

The Centrality of Worship in the Life of the Church

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One of the distinguishing features of Christians is that they gather to worship the Triune God every Sunday. Some Christians gather for a full service of bible readings, sermon, and Holy Communion. Others gather for a service of readings, prayer, and sermon. For the Quakers, worship is a time of silent meditation in which the congregation waits for the Holy Spirit to inspire someone to speak. Christianity has a diversity of worship patterns. But Christians agree that gathering for worship is an essential part of the church's life.

The Christian tradition of communal worship derives from the bible. The Jewish people had worship in three different places. At the Temple, the Jews had prayer, praise, and sacrifice. The synagogue was where they assembled to study the law and to pray on the Sabbath and on some weekdays and festivals. Finally, Jews gathered with their families in the home for sacred meals, especially on the Sabbath and on Passover. In the Passover liturgy, they remembered Israel's deliverance from slavery in Egypt.

Jesus himself participated in the worship of these places. He went to the Temple in Jerusalem many times during his ministry. He taught in various synagogues. On the night of his betrayal, Jesus celebrated a Passover Meal with his disciples in an upper room of someone's home.

Communal worship was also important for early Christian communities. According to Acts 2:42, the first Christians in Jerusalem "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread (Holy Communion) and to the prayers."

According to Acts 20:7, Christians in Troas met every Sunday for Holy Communion.

So we know from the bible that communal worship was and is important for God's people. But do we regard worship as *central* for the church? In other words, is it a priority in terms of our time, effort, and money? Is attending worship essential to our individual Christian lives?

Here it might help to think in terms of two images. For some Christian communities, worship is merely one pearl on a string of pearls. In other words, it is just one among many things that the church does, with no more importance than any other activity. But for other Christian communities, worship is like the sun: it is the center of the church's life and all other activities in the church revolve around it. I urge all Christian congregations to make worship the sun of their communal life.

But *why* should worship be central in the church's life?

To begin with, in worship the church encounters the Risen Christ. Jesus himself said: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:20). In other words, Christ is present in the *gathering* of his people. Put another way: his people together are his body on earth. As St Paul says: "Now you are the body of Christ, and individually members of it" (I Cor 12:27). In encountering each other in worship, we encounter Christ, and this experience builds us up in the faith. Knowing that others share our faith sustains us and gives us courage. Communal worship also provides the opportunity to share our joys and sorrows so that we can be supported and comforted, and in turn comfort and support others.

The church also encounters Christ in the things it does in worship, namely, reading the bible, preaching, and celebrating Holy Communion. In Luke 24, Jesus explains the scriptures to his two traveling companions and breaks bread with them. It is *then* that they recognize him. In the explanation of the scriptures and the sharing of the meal Jesus is made known to them. So our reading the bible, preaching, and sharing

Holy Communion are meetings with Christ.

We also encounter the Lord Jesus in our *baptizing*. Consider the Great Commission of Matthew 28:16-20.

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. *And remember I am with you always to the end of the age.*"

Note especially the words, "I am with you always to the end of the age." These words mean that our proclaiming the gospel to seekers, teaching converts how to be Christians, and initiating them into the church by baptism is a process in which the Lord himself is present to guide the church. That is a powerful and meaningful promise, for sometimes we get discouraged in our efforts to carry out the Great Commission. Resistance to our evangelizing efforts and the small number of converts might leave us doubting whether our efforts really have Christ's blessing. But his promise "I am with you" relieves our doubts and encourages us.

Worship, then, is an experience *of the real presence of Christ* that sustains us in our mission. At the same time, worship *frees* us for our mission by proclaiming and offering God's forgiveness. Many of the bible texts we read in worship tell of Jesus forgiving sins. Ideally, sermons proclaim and offer God's forgiveness to us *