

What worship is and isn't

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

A Sermon for the Second Sunday after Pentecost

What is worship? And what is it to be spiritual? We know that worship by itself is not in itself Christian. Worship is found in all religions, even so-called nature religions.

The question is: Are you worshipping the true God or other false gods?

Here the Bible can help us, particularly the Matthew text for today. It has the famous line: "I desire mercy and not sacrifice" (Matthew 9:13).

This same message is in Psalm 50 for today and also throughout the Old Testament.

Even though the whole institution of sacrifice started out one way, it immediately went wrong, and it's continually going wrong because we always end up saying: "Well, there must be a way that I can manipulate God a little bit, a way that I can get an edge."

By doing something for the Lord and doing it right, then he will be pleased with me and do something for me. So, I do something for him, and he does something for me, and it's a kind of trade-off, and that's how sacrifice goes wrong because that's not what it was originally meant to be.

It really is a sign of the basic sin of spiritual pride, the flip side of which is presumption. Presumption is thinking: "We can make God go our way a little bit at least. We have an edge if we worship and we worship right."

Throughout the history of the church there have been all kinds of battles about this. Should the altar be up against the wall? Or should the altar be more like a table out in front?

It used to be the case that the altar was up against the wall. Then after Vatican II in the 1960's big changes were made. One prominent Roman Catholic who advocated for moving the altar from the wall to being a table with the priest facing the congregation rather than having his back to the congregation, was Cardinal Ratzinger. But many years later when he became Pope Benedict XVI, he changed his mind and wrote that the altar should be put the altar back against the wall. He and others had been so sure before.

Where should the baptismal font be? At the back of the sanctuary? At the front? Front and center, or front to the side?

Should we make the sign of the cross? Or not?

Should we take out the pews and put in chairs?

Should the worship service have a structured liturgy, or should it be more free-wheeling with free prayer?

Some say worship should be spontaneous and free flowing over against a structured liturgy. The problem is that when churches try to have free prayer even that falls into a predictable pattern with predicable prayers.

This is true even for the Quakers. In a Quaker service there is silence, but then one person stands up and reads a Bible verse and sits down again. It may seem to be unstructured, but in fact, it's a very ritualized process.

When we think about worship, we want to talk about a "No" and a "Yes."

The "No" has to do with the evil one, commonly called "the devil." There's nothing the devil likes more than to get us distracted about how to worship. As Paul writes in 2 Cor 11:14: "Even Satan appears as an angel of light."

The evil one tempts us to go astray in principally three ways.

One is to think that worship is true and correct if it's successful, meaning: Do people come? Do you get more numbers?

But numbers are a faulty test that tempts the church into thinking it's up to us to make it work; it's up to us to make it happen.

Second, the evil one tempts the church into thinking it will be able to give you that experience that will fulfill your need to experience God. It really goes back to that famous statement by St. Augustine in the 5th century: "My heart is restless 'til it rests in thee." We are tempted to think we have to give people something for their restless hearts.

The problem with that is, of course, that our hearts aren't restless, our hearts are rebellious. We'd rather be God than be his creatures.

Matthew 12:33 says: "What the heart is full of, the mouth overflows with." Yes, but our hearts are corrupt so what overflows is not something that comes from the Lord, but something we have, we produce. We are tempted to think that the church can and should give us that experience and that will be successful.

There's a useful illustration of this that happened in Germany in the 1980's. The Lutheran Church of East Germany was at that time extremely successful. It was bubbling over with people and activities. As a consequence, Lutherans in other parts of the world took notice and said: "We've got to learn from these Germans!"

But when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, and Germany was reunited, much of that activity in the churches in what had been East Germany collapsed. The church had been a zone of freedom denied to society. Much of the activity had been political.

In a different way in Finland after World War II, there was real activity in the Lutheran churches, and Lutherans were told that we need to learn from those Finns. However, the churches were very active and successful for that moment because there were jobs in the church, jobs as teachers, deaconesses, and the like, and once the war ended and the economy improved, the activity in the churches went down again.

In many ways we get sucked into thinking: “We’ll make it successful; it’s up to us to make it successful.”

And the third temptation is the one that comes from the Bible verse 1 Cor 14:40 in the discussion around speaking in tongues, where Paul writes: “All things should be done decently and in order.” Some will say: “Ah, the key to worship is that it is to be done decently and in order.” The problem is: Who is to say what is decent and in order over against chaos? That doesn’t help us very much.

What is it that worship is about?

In the Reformation tradition, picking up from the Apostle Paul, there is simply one issue and one question: Is the gospel proclaimed? Everything depends on that because the gospel is a matter of salvation, and since salvation is at stake, the question we ask about worship, as about everything else, is: Is this the gospel? Does it point to Christ and him crucified?

If it does, everything else is extraneous and incidental, and, if it doesn’t, everything is wrong.

But we are continually tempted into thinking: “Ah, we make it happen, and it’s about us.”

Finally, there are four things that we use to sort it out, how it works, and what it’s about.

First, we have every day to return to our Baptism. Luther twice in the Large Catechism writes: What we do is return every day to our Baptism. That’s where the Holy Spirit is given. That’s what it is about, and worship then is that we gather again to celebrate and start again.

The second one is: How does faith come to us? Paul writes in Romans 10:17: “Faith comes by hearing and hearing comes by the preaching of Christ.” He says the same thing in 1 Corinthians 1:21: “For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.” This means it’s not what we do but what God is doing through his word.

Third, it's outside of us, in spite of us. We keep thinking that worship has to do with something we do, our involvement, and we make it happen. The fact is that it's the Word, the external Word that comes to us and makes it happen.

Therefore, we do not therefore worship alone but come together; we are together doing this. As Luther says in his striking way in the Smalcald Articles: "Accordingly, we should and must constantly maintain that God will not deal with us except through his external Word and sacrament. Whatever is attributed to the Spirit apart from such word and sacrament is of the Devil" (Smalcald 3/8/10; Tappert 313).

That clears the deck, so to speak. Where is the true God? He meets us here, wherever two or three are gathered in his name, around his Word and sacraments.

Fourth, while the world demands many things of us, worship has to do with resting in the Lord, in prayer, praise, and thanksgiving. We praise and thank the Lord that he's the one who does it; he's the one who makes it happen. We rest in him. Amen