



Worship and World: Issues for Planning Worship

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“What is your mission?” Because of the context I was surprised by the question. It sounded strange when it came from the lips of a business professor to future MBAs in a major university’s class on organizational development. For me it was a church question. The instructor was suggesting that a business has to be clear about its mission and then keep that mission central as it plans and implements that organization’s business.

Studies of excellent companies suggest that they have carefully identified their mission, and in their corporate culture they repeatedly express that core of their work through specific rites and rituals.¹

As one plans for worship, it is wise to ask frequently: “What is the mission of worship?” What is core and central? What issues are raised as the mission of worship is planned and implemented? How will the doing of worship be true to what is central to the mission of worship? How do the rites and rituals we use keep the church at the core of its faith and mission?

I. THE MISSION OF WORSHIP

If the core and center of corporate worship is “a gathering around Jesus Christ, who is present in the community through his Spirit-empowered means of grace (Augsburg Confession 7), a gathering in Jesus Christ to give praise and thanks to God,”² then the proclaiming of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments according to the gospel are central to the mission of worship. Worship is a gospel event for the sake of the world. It is an event of the gospel doing what it is.

But the difficulty of proclaiming the gospel and administering the sacraments in worship is that it is done in a broken and fallen world. “In worship,

¹Terrence E. Deal and Allen A. Kennedy, *Corporate Cultures: The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1982) and Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman, Jr., *In Search of Excellence* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982).

²“Northfield Statement on Worship,” *Worship Among Lutherans* (Geneva: Department of Studies of The Lutheran World Federation, 1983) 5.

God’s will for humanity is proclaimed, celebrated and, thus, made evident within the prevailing social, political, economic and cultural contexts of the time.”³

The statements quoted above grew out of an international consultation of Lutheran worship leaders, and they point to the difficulty and necessity of planning and doing worship. We are given the ageless gospel, but it must be proclaimed to this people in their language and their

cultural context. The one, holy, catholic and apostolic church has given us a tradition of worship, but now that tradition must be done so that it is a living and engaging tradition for us.

Worship planning must become “application.” It is an interpretative or hermeneutical event. I have found Hans-Georg Gadamer’s inclusion of “application” along with “understanding and interpretation” in the hermeneutical act to be as helpful for worship as it is for biblical studies and preaching. Gadamer notes the tension between the text set down and the sense arrived at through application to the particular situation.

A law is not there to be understood historically, but to be made concretely valid through being interpreted. Similarly, a religious proclamation is not there to be understood as a merely historical document, but to be taken in a way in which it exercises its saving effect. This includes the fact that the text, whether law or gospel, if it is to be understood properly, i.e., according to the claim it makes, must be understood at every moment, in every particular situation, in a new and different way. Understanding here is always application.⁴

An example in the liturgy might be the passing of the peace. On Sunday morning that action may vary in meaning from a simple greeting to a confession of or commitment to the peace of the Lord; but that same action will likely be understood and experienced in a new and different way when the peace of the Lord is passed at a funeral.

Further, this “application” in worship is for the sake of the world. The mission of God in Jesus Christ is for the world, and it is that gospel for the world which is at the heart of worship.

II. SOME ISSUES FOR PLANNING WORSHIP

The following are a few selected issues which I hope will stimulate more comprehensive thinking among those responsible for planning worship.

1. *Application: theological integration rather than practical ideas.* My perception is that we have often done the parts of the liturgy without much serious theological catechesis or reflection on how worship is an event and place for integrating and centering our classical theological disciplines. Application in worship seeks to integrate our theology and to express it in this encounter with God in this particular time and place. The frantic search for new worship ideas or music to entertain and attract people needs to be put in the proper relation to the mission of worship.

2. *Worship and world.* The concerns which linked “Word and world” in the title of this journal also lead me to urge a vital dialogue between “worship and world” in planning the church’s liturgy. The liturgy will inevitably express our

³Ibid.,7.

