

## DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS AND THEOLOGICAL OPINIONS (DSTO)

### VOLUME 3 D. MINISTRIES IN THE CHURCH

# The use of personal testimonies in public worship

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## INTRODUCTION

It would be valuable to note the recent history of testimonies if we choose to draw on them to enrich Lutheran worship services. They probably arose at the time of Pietism before becoming a means of evangelism in revivalist circles of the nineteenth century.

Testimonies tended to be looked at askance by Lutherans because

- those giving their testimony often spoke of deriving their assurance of salvation more from their decision for Christ or their reformed life than from God's gracious decision for them in Christ, and
- members of Pentecostal churches have sometimes used testimonies to speak of their special spiritual gifts, thereby distinguishing themselves from those not yet 'filled with the Spirit'.

Testimonies can certainly be used in worship for the benefit of all. However, it is important to avoid the use of testimonies which detract from preaching the word of God and undermine confidence in God's amazing grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Carefully employed, testimonies can enhance preaching, highlight God's grace, and provide clear examples of ways in which the Christian faith applies to daily life.

## TESTIMONIES IN WORSHIP ACCORDING TO THE BIBLE

There are some important differences between the biblical use of the word 'testimony' and the modern use of personal testimonies during worship services. When the Bible speaks of testimonies it employs legal language, the language of the courtroom. Just as witnesses can give true or false testimony in court, so people can testify truly or falsely about God. Biblical testimony to God establishes the truth about God and one's relationship with God.

The testimony the Israelites gave to the Lord was not based merely on their historical experience of God, because this was often ambiguous and confusing. Rather it was based on God's testimony to them in his word which interpreted their experience and showed them how God was graciously at work with them.

Their testimony to each other about God served to perform a number of very clear functions in worship. This is evident in the psalms. In their national laments they bore witness to their experience of trouble and to their faith in God's goodness (e.g. Ps 79), just as they testified to God's goodness and mercy to them in their national psalms of thanksgiving and praise (e.g. Ps 107). Their national witness was matched by their personal testimony to God's grace, given within the worshipping community. So they bore witness to their Troubles in their laments (e.g. Ps 88) as well as to God's deliverance of them in their psalms of thanksgiving (e.g. Ps 30). They spoke about their guilt (e.g. Ps 32) and their experience of divine providence (e.g. Ps 23).

Individuals always spoke in inclusive terms so that their personal stories could become the story of all God's people. In their prayers and praises, therefore, the Israelites bore witness to their God and to his personal involvement in their lives.

In the New Testament the accent falls on the testimony of the Father and the Spirit to Jesus the Son (e.g. John 5:36–39; 15:26; 1 John 5:6–11). This is matched by the testimony of the apostles to the risen Lord Jesus (Luke 24:48; John 15:27; Acts 1:8,27; 2:32; 3:15; 4:33; 5:32; 10:39). The testimony that the apostles bear to Jesus is foundational. It is an essential part of the divine service (see Acts 2:42). All other speaking in the divine service depends on it and is consistent with it (Matt 7:15–27; Rev 19:10).

## THE USE OF PERSONAL TESTIMONIES IN LUTHERAN WORSHIP

1. Testimonies do not replace or appear to replace the sermon as the authoritative exposition of God's word. It is important that testimonies are governed by God's word, and that they serve the word. In the New Testament church human testimonies were secondary to the reading of the scriptures and the sermon as their authoritative exposition (1 Tim 4:13).
2. If testimonies are used in a eucharistic service, care needs to be taken that more important elements are not omitted.
3. Prior to the day, where possible, the pastor will meet with the presenter to discuss the proposed testimony, and to provide support and encouragement.
4. With the assistance of the criteria (below), together the pastor and presenter can work on the form, content and delivery of the testimony.

## CRITERIA FOR THE USE OF PERSONAL TESTIMONIES IN WORSHIP

- a. Helpful testimonies promote Christ and his grace, not the people giving them.
- b. Testimonies will not burden the consciences of their hearers by making demands on them, nor will they portray individuals as definitive models of Christian spirituality.
- c. The type of testimony will determine its place in the service and the purpose that it serves.

## PLACEMENT AND PURPOSE OF TESTIMONIES

- The story of a person's trials or troubles before the prayer of the church so that the congregation will pray for that person.
- The story of answered prayer before the collect or the prayer of the church to encourage people to pray.
- The story of the Lord's help, for example in healing, or the Lord's deliverance, for example from an accident, or the Lord's blessing, for example in the birth of a child, before a prayer of thanksgiving in the prayer of the church.
- The story of a person's experience of sin and forgiveness before the rite of confession and absolution.
- A personal confession of faith as an introduction to a hymn/song or a Bible reading which summarises that person's experience of God's grace.
- The story of a person's conversion told in the context of an adult baptism, a confirmation, a reaffirmation of faith, or an evangelistic service.
- An anecdote by a person about an experience of God's guidance at their work, in their community, or in their family, told to illustrate a point from the pastor's sermon, at a pre-arranged signal during the sermon or before the final benediction.