC XXVII,36ff; Apol XVm18; XXVII,69; S Art II,2,26; II,3,2; LC I, 16ff).
- b. By his word in both the Old and New Testaments, God himself has ordained how people are to worship him.
  - He has shown what is false worship as well as what threatens true worship of him.
  - In the New Testament Jesus has instituted the public ministry for the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments as the divinely appointed means of grace in worship (Matt 26:26–28; 28:16–20; AC V, VII, XIV, XXVIII).
- c. Through the means of grace the crucified, risen, and ascended Lord gives his Holy Spirit and so continues his ministry in and through the church (Acts 1:1–8; Matt 28:18–20; AC V; XVIII,3; FC Ep II,4).
- d. God's Son took on created flesh and blood for the salvation of the human race; so also he uses his creatures and created things in his ongoing ministry. He not only uses human language in preaching, but also uses it with the water in baptism and with the bread and wine in the Lord's supper to heal both body and soul (SC IV; VI; LC IV,19ff; V,68).

## 3 The nature of Christian worship

- a. The word of God reveals the nature of divine worship to human beings. They therefore do not discover from their own subjective experience what is divine worship (see 1b(1); 2a above for references).
- b. Through God's word the Holy Spirit initiates them into divine worship and reveals to them mysteries which are beyond natural, human experience (1 Cor 2:9,10; see 1b(4) above for references).
- c. God's word assures them that in worship the Triune God is present and active in serving them (Apol IV,49; 310; LC I, 84).
  - He calls them into his presence.
  - He forgives them.
  - He speaks to them.
  - He listens to them.
  - He gives them his gifts.
  - He invites them to his banquet.
  - He gives them his body and blood.
  - He blesses them.
  - He equips them to work with him for others.
- d. In response they entrust themselves to him, and react appropriately to his activity (Apol IV,49; 154; XXIV,27; LC I, 84).
  - They gather in his presence.
  - They confess their sins.
  - They listen to him.

- They pray to him.
  - They offer their gifts.
  - They dine with him.
  - They give themselves totally to him.
  - They thank and praise him.
  - They go out to work for him with others.
- e. In worship God's people engage both in rest and in work. On the one hand, they cease from their labours, rest in Christ, and wait in faith on God to act (Matt 11:28; Heb 4:3–11). On the other hand, they also serve their God, each other, and the world in their worship (Rom 12–13; 1 Tim 2:1–6; Heb 13:14–18; 1 Pet 4:7–11). Yet the reception of divine blessing does not depend on human actions, thoughts, or feelings, but on God and his grace (Rom 10:17; Gal 3:2,5; LC I, 84,86,91f).
- f. Since Christian worship is based on the presence and activity of the Triune God through his appointed means of grace, its essence consists in the public proclamation of his word, the performance of baptism, and the public administration of the Lord's supper (Apol XV,42; XXIV,69ff; LC I,84).

#### 4 The place of worship

- a. In the new covenant the risen Lord Jesus is the new temple of God where God the Father meets his people and they meet him (John 2:21).
- b. Jesus, the incarnate Word, is God's way to the human race and its way to God and life with him (John 14:6).
- c. In the new age, worship is bound to the person of Jesus, rather than to particular places (John 4:20–24). Yet particular places are rightly consecrated for the benefit of space-bound human beings, whom Christ through his incarnation meets and redeems in their spatial existence.
- d. There is no true worship of God except through Christ Jesus as he comes to his people through the means of grace (Col 2:9,10; 1 Tim 2:5; AC XXVII, 36,37).
- e. Christian worship occurs simultaneously both in heaven and on earth.
- Since God's Son has come to earth as a human being to manifest the Father's name to the human race, Christians participate in divine worship through his name here on earth (John 17:6; Matt 18:18–20; Apol IV, 154ff; 299; LC II, 27ff).
  - Since he has ascended as the God-man into his Father's presence, they also participate in the heavenly worship of the angels with the triumphant church in heaven (Heb 10:19–22; 12:22–24; Rev 4,5).
- f. Divine worship thus transcends time and space, for in it earthbound believers anticipate their life with the Triune God in heaven (Isa 6:1–5; Rev 4).
- g. The consecration of particular places for divine worship symbolises and anticipates the final sanctification of all creation for divine worship (Rev 21:2 – 22:5).