⁴Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1975) 275.

relationship with the world—whether we flee the world and stand against it in our worship or face outward toward the world, claiming it as God’s while knowing its demonic dimensions.⁵ The petitions of The Prayers will be tilted by our view of the world and how we view the church’s relationship to the world.

Worship has an inward or community dimension, to which we have attended well. However, if God's movement in the gospel is toward the world and if that outgoing gospel is at the heart of worship, then there must be careful attention in planning worship to the world as well. As we do that, the sacrament of Baptism can be seen as the sacrament of outreach or conversion. The Prayers will have petitions and a passion for the world.⁶

The application most worshipers will make is in the context of their life in a non-church setting. A challenge for pastors and other worship planners is how to engage those life-in-the-world contexts.

3. *Worship and the vocation of the baptized.* There was a time in the past when clergy persons were sole leaders in worship. In fact, church history points to a time when private masses made the presence of a congregation unnecessary. In the Roman Catholic Mass before the Second Vatican Council, the rubrics of the liturgy were exclusively concerned with the leader, namely, the priest. Those old rubrics mentioned the congregation only three times and then in relationship with the leader. However, with Vatican II the worshipping congregation and the various shared ministries became normative.⁷ Since that event, lay leaders in worship within the Roman Catholic Church are often more visible and active than in the churches of the Reformation which have trumpeted their emphasis on the priesthood of all believers. Where is the participation and ministry of the laity in so-called "private baptisms" (a contradiction in theological terms), in which the congregation is deemed "disposable"?

The identity of worshipers in the liturgy needs attention. In working with groups of lay persons around the subject of worship, I developed two questions which provided instructive answers. The first question was: "Why are you a lay person?" Some responses were: I am not ordained; I did not feel the call to become a pastor; women were not being ordained when I was growing up, etc. The point is that lay persons responded to that question negatively. They defined themselves by what they were not. The ordained pastor was the measuring stick, and they were not clergy. The second question was: "How did you become a lay person?" Answers varied: I was born one; my parents brought me to church; I became active out of interest and commitment. And usually someone would say: "I was baptized."

You have heard it said, "I'm not a pastor. I'm only a lay person." That immediately puts the role of the worshiper in a subordinate status. However, I can't imagine someone would say, "I'm not a pastor. I'm only baptized." That positive role and identity of the baptized is increasingly stressed in most churches' liturgies.

⁵Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951). I find his five models helpful in testing how one plans the liturgy in relationship to one's view of the world.

⁶J. G. Davies, *Worship and Mission* (London: SCM, 1966). I am indebted to Davies for arguing this outward dimension of the church's worship in persuasive detail.

⁷Mark Searle, *Liturgy Made Simple* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1981) 23.

However, the point is not to make lay persons or the baptized "para-pastors" or assistants to the clergy. It is rather to symbolize in worship their vocation in the world and ritually to rehearse their roles in the world.

A good example of this is how one parish introduces the lay lectors each Sunday. Before the lessons are read, the pastor introduces the lector by saying that today's lector is Mary Jones.

She carries out her ministry during the week as manager of a downtown store, as mother of two teen-agers, and on the church's social ministry committee. One senses in that introduction that this person's ministry is not primarily assisting the pastor in the liturgy. Reading the lessons is symbolic of the call of all the baptized to bear the Word into the world where most of the worshipers do their ministry.

Unfortunately, there are many situations where laity or the baptized are made ritually disposable. In many larger parishes with a multiple pastoral staff, lay persons are excluded from worship leadership roles. We must examine what that says about the ministry of the whole congregation.

4. *Tradition and imagination.* The biblical and liturgical tradition can keep us at the core and heart of the faith, but to use the tradition without imagination may not do justice to the God we call Creator. The hymn verse may be a guiding principle for worship planning:

The Church of Christ in ev'ry age
Beset by change, but Spirit-led,
Must claim and test its heritage
And keep on rising from the dead.⁸

There is a creative tension which is essential to worship planning. The task is like that of the composer, who establishes or utilizes a clear musical theme, but then provides insight, interest, and new meaning by providing variations on that theme.

