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WORSHIP IN SMALL CHURCHES

Carl M. Rasmussen

This paper is not intended to be a “how to do it” manual, showing small churches how they too might implement the proposals of this or that school of liturgical worship from the small church’s point of view. It will attempt further to recognize the strengths that the small church brings to worship, and to advocate a theological point of view with respect to worship that is both in the interest of the small church, and that the small church is in a unique position to advocate.

I

The topic, “Worship in the Small Churches,” can be approached from two different standpoints. We can argue that with respect to worship, the weaknesses of small churches stand out; or we can argue that with respect to worship, the strengths of small churches stand out. Which of the two approaches one takes will be determined largely by one’s position on the larger question of worship itself—what worship is all about, and of what worship consists.

If we view worship mainly as a human endeavor, as the “work of the people,” as something we do for God, then we will regard worship as being of “higher quality” the more human resources we have with which to conduct it. Consequently, we will view small churches as having outstanding weaknesses with respect to worship.

On the other hand, if we view worship primarily as the forum in which God acts, as the main way in which He gives us His grace, puts His love into action, chooses us, forgives us, awakens and strengthens our faith—in short, if we view worship from the

point of view of God's means of grace, then we will not evaluate worship services on the basis of the quantity of human resources available. Consequently, we will not view small churches as having outstanding weaknesses with respect to worship. In fact, according to this view, it might well be argued that the small church has a unique strength with regard to worship. This strength is precisely what would be viewed as a weakness according to the other view; that is, the relative lack of human resources the small church has to bring to its worship services. (The term "relative" is used in recognition of the fact that of course any individual small church may have many human resources, but that in general, small churches will have fewer of them in comparison to the larger churches.)

How is it possible for a lack to be viewed as a strength? According to the point of view expressed in II Corinthians 12:9-10, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness;" and "when I am weak, then I am strong." This thought is expressed throughout Scripture: In Moses' warning to the people of Israel that when they become rich and possess many things, they are in danger of forgetting the Lord (Deuteronomy 8); in Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the publican, in which it is the man who stands empty-handed, offering God nothing, pleading for mercy, that goes down to his house justified; in Jesus' statement regarding the widow's penny, in Mark 12; in I Corinthians 1:17, in which Paul speaks of the ability of "eloquent wisdom" to empty the cross of Christ of its power.

Human experience also evidences the truth of the proposition that a relative lack of human resources can be a strength with regard to worship. How often when we experience suffering and loss, we find ourselves turning to God—even, it must be admitted, as a last resort, because our own resources have run dry.

Thus, both Scripture and experience show that the perception of our own inadequacies, weaknesses, and sinfulness leads us to focus on God's grace, and on the means by which he grants it, namely the Word and the Sacraments. That focus, in turn, is quite obviously a strength with regard to worship (according to this view), since the means of grace are the central and only indispensable elements in worship. All other components in the worship service are *adiaphora*, that is, optional and dispensable. This is not to say that they are necessarily undesirable! By no means. There are many and various resources which can in freedom be used to enhance our worship experiences. But it is important to realize that all of them, with the exception of the Word and the Sacraments, are optional.

Let us restate this point once more, for clarity: The relatively small amount of human resources available to small churches can lead them to focus on God's gifts of Word and Sacrament, and this focus must be regarded as an outstanding strength.

Now let us deal with some possible objections.

To answer the objection that this view shows favoritism toward small churches, and implies that large churches do not value the means of grace, let it be said that it is not the purpose of this paper to advocate any particular size of congregation as ideal, but to advocate a particular theological point of view on worship, namely that worship is primarily the context of God's work through the means of grace; that Word and Sacrament are the central issues; and that everything else is *adiaphora*, or optional. The argument is for a particular view of worship, not a particular size of church. Further, it is in the interest of churches of every size, from the tiny to the huge. The small

church, however, has a special interest in this point of view, for without it, the small church's worship will be considered inferior, even by its own members. The small church may be in a better position to see this distinction in views. And the small church can be of great service to the whole church, by vigorously practicing and advocating this point of view.

What is advocated here is not an anti-cultural, anti-intellectual, or iconoclastic point of view. It is not saying that churches ought to discourage the talent within their congregations for fear that these talents might obscure the means of grace. This would be like saying "let us sin that grace may abound." The point is of course not to attempt to diminish what human resources we do have, as this would be an ungrateful attitude to the gifts God has given, which should be used to his glory. The point is rather to be content with the gifts God has given, and to see the strengths that may reside in a small amount of resources.

It is also not the view of this paper to favor "low-church" over "high-church" worship as if it is somehow more pious, holy, or virtuous. To advocate either one as necessary, or superior to the other, is to take ourselves much too seriously. To be an anti-intellectual or a cultural snob is also to take one's self too seriously. All of these things are adiaphora, side issues. What is necessary is Word and Sacrament. Everything else must be used—or not used—in freedom.

The point of view towards worship being advocated here is the same as that expressed in the classical Lutheran formulas of *sola gratia* and *sola fide*. In our worship, we should always be expressing the same truth proclaimed in Scripture and the confessions; in the whole liturgy, we should proclaim the same truth we do from the pulpit: that we are justified freely for Christ's sake through faith, and not by our works—including our liturgical works. This will be expressed if in our worship, God's actions are emphasized—His gracious dealing with us through Word and Sacrament.