## 5 Worship and time

- a. At creation God not only established the cycles and seasons of time to promote life here on earth, but also blessed and sanctified the Sabbath to provide a foretaste of eternity within the bounds of time (Gen 2:1–3).
- b. By instituting the tabernacle at Mt Sinai he regulated the worship of his people in the old covenant by the ordinances for the Sabbath (Exod 20:8–11), the festivals for pilgrimage (Exod 23:14–17), and other holy times (Lev 23:1–43).
- c. All these holy times find their fulfilment in Jesus Christ, who ushered in the new age (Mark 1:15; Col 2:17).
- d. Through him the faithful enter the eternal rest of God (Matt 11:28; 12:8; Heb 4:1–11) and already now join in the eternal worship of God by the angels (Luke 2:14; 19:28; Rev 4–5).
- e. Worship in the new covenant is therefore not bound to special times, but to Christ who sanctifies every time of worship through his presence in the means of grace (Col 2:16,17; cf Rom 14:5,6).
- f. Even though the Lord did not designate any special times for worship, the church has set apart certain times of public worship for his time-bound people. Thereby they confess that their Lord not only meets them in time but also redeems them from the tyranny of time for their eternal service of him.
- g. The early church set apart Sunday to commemorate the resurrection of Jesus, the giving of the Holy Spirit, and the inauguration of the new age for the people of God (Acts 20:7; Rev 1:10).
- h. In the liturgical year the church not only commemorates the events of Christ's life and ministry, but also expresses its temporal participation in the eternal worship of God.
- i. The consecration of particular times for divine worship symbolises and anticipates the consummation of all time in eternity with its perfect worship of the Triune God.

## 6 The forms of worship

- a. Christ did not institute a particular order or pattern of worship for his church. He did, however, give clear directives on the constant and essential features of Christian worship, which are baptism, confession and absolution, reading and preaching the word, prayer, and the sacrament of the altar (Matt 28:19; John 20:23; Luke 24:46,47; Luke 11:1–13; Matt 26:26–28; AC VII; XV; XVI,40–45).
- b. In the Lutheran tradition a distinction is made between the essentials of worship, which have been divinely instituted, and the non-essentials or adiaphora, which have been neither bidden nor forbidden. While these non-essentials are not necessary for creating faith and the unity of the Spirit, some humanly instituted rites are necessary in the church for maintaining the unity of love which is expressed by common ritual forms (1 Cor 14:33; Eph 5:17–21; AC XXVIII,54ff; FC SD X,8ff).

- c. Even though no particular order of worship is essential to the life of faith, all orders should nevertheless act as confessions of the faith.
  - They should highlight the presence and operation of the Triune God in the means of grace.
  - They should be consistent with the truth of God's word and the teaching of the gospel. They should, therefore, use the words of the holy Scriptures (LC I, 92ff).
  - They should express the teaching of the Lutheran church, for correct doctrine defines what is correct in worship. Likewise, dogma and liturgical form go together (FC SD X, 5ff).
  - They should be faithful to the catholic tradition of the church and be ecumenical, provided always that this is consistent with God's word and the confessional position of the Lutheran church (AC XXIV,1–3).
- d. The forms of worship should also be culturally appropriate and corporate in character (FC SD X,9ff).
  - They should use modes of communication and expression which people can readily appreciate and understand, and yet allow for continued growth in the understanding and practice of the divine truths conveyed.
  - They should provide a framework for each person to respond to God's presence and grace, as led by the Holy Spirit, in corporate adoration, confession, dedication, thanksgiving, praise, petition, and intercession.
  - They should build up the corporate life of the whole worshipping community, rather than some individual or sectional interest (1 Cor 12:7; 14:12,23).
- e. Christian worship should be characterised by good order (1 Cor 14:33,40; AC XV; XXVI,40; XXVIII,53).

## **7 The manner of worship**

- a. Worship of God involves the whole self created by him and redeemed by him for eternal life (Rom 12:1 ; Heb 10:22; LC I,73).
- b. Through the means of grace in worship, Christ sanctifies the body and the mind with the senses, thoughts, and emotions, so that his people can receive him completely and respond to him more fully (Rom 12:1; Eph 6:26,27; 1 Thess 5:23).
- c. Since each person is affected differently by God's varied grace, the formal arrangement of worship should aid the word of God to speak to all kinds of people, and give expression to a wide range of responses to the gospel within the framework of the liturgy. In the Lutheran tradition worship has therefore been governed by both the freedom of faith and the law of love (1 Cor 14; Eph 5:21).
  - While the forms for public worship do regulate the corporate activity of the congregation, the church should not prescribe any particular pattern of spiritual experience or mode of subjective response to the gospel as exclusively valid or normative.
  - The Lord's directives on the essentials of worship (cf 6a), rather than subjective experiences and responses, should shape the liturgy of the congregation without prescribing any particular experiences or imposing a pattern of spirituality.