Too often the traditional and contemporary are divorced or at least separated into two separate services. The point of thinking about the application of our worship is that both the tradition and the contemporary context are taken seriously, not separated. It is in the catalytic interaction of the two that a living tradition emerges which relates to both the tradition and the contemporary.

Without this application, the tradition can simply be regarded as past—a beautiful museum piece, a nostalgic trip, even an escape. On the other hand, many so-called contemporary services are simply temporary. They tend to be constructed rather than catholic—narrow in musical style and lodged in a narrow time period, as if now were always and the past passé.

If we are to be in tune with the ministry of the baptized and the intersection in them of worship and world, we also need to find ways to involve them in worship planning. Worship planning “think-tanks” or seasonal planning teams are a couple of imaginative options.⁹

5. *Music and other arts.* Think of all the places in the world one hears music.

⁸“The Church of Christ in Every Age,” *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978), Hymn 433.

⁹Walter C. Huffman, *Worship Blueprints: Guide to Planning Congregational Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979). The whole *Worship Blueprints* series provides one approach to planning.

It is an important element for celebrating and for mourning. It is used to tell a story, to express faith and feelings, to cry out, and to dance. There is music for riding elevators and for driving cars.

Music is a proportionately large part of the worship gathering each week as well. It is a

way to be in touch with the tradition of other times and places as well as our own time. Its importance demands that musicians be crucial members of any worship planning process. In fact, musicians can be important contributors to evangelism and communicators with our young people. They are so important that many ministries would be strengthened if a full-time musician were added to a parish staff. This might be kept in mind when a parish evaluates its staff needs.

The artist, musical and visual, can help us see the Word and the world in new and innovative ways. That is their gift and their mission, both for worship and for life in the world.

III. SOME LITURGICAL APPLICATIONS

The following “applications” comprise an attempt to begin thinking about the structure of the liturgy, the tradition, and its relation to planning for the contemporary context.

1. *Hymns*. An instructive exercise for worship planners is to review the hymns they have used for the last two years. This will reveal much about one’s stress on ministry, relation of church to world, and theological emphases. It is good at times to be clear about our liturgical prejudices and what influences our planning. Those prejudices are revealed in both what we use and what we leave out.

2. *Announcements*. Some people would solve the announcement issue by simply excluding them or pointing to the bulletin. However, if a congregation lives by the gospel and is swept up in God’s mission to the world, then one could expect announcements which are worthy of that life and mission and welcome in worship. Perhaps a criterion for verbal announcements is that they be candidates for petitions in The Prayers! If they are, it may be well to make the announcements immediately prior to The Prayers. A fringe benefit will be that prayer petitions won’t have to double as announcements—telling, e.g., that a person is in the hospital and why we are praying for them now.

3. *The Prayers*. Worship and world certainly embrace in the petitions for The Prayers. Crafting the petitions is an obvious place for the baptized to work with the ordained. Like the sermon, this is a time for specific application. If The Prayers are “the business meeting of the church,” then this is time for the specifics of the life and mission of this congregation for this world in this time and place to be brought before the throne of grace.¹⁰

This is not an easy task and can be most revealing. I once heard a leader of prayer who gave me the distinct feeling that there was no real world out there, but only the inner world of spiritual devotion. On the other hand, some of you may recall the partisan prayers (on both sides of the issue) during the Viet Nam conflict. It is not easy to pray in the community, so some give up and

¹⁰Dr. Walter Boumann from Trinity Lutheran Seminary in lectures for the Lutheran Conferences for Worship often referred to The Prayers as “the business meeting of the church.”

resort to generalities or pre-printed prayers prepared by someone else. Perhaps we can learn from earlier worship practice. At one time deacons—those who ministered to the needy during the week and knew these problems first hand—were leaders of the Prayers. They knew what and whom to pray for.¹¹

4. *Sermon*. “Application” has been blunted by an unfortunate separation of preaching and liturgy. Where else does one do preaching but in the context of the whole liturgy? We need to

explore the interactions of preaching with all the significant parts of the integrated action of the whole worship event.