The small church is in a strong position to be an advocate and example of this kind of worship, and the small church has good reason to see that this emphasis is maintained in the continuing movement of liturgical renewal in the church.

II

Some specific rubrical proposals for worship according to the point of view expressed above are as follows.

Confession and absolution should be included in every Sunday worship service, as a mandatory rubric. This is in contrast to the suggestion in *Lutheran Book of Worship* that the confession and absolution be made an option. In the absolution we have a very clear, precise, and powerful example of the proclaimed word which is God's grace in action. This is precisely one of those items which is *not* adiaphora, but essential, and ought not to be optional.

The Sacrament of the Altar should be referred to as "Holy Communion" or the "Lord's Supper," and the term "Eucharist" should be avoided. "Eucharist" is an esoteric, uncommon term, not understood by many. Worse, it means "thanksgiving", which is an action that has us as its subject, rather than God. Certainly it is God's action, His grace, that is important in this Sacrament, and not ours. It is illogical and detrimental to the proper understanding of this Sacrament as a means of *grace* to give it a name which assumes that the central nature of the sacrament is

something humans do, namely “thanksgiving”. Further, calling the Lord’s Supper “thanksgiving” will not make people more thankful or happy. Thanksgiving is created in our hearts by the gift of forgiveness given in the Lord’s Supper, not by dropping the hint that we should be thankful by calling it the Eucharist. Eucharist is a misnomer, as the sacrament is not an *act* of thanksgiving, but a *cause* for thanksgiving.

Processions with the wine and bread, and placing them upon the altar in the same moment as placing the gifts of money, should be avoided. Such liturgical action implies that the elements of the Lord’s Supper are our gifts to God. Precisely the opposite is the truth.

The Words of Institution should be proclaimed clearly and powerfully, by *themselves*; these words convey and establish the gift/grace nature of the sacrament. These words of Christ should not be incorporated within a prayer, for this obscures them in several ways. First, there is a simple excess of verbage. The so-called “Eucharistic prayer” includes so much extra material, including responsive readings, a musical conclusion, an edited version of the epiclesis (calling down of the Holy Spirit), and a summary of salvation history, that the Words of Institution are lost in the shuffle. Unless people are paying very strict attention, they will miss the most important words. Hidden within all this verbage, the Words of Institution are not given the distinction they deserve as Christ’s words which institute, inform, and mandate the practice of receiving the Lord’s Supper. Second, with the “Eucharistic prayer”, there is a serious confusion of direction. The Words of Institution are the proclamation of the Gospel, and as such, come from God to us. Prayer, on the other hand, is from us to God. Therefore, the Words of Institution do not belong within a prayer. It is grammatically, and more importantly, theologically wrong. Thirdly, the use of a long, grandiose prayer at such an important juncture in the communion service again implies that our actions, such as prayers, are the important thing in the Sacrament, rather than God’s action; it implies that the Lord’s Supper is primarily something from us to God rather than from Him to us, a distortion which was vehemently fought by the reformers. The use of the “Eucharistic prayer” will no more insure a spirit of thanksgiving and happiness than will using the term Eucharist as the name of the Sacrament. Thanksgiving will come forth of its own as the gift is given and joyfully proclaimed, from the pulpit, and in the unhindered, unencumbered Words of Institution.

The Baptismal rite should be kept simple and to the point, emphasizing the grace of God who grants salvation and the Holy Spirit, and adopts us as his children, through this means of grace. We should continue forthrightly and boldly to emphasize the baptism of infants, as doing so is the clearest possible witness to the salvation which is given through no merits of our own. This ought to be done despite the possible risk of a child not being nurtured properly. (This is true, even as it is true that the possibility of less than responsible parents is no excuse for abortion.) This is in contrast to the point of view taken by some exponents of liturgical renewal, and somewhat implied in the baptismal rite of LBW, that adult baptism is to be the norm, and infant baptism the exception. The service at the altar, rubrics #12ff. in the LBW, could be omitted or at least made optional, as it is an unnecessary addition, an adiaphoron, which might obscure the important thing, the baptism itself. Praying for the Holy Spirit to come upon the baptized while laying on hands is objectionable, as it

implies that the Holy Spirit is not already given in Baptism itself. Saving up baptisms for Easter is ill advised, as it makes of infants props for making the Easter service more elaborate. "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." Scriptural quotes pertaining to Baptism should be included in the baptismal service, as these proclaim the promise and gift given in the Sacrament and show us the Lord's command that we baptize, even as the Words of Institution do for the Lord's Supper.

These are some specific proposals for enhancing our worship and allowing it to proclaim the truth of the gospel, that is the free and unmerited salvation given to us by God. Let the faith which directs our liturgy and is taught by it be the same faith which we believe, teach, and confess in our creeds, catechism, and confessions; the same faith taught in Scripture. The small church will then in no way consider its worship weak or inferior due to simplicity, since Word and Sacrament, not elaborateness, are the key to worship. In fact, the pre-eminent position of God's grace will erase such human distinctions as large and small. Our worship will then evidence the truth proclaimed by Paul in his letter to the Galatians: (Gal. 3:28) "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; (let us add—there is neither large nor small!) for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

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