- d. The fine arts can evoke and express a wide range of responses to God's varied grace, and thus find their fulfilment in the praise of the Triune God (eg Eph 5:18–20).
- e. The whole of our life is to be worship of God; by his mercy we live in his presence and acknowledge him in all circumstances (Rom 12:1–7; 1 Cor 10:31; Col 3:17; LC I,85).

## 8 The scope of worship

- a. Divine worship is both heavenly and earthly in scope (Heb 12:22–24).
- b. The angels worship the Triune God in heaven. They adore him face to face and praise his holiness (Isa 6:3; Heb 1:14; Rev 4:8–11; 5:8–12).
- c. The communion of saints is part of his heavenly choir.
  - In Christ the faithful departed, set free from death, join the angels in their adoration (Heb 12:22,23; Rev 7:9–17).
  - In Christ the faithful on earth, though burdened by sin and dependent on the means of grace for their pilgrimage, already participate in the praises of the heavenly choir (Heb 12:22–24; Rev 14:1–5; 19:6–8).
- d. In its obedience to the Triune God, non-human creation praises his goodness and power, now imperfectly under the burden of decay, but finally in perfection at the renewal of creation (Ps 96:10–13; 98:7–9; 148:3–10; Rom 8:19–22; Phil 2:9–11; Rev 5:13).
- e. In and through Christ, God plans to reunite the whole of his fractured creation, so that it reaches its divinely intended consummation in worship of him (Eph 1:9,10; Col 1:19,20).
- f. Through its proclamation of God's grace and its prayers for all kinds and conditions of people, the church engages in the priestly service of the gospel to and for the world, so that all nations and people may come to worship their true Lord (Rom 15:7–12; 1 Tim 2:1–6).
- g. By confessing the lordship of Christ, the church exercises its prophetic voice in speaking out against those political structures and powers which usurp his lordship; by offering petitions, intercessions, and thanksgiving for all those who wield political power, the church exercises its priestly role and so helps them to fulfil their proper responsibilities within the divinely given limits of their power (Matt 28:18–20; Rom 13:1–7; 1 Tim 2:1,2).

## 9 The importance of worship

- a. The Triune God wills that all people worship and enjoy him forever (Eph 1:5,6, 11,12).
- b. In its worship the church begins to do in time what it will do in eternity.
- c. The church, as a divine institution, exists through and for divine worship (AC VII).
  - In worship the Triune God creates and sustains the faith of his people.
  - Through worship he establishes and builds up the church as a community on earth whose citizenship is in heaven (Gal 4:26; Phil 3:20; AC XXVIII,8,9).
  - By worship he calls his people to participate in his divine life and in his saving work on earth (1 Pet 2:9; 2 Pet 1:3,4; Rev 1:5,6; 5:10).

- d. The church, as a human institution, is essentially a worshipping community (AC VII; Apol VII, VIII, 5ff).
- As the chief ritual activity of the church, worship constitutes and identifies the church as a social entity.
  - Worship embodies and communicates those values and beliefs which underlie the existence of the church.
  - Worship shapes the corporate character, mental world, and lifestyle of those who participate in it.

#### KEY TO REFERENCES FROM THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS

AC = Augsburg Confession	Roman capital, eg II = Article Numeral, eg 6 = page section
Apol = Apology to the Augsburg Confession	Roman capital, eg II = Article Numeral, eg 6 = page section
S Art = Smalcald Articles	Roman capital, eg II = Part II Numeral, eg 2, 26 = subject & page section
SC = The Small Catechism	Roman capital, eg II = Part II Numeral, eg 6 = page section
LC = The Large Catechism	Roman capital, eg II = Part II Numeral, eg 6 = page section
FC = Formula of Concord	Roman capital, eg II = Article Numeral, eg 6 = page section
Ep = Epitome	
SD = Solid Declaration	