For a community that believes that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14), preaching must appear with the proper ambiguity and uncertainty which application of the Word to life in the world brings. If the baptized worshipers are a prophetic community, active in God’s mission to the world, then they should not be so passive as worship often invites them to be. How shall the baptized publicly present their bodies “as a living sacrifice” (Rom 12:1)? A congregational “think tank” maybe helpful, serving both as a worship-planning group who may be responsible for The Prayers and also bringing sharp questions and insights from differing places and disciplines to the one charged with proclaiming the gospel publicly.

5. *Offering.* Worshipers’ views of the church and its mission will be revealed in their offering. If the worshiper views the church mainly as the institution which provides all kinds of local ministries, offering may focus on salaries and keeping up the church building. If the worshiper defines the church as primarily a herald of the gospel, then offering may be seen as primarily for Word-related ministries like preaching and evangelism. If the giver has an image of the church as being primarily on a mission of mercy and social justice, the budget totals will be proportionately large for helping the poor, the hungry, and the oppressed. Again, we see how one’s theological view of the church, its mission, and its relation to the world are present in such a familiar, even routine, element of the liturgy.¹²

6. *The Peace.* This has been a particularly revealing “new” old thing. We have had the old words for a long time. The presiding minister shared the peace with the worshipping assembly: “The peace of the Lord be with you always”; we responded, “And also with you” (or formerly: “And with thy spirit”). But the new is that we now share the Peace ritually with one another (though this also is not new, but a venerable tradition recently revived).

One of the problems in present practice is that we have stuck this action at one symbolic level. It is only or mainly a greeting; so now I hear pastors say nothing about the Peace, but simply, “Turn and greet those around you.” In turn, the placement in the service is sometimes moved to the beginning. But here is where the tradition needs to question the contemporary application. If this is a ritual action with several symbolic layers, we need to let it function as more than a greeting. Does a hearty “Good Morning” adequately express this ritual action?

¹¹Walter C. Huffman, *The Prayer of the Faithful* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986). This is the best guide I have found for helping understand and prepare The Prayers of the Church.

¹²Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974). Prejudices toward one or more of Dulles’ five models will often be expressed in planning the liturgy.

We might move from trying simply to be a friendly community (which is commendable!) to thinking about this action as part of God’s mission in the world. Jesus is our peace who has broken down the dividing wall of hostility between us (Eph 2:14). Our Lord said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you” (John 14:27). I believe those powerful expressions of Christ’s gift to the world are to be offered in this action. We witness to that peace of the Lord in worship as rehearsal of the way we will witness to that peace in the world. We commit ourselves to that peace. We confess that we believe in this peace which

is a foretaste of the peace to come and that we are beginning to live by that peace. It is an involving action as liturgy should be. It catches us up in the mission of God to the world and claims all the baptized as peacemakers in the world. This action can be trivialized, or we can see it as a gift given to us which we give to one another and offer in God's name to the world. Again, we are trying to keep worship and world in dialectic tension.

7. *Dismissal*. This may be a good place to end this essay. "Go in peace. Serve the Lord," says the Assisting Minister.¹³ The direction of worship is to go and serve as priests for the world. To make this dismissal more symbolically vivid, perhaps a person from the pews should step forward to dismiss the congregation with these words. Perhaps it might be an elected officer of the congregation or a member of the governing board. The mission of worship is now directed to be continued in the mission in the world.

Planners of worship are like composers of music. They craft a contrapuntal rhythm of worship and world with all of its dissonances and harmonies.

¹³*Lutheran Book of Worship*, 74.