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W O R S H I P

Eduard R. Riegert

What is worship? The word itself comes from “worth-ship,” which means “ascribing worth to God.” One is reminded of the four and twenty elders in the mighty vision of the seer of Patmos who “threw their crowns in front of the throne, saying, ‘You are our Lord and our God, you are worthy of glory and honor and power . . .’” (Rev. 4:10-11, J.B.).

But at once we recognize that, at least here on earth, worship must be more than a response to God. Perhaps the most direct description of worship is that made by H. Grady Davis: worship is “God speaking to his creatures and his creatures making decent reply to him.”¹ Davis’ deft grasp of the dialogical heart of worship is an echo of Martin Luther’s equally direct statement. Preaching at the dedication of Castle Church, Torgau, in 1544 he stated that the worshippers too must join in the dedication “in order that the purpose of this new house may be such that nothing else may happen in it except that our dear Lord himself may speak to us through his holy Word and we respond to him through prayer and praise.”² A little further on he declares that “since Sunday is now universally accepted as our sabbath or day of rest” everyone should “make themselves ready, and come together to hear God’s Word and to respond to him by calling upon him together, praying for every kind of need, and thanking him for benefits received.”³

We should not move away too quickly from such simple descriptions of worship because, like the rude manger of Bethlehem, they contain profound treasures. Let us examine them.

First, we may note that IT IS GOD WHO STARTS THE CONVERSATION. We

1. H. Grady Davis, *Why We Worship* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), p. 14.
2. *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, Vol. 51.
3. *Ibid.*

cannot emphasize that enough. He began that conversation with Adam and Eve, he continued it with the patriarchs and the prophets, and “in our own time, the last days, he has spoken to us through his Son, the Son that he has appointed to inherit everything and through whom he made everything there is” (Heb. 1:1-2). That Son is called the Word, and “the Word was made flesh, he lived among us, and we saw his glory, the glory that is his as the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). So God has spoken and continues to speak, and the Word he spoke and speaks is nowhere so clear and lucid and powerful as the address made by the life, suffering, death, and resurrection of his only-begotten Son. In him God’s address becomes not only audible but visible as well: “the Word, who is life . . . that life was made visible . . .,” writes John (I John 1:1-2). It is God, not we, who starts the conversation.

Secondly, we note that GOD’S INITIATIVE IS VASTLY SURPRISING! We have seen on television how thrilled were those people who happened to be spoken to by the Queen and the pope, and how they treasured the handshakes and even the briefest of touches: “She spoke to me!” they say, incredulous. “He took my hand!” That God should speak to us is even more amazing: “What is man that you should spare a thought for him, the son of man that you should care for him?” (Ps. 8:4). But the amazement goes deeper if we go deeper to face something ugly. It is the fact of *sin*. God is holy, we are unholy. “What a wretched state I am in!” whispered Isaiah in despair. “I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips . . .” (Isa. 6:5). Centuries later Paul confessed the same: “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body doomed to death?” (Rom. 7:24). And we make the confession, too: “Most merciful God, we confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against you . . .”⁴ Why would God bother to speak to us? And if he did, would he have anything except judgment to say to us? If as a parent you left your child for ten minutes to get a litre of milk and came home to find the house in total chaos — what would you say?

So, thirdly, we note that what God says to us is BOTH A WORD OF JUDGMENT AND A WORD OF FORGIVENESS. These two “words” belong together. If you came home to find your house a mess and your favorite lamp broken, and you crumpled into a chair sobbing while you took your astonished child in your arms, your child would at one and the same time be deeply convicted by your sobs (judged) and yet accepted by your embrace (forgiven). These words of judgment and forgiveness are spoken by God in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Suffering and death are the end-result and consequences of our sin, and on the cross these are exacted. Forgiveness and a new life are the pledge of unsurpassed love, and that abiding and persistent love of God for us bursts all the bonds of sin, death, and hell in the miracle of the resurrection! God’s ultimate word is the word of *salvation*!

Fourthly, we should UNDERSCORE THE COSTLINESS OF THE WORD OF SALVATION. Someone once callously remarked that it is God’s business to forgive, and so he should get about his business. But God is not an adding machine which calculates our debts and then erases them. God is *Father*, Jesus told us. His is the heart of a *parent*, and the hurtful, greedy, thoughtless wickedness we visit on one

4. *Lutheran Book of Worship*, “Brief Order for Confession and Forgiveness,” p. 56.

another and the injustice and perversity we practice in our corporate life, are deeply saddening and offensive to God. The crucifixion of Jesus is again both the lump sum of all this unrighteousness, and the drawing of it all into God himself for our sakes: "For our sake God made the sinless one into sin, so that in him we might become the goodness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). The word of forgiveness and acceptance, therefore, comes out of deep suffering and pain. That God is willing to bear it is what is meant when he is called *gracious*, and we acknowledge and give thanks for his graciousness when we confess the Second Article of the Creed, understanding it to mean, "I believe that Jesus Christ, true God . . . and also true man . . . is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, delivered me and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with silver and gold but with his holy and precious blood and with his innocent sufferings and death, in order that I may be his, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, even as he is risen from the dead and lives and reigns to all eternity."⁵

