

## GENUINE WORSHIP

We use the words “divine service” for our Sunday worship. How should we understand that expression? We should not interpret that to mean our service to God. Worship is not primarily a human activity, like Tibetans' spinning their prayer wheels, or repeatedly and mindlessly reciting the same words in prayer, as if the mere saying of words had an automatic influence on God. Worship is not whipping up emotional adoration and praise. When we worship, our gracious God is serving us, mercifully offering us forgiveness and reconciliation through His word, through baptism, and through the Lord's Supper. That is why the pulpit, the lectern, the font, and the altar, must occupy prominent places in our churches. As a result of God's service to us, in Word and sacraments, we should gratefully respond to Him in prayer and praise.

That means that, when we worship, we focus on what our gracious God has done for us and has promised to us. Our divine services are primarily for those who have a living faith. Other worship activities, such as Bible studies and devotional exercises in the home should flow from, and lead towards, Sunday worship and participation in the Lord's Supper. God the Holy Spirit works faith where and when it pleases God in those who hear His Word and receive the Sacraments. As we gather around Jesus Christ in His real presence, He strengthens our faith in Him. Those whose faith is strengthened will consequently desire to spread the message of God's grace in Christ to others.

Our worship is ecumenical in the right sense, that we introduce nothing that is inconsistent with the Holy Scriptures and the three ecumenical creeds of the church. It is not falsely ecumenical, in the sense that desire for expressions of outward unity with other Christian denominations leads to compromise of the truth of God's Word or keeping silent about aspects of it in order to please other human beings. Because, as we worship, we think of ourselves as members of Christ's one body, the church, with believers of all other times and places, we recognise that we should not put up cultural, racial, and social barriers as we worship.

Because Christ's service to us led Him to the awful, shameful cross, even when we praise His triumph and victory, we proclaim Him as the incarnate Christ who was crucified. That is appropriate for the Scriptural theology of the cross. That is also why in our worship we treasure God's grace in Christ even more highly than the hidden sovereignty and glory of God apart from His revelation of Christ the crucified.

Worship should flow from the Gospel. The heart of our worship should be the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ, who made the atoning sacrifice for our sin and rose again from the dead for our justification. He is our living Lord, who gives us forgiveness, life, and salvation. We do not worship God because we think we have kept God's Law, or because we imagine that our feelings or abilities supplement what Jesus Christ has done in any way. When we hear the preaching of the Law, its chief purpose is to show us our sin, and to show us our need for Jesus Christ's fulfilment of it for us, and our need for His suffering our condemnation for our breaking of God's Law. Consequently, when we gather for worship, we do not focus on ourselves, on our achievements, on our religious activities, or on our giving, but on our gracious God. We should avoid going through the motions of the liturgy as if by the mere saying or singing of it we are meriting God's favour.

The central part of worship is God's service to us through His Word and the Lord's Supper, in which He offers, conveys, and seals His forgiveness, life, and salvation. Therefore, we do not regard the liturgy as a form that is designed to produce desired responses in us as we worship. We gladly use the liturgical forms that we have received from many centuries of Christians before us, because they consist almost completely of sections of God's Word in the Scriptures, and because we know we are one with all other believers of all times and places. Though the one church of Jesus Christ is hidden to our view, we understand ourselves as part of it as we, the people of God, hear His Word and receive the body and blood of Jesus Christ in His real presence. We use the historic liturgy because it has shown that it ensures the centrality of God's forgiveness, rather than for merely historic reasons, or because we are fond of its musical settings.

Although the common order of service has a structure that recurs every Sunday, we appreciate the manifold variety of God's grace as the readings, the prayers, the hymns and the liturgical “propers” change throughout the church year. Variety does not come through novelties that we concoct, through writing our own creeds, or introducing subjective elements that may not reflect the responses of the whole body of Christ.

In our worship, we do not use music for purely aesthetic reasons, or because the kind of music satisfies the personal tastes of worshippers or of leaders in worship. Rather, church music is the servant of the Word. Its purpose is to let the living voice of the Gospel sound forth. That is why the music in the service should be thoughtfully prepared and skilfully presented. Although organ music has become prominent in our services, we recognise that books such as the Psalms and Chronicles show that the people of God made use of a wide variety

of instrumental music in worship of God.

We do not follow the principle that we may use only the aspects of high culture that are expressly commanded in Scripture. Where architecture, sculpture, painting, and graphic arts serve the Gospel, we gladly use them in our churches. Because such features of high culture involve skill and careful presentation, standards will be a function of desiring to bring to God our very best. We acknowledge that in forms of art tastes vary, but also recognise that many popular artistic expressions are not lasting, and that there is value in what many centuries of skilled and educated people have produced that is enduring. We will therefore resist what is mediocre, novel, and ephemeral, but make our standards whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, appealing, excellent, and praiseworthy. Because God's Word, particularly His Law, often has things for us to hear that we, as sinful people, would rather not hear, the use of various forms of art does not have entertainment, but the service of God's Law and Gospel to us, as its focus.

Human skill and art often draw attention to the people who exhibit their skill. Because in worship we respond to God's service to us, our church furnishings, paraments, vestments, chrismons, and all forms of art and culture should enhance s sense of holy awe, reverent wonder at God's grace in Christ, and spiritual adoration. When the Israelites built the tabernacle in the wilderness, they used imagery drawn from the patterns, precedents, and motifs of Scripture. They did not hesitate to use natural objects of God's creation or people whom God had endowed with skill. We, too, gladly use His creatures and gifts to celebrate God's saving work in Christ our Lord.

Because we worship God in spirit and in truth, together with Christians of previous generations, we recognise that the holy things of God are meant for His holy people. Where the holiest things of God are involved, we apply the words of Jesus, "Do not give what is holy to dogs or throw your pearls before pigs." It is not our desire to insult any people who bear the name of "Christians" by calling them "dogs" or "pigs." For our focus is not on any persons, but on the destructiveness of error and on the holiness of what is true. Genuine love rejoices in the truth. In love, it is our duty to speak the truth without denial, in either words or actions. We acknowledge our duty not to give a false witness by worshipping with those who deny the truth of God's Word. True fellowship with those who confess the truth with us also includes the duty lovingly to warn those who depart from the truth of God's Word, and avoid them, so that we do not become guilty of complicity with their error. Blessing God involves the duty to reject and curse what is opposed to Him and His truth.

May God, who is Spirit, enable us to continue to worship Him in spirit and in truth!