

Worship and reconciliation

Marva J. Dawn

In this utilitarian age, many churches fall to the temptation to turn worship into a means to accomplish other ends. Some congregations, for example, design worship to “attract the unbeliever.” The Bible makes it clear that worship’s sole end is to glorify God: we worship because God deserves it. Period. To be sure, an effect of such God-centered worship will be the formation of a people who become more like the God they worship, and this people will, as a result, be actively engaged in inviting their unbelieving neighbors into a relationship with the God they adore.

As we begin to consider the relationship between worship and reconciliation, we must beware lest we take a utilitarian approach and make reconciliation the aim of worship. How can we avoid

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this mistake and yet discuss worship and reconciliation? What is the relationship between the two, and how is it manifested?

Worship of the triune God

For us to see the connection of worship with reconciliation, we must begin by remembering who the God is whom we worship. As Christians, we recognize that in Christ, God has been revealed as a Trinity. Jesus repeatedly told us that He had been sent by His Father and that He would send His Spirit to us.* Furthermore, Jesus asserted that His desire

was for us to participate in the unity of the Father, Son, and Spirit.

Our worship, then, is made possible by Jesus, who is our high priest. By His grace and by the power of His Spirit we are brought

* [Pronouns referring to persons of the Trinity have been capitalized at the author’s request, “so that we remember that Jesus is both God and man and so that we wouldn’t genderize other persons of the Trinity.”—Ed.]

into His own intimacy with His Father. In worship, God is both the subject who draws us into the trinitarian fellowship and the object of our praise and adoration. We hear God's Word to us read and expounded; we respond with thanksgiving and the offering of our lives; we bring to God our petitions and intercessions, because we continually learn how much the Trinity cares for all for whom we pray, for universe upon universe.

The more we worship the triune God, however, the more we realize that we have alienated ourselves from this God who invites our participation in the Trinity's purposes for the cosmos. We have sinned. We have turned away from God. We have found ourselves incapable of being the people God would have us be and we ourselves would like to be.

Worship and reconciliation with God

Because they recognize that worshipers come bearing the burden of our sin and alienation from God, many churches (especially those that follow the basic patterns of worship laid down in the

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first centuries of the universal church's existence) begin their services with a rite of confession and absolution. The goal is not utilitarian—to get forgiveness—as the apostle Paul makes clear: “In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us” (2 Cor. 5:19). The fact that God has already accom-

plished the work of reconciliation frees us to get rid of all the burdens of alienation that remain in us. Thus, in our worship services, as part of our adoration of God, we both confess our sins, which separate us from God, and declare God's work of reconciliation, which has entirely overcome those very sins.

The whole process is wonderfully illustrated by the following excerpts from the rite that begins worship services in Lutheran churches, as printed in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*.¹ The pastor invites the congregation's confession and adoration by declaring God's fullness of forgiveness with these words from 1 John 1:8-9: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just

will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” That assurance is followed by a period of silence (during which worshipers may kneel) for reflection and self-examination. Then the pastor invites public confession by addressing the Trinity as “Most merciful God,” after which all the worshipers together make this common admission to God of their inability to fix themselves, of the completeness of their sinfulness, of their trust in God’s pitying compassion, and of their desire to change and follow Jesus in His ways:

We confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us. Forgive us, renew us, and lead us, so that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways, to the glory of your holy name. Amen

The specificity and thoroughness of that confession leave no one out—not for the purpose of causing us to be discouraged, but so that we get rid of all our burdens and guilt, so that we can know we are utterly forgiven and cleansed. What a great relief it is, then, to hear the pastor announce to each one of us and all of us in the community together God’s full remission, the Trinity’s total pardon for all that separates us from God. The pastor asserts,

Almighty God, in his mercy, has given his Son to die for us and, for his sake, forgives us all our sins. As a called and ordained minister of the Church of Christ, and by his authority, I therefore declare to you the entire forgiveness of all your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Churches from different denominations have varying understandings of the roles of pastors, priests, or other ministers, and I am not insisting on the particulars of this rite. I set it down here, though, to emphasize that the work is God’s, that it is the author-

ity of Christ that assures us of our perfect reconciliation with God. It is the Trinity who has accomplished all that needed to be done to secure that reconciliation and who continues always to make that reconciliation available to the whole world. Worship helps us discover these truths about God and helps us celebrate them more deeply.

Reconciliation with ourselves

Many of us are not reconciled with ourselves, because we carry around huge burdens of guilt. The value of rites such as the one sketched above is that they give us tangible experiences of being rescued from our sins. Furthermore, the ritual enables us to become more reconciled to ourselves in body and mind and will. In many denominations, worshipers kneel during the confession and rise with gladness after hearing the proclamation of forgiveness. Some people make the sign of the cross on their bodies as the triune name is pronounced, in order to touch their foreheads (mind), hearts (soul, will), and shoulders (actions, symbolized in biblical literature by arms and hands) with God's reconciling freedom.

These physical movements—and any others in which we might engage in worship, such as lifting of arms in prayer or standing to sing and sitting to listen—are all part of our loving response to the God whom we worship. We want, as Jesus said, to love the Lord

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our God with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:30). When we respond to the Trinity's reconciling work with such a holistic love, we experience and practice the unity of body and soul, mind and spirit, with which we were created.

Reconciliation in the worshiping community

Some denominations, such as those affiliated with the Anglican communion, place the rite of confession and absolution just before the offering, in keeping with Matthew 5:23-24,

which instructs us, "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift."

In these churches the proclamation of forgiveness by the pastor or worship leader is immediately followed by the blessing, “The peace of the Lord be with you always” (to which most congregations respond, “And also with you”). This peace is then extended to others by everyone in the worshiping community. The goal is that the triune God who has reconciled us all to Himself will be glorified by the complete reconciliation of all those who are gathered to praise Him. It is blasphemy, rather than worship, if those of us who revel in God’s restoration of our relationship with Him are at odds with one another. It is also a desecration of the Lord’s Supper (which in many churches follows the offering) if we come to Christ’s table of reconciliation without the unity that He has made possible.

Reconciliation with the world

When we gather for worship, we celebrate the kind of God we have, a God who so loved everything in the cosmos that Christ came to restore each creature to full relationship with the Godhead and with every other entity in the creation. The more we learn about this God and the more we adore the Trinity, the more we will be formed into the Lord’s likeness and into Christ’s yearning that all would be one. We will learn that God has both “reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18).

Therefore, we call into question the genuineness of our worship and the reconciliation that God has achieved if we do not work for justice in the world. We deny the unity of God’s world if some are hungry while others are overfed. We shatter the reunification of the cosmos when peoples are at war with each other. As Amos trumpets the word of the Lord,

*I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies....
Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.
(Amos 5:21, 23-24)*

The invitation of a church's worship, then, is to take the presence of God which we have experienced there back into our daily lives, so that we yearn unceasingly for genuine reconciliation in the world and engage in practices that contribute to that focal concern. Thus the public, corporate worship of our reconciling God spills over into the continuing worship of each moment in our steadfastly reconciling lives.

Note

¹*Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978), 56.

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