Fifthly, we should note that THIS WORD OF GOD IS POWERFULLY LIBERATING, and in two ways. It frees us *from* bondage to sin, guilt, death, and the power of evil. It frees us *for* a life of grateful loving service of the neighbor. This is nowhere so clearly "imaged" as in Baptism. In this sacrament we are joined to Christ so that "when we were baptised in Christ Jesus we were baptised in his death; in other words, when we were baptised we went into the tomb with him and joined him in death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the Father's glory, we too might live a new life" (Rom. 6:3-4). This new life is lived by and in a new spirit, the Holy Spirit, who moves and directs us into deeper communion with God and into dedicated mission in the world.

Sixthly, we need to say something about HOW GOD "SPEAKS" TO US. Taking our cue, as Christians, from Jesus who is "the Word made flesh," we believe that God always uses an "incarnated Word" to address us, that is, he speaks to us through or by means of some "means" or "medium" or "vehicle". The church calls these media the "means of grace" ("grace" because the Word God speaks to us is ultimately gracious, in that even God's judgment is an effort to lead us to salvation). Historically the "means of grace" are two, the Word of God and the Sacraments (Baptism and the Lord's Supper), because the early Christians experienced the presence of Christ with them precisely in "Word and Sacrament" (see Luke 24:13-35, the account of the disciples travelling to Emmaus). The Bible and the Sacraments "mediate" God's grace to us. Perhaps it will help to put it like this: Jesus is the *incarnate* Word; the Scriptures are the *written* Word; the Sacraments are the *visible* or *acted* Word. From this base we may go further: because God has instituted the office of the ministry to preach the Word and administer the Sacraments, this office too is a means of grace; and because Christians can speak a word of forgiveness to each other in Christ's name their conversation can also be a means of grace. Article IV of the Smalcald Articles (one of the documents known collectively as the "Lutheran Confessions") sums it up like this: ". . . the Gospel . . . offers counsel and

5. The Small Catechism, in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), p. 345.

help against sin in more than one way, for God is surpassingly rich in his grace: First, through the spoken word, by which the forgiveness of sin (the peculiar office of the Gospel) is preached to the whole world; second, through Baptism; third, through the holy Sacrament of the Altar; fourth, through the power of keys; and finally, through the mutual conversation and consolation of brethren. Matt. 18:20, 'Where two or three are gathered', etc."⁶

Now let us draw these things together. In worship God speaks the words of judgment and salvation in Jesus Christ. We need to hear them over and over again and see them acted out over and over again, because without doubt we mess up the house over and over again. Indeed, God calls us together in order for that Word of salvation to be spoken and acted so that we may hear and respond. Recall how the Small Catechism expresses this: "I believe that by my own reason or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and preserves it in union with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church he daily and abundantly forgives all my sins, and the sins of all believers, and on the last day he will raise me and all the dead and will grant eternal life to me and to all who believe in Christ."⁷

So far we have spoken of God's address to us. Now we turn to the "DECENT REPLY".

If we think again of the child in our earlier example, surely the very first decent reply is to say, "I'm sorry!" And no doubt the second decent reply is to say, "Will you forgive me?" Then (since the Word is gracious!), "Thank you!" Then, "I'll clean up the mess." Then, since the "mess" is deep and wide and stubborn, "I cannot do this by my own strength; will you help me?" And then, "Forgive me; I got distracted . . ." Here we have identified the primary elements of a "decent reply": confession of sin, expressions of repentance, praise and thanksgiving, confession of faith, petition, intercession, adoration.

But just as the address of God comes "in more than one way," so our reply is made in more than one way or language.⁸ We not only speak, we sing. We not only vocalize, we move, we act out, we portray. Think of all the actions made during a service of worship both by the ministers and the people which communicate one or more of the above responses. Don't forget that perhaps one of the most significant "action-responses" is our departure from the worship place: "Go in peace. Serve the Lord"!

It is clear, now, that a worship service (a "liturgy") must provide means (notice how often this word comes up?) by which this conversation can proceed. Briefly, **the means through which God addresses us** are: Baptism, absolution, scripture, sermon, the Lord's Supper, hymns, creeds, benediction, the fellowship of believers.

6. The Smalcald Articles, Article IV, *The Book of Concord*, ed. Tappert, p. 310.

7. The Small Catechism, *The Book of Concord*, ed. Tappert, p. 345.

8. See the brief and helpful discussion of the "languages" used in worship by Paul Bosch, *The Sermon as Part of the Liturgy*, The Preacher's Workshop Series Bk. 6 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1977).

The means by which we make decent reply are confession of sin; hymns of praise, thanks, and petition; prayers or adoration, confession, petition, intercession, thanks, praise; confession of faith; music; liturgical dance; banners; art; the offering; service in mission, witness, and social ministry; doing our work (occupation) as faithful Christians (vocation).

It is obvious that worship does not allow for spectators. What is going on is a life-and-death dialogue with God, and to sit through it vacantly is an insult. It is also obvious that worship does not end with the final sung “Amen” of the liturgy but continues as we continue listening and responding to God in the world of work and play (“liturgy” means the work of the people). For it is precisely because we have heard the Word in worship that we can hear God speaking to us through the events of the world; and it is precisely because we have learned the “decent reply” in worship that we can make such a reply in the world.

It goes without saying that the conversation with God which is worship can be helped or hindered. Poorly read scripture, ill-prepared sermons, sloppy leadership, faulty hymns, a mish-mash order of service, conventional prayers, spotty acoustics, cheap art, a bleak worship room are obstacles both to hearing and responding. Thus it is that people have always been moved to invest their *best* in worship: their best physical materials and their best talents.

However, this very compulsion to provide the best also opens the door to idolatry. Having given our best to facilitate the conversation so that we may hear clearly and make a reply worthy of God, we often find ourselves with one or more “golden calves” (see Exodus 32): the building, a certain style of architecture (it “looks like a church,” we say!),⁹ a particular liturgy (how hard it is to introduce a new liturgy!), certain hymns and rituals (“we always did it this way!”), a group of compatible and exclusive people, etc. Then, instead of worship being a joining of God and our life it becomes a separation. We become “Sunday Christians”; we don’t really hear any longer, and our reply has become something we do to please “God” — which really means, please ourselves. This perversion of worship is perhaps the most glaring evidence of the power of sin.¹⁰

Since our parents and/or grandparents were all immigrants to North America, one of the most easily constructed “golden calves” has been our ethnic worship traditions. It is simply a fact of life that our earliest memories and experiences retain enormous power. If as children we heard the scriptures read in Norwegian or Finnish or German or Estonian, for example, and if we learned to make decent reply in that language, then that language will remain crucial in our worship, and only with difficulty will we move to another. That is in part why the acceptance of a common worship book has been a slow process among North American Lutherans. Each ethnic group, for example, wants its own treasury of hymns to be included — but that would result in a massive book!

On the other hand, our ethnic worship traditions provide rich and powerful means

9. See Richard C. Crossman and Eduard R. Riegert, “Edifying the Body while Building the Edifice,” *Consensus*, VII, 2, April 1981, 3-10.

10. See Eduard R. Riegert, “Worship and the Church’s Mission,” *Consensus*, IX, 1, January 1983, 21-31.

to facilitate the conversation with God.¹¹ One of the principal surprises on the first Pentecost was that, when devout folk “from every nation under heaven” who were living in Jerusalem assembled to find out what was happening, each person was amazed and astonished to hear the Christians “speaking his own language” (Acts 2:5-7). Diversity of languages, this experience seems to say, can become a marvelous symphony under the direction of the Holy Spirit! Apart from the Spirit, we may add, diversity of languages can cause divisiveness, suspicion, and offence.

One of the wonderful developments in worship over the past several decades has been the ecumenical convergence in liturgical orders and materials. Common liturgical texts (the Creeds, the Gloria, the Lord’s Prayer, etc.) have been accepted by the major churches throughout the English-speaking world. Revisions of liturgies have given Protestants and Roman Catholics very similar orders of service, church years, and lectionaries. Even denominations which, at the time of the Reformation or since, gave up such elements as the church calendar, appointed lessons, paraments, and vestments are becoming interested in these time-tested means of hearing the Word of God and making decent reply.

Worship is a “many splendor’d thing.” It can be a very simple “breaking of the bread” among “two or three gathered together” among whom is the crucified and risen Lord; it can be a magnificent “solemn high eucharist” with incense and processions and rich vestments and superb organ and choir and instrumental music. At the heart of it is the simple but profound dialogue with God who comes to us and addresses us with his Word of Salvation.¹²

11. See Roger W. Nostbakken, “Celebrating the Mosaic: A Perspective on Lutheran Worship in Canada,” *Consensus*, VIII, 4, October 1982, 13-22.

12. For further reading see Gail Ramshaw Schmidt, “The Word in the World,” *Consensus*, VIII, 4, October 1982, 23-27; Lowell C. Green, “Luther on Revelation: Foundation for Proclamation and Worship,” *Consensus*, IX, 2, April 1983, 3-11; Philip H. Pfatteicher, “Worship: The Source and Summit of Faith,” *Consensus*, IX, 2, April 1983, 13-25; Carl M. Rasmussen, “Worship in Small Churches,” *Consensus*, IX, 2, April 1983, 26-30; Philip H. Pfatteicher, “Worship: The Source of Renewal,” *Consensus*, IX, 3, July 1983, 23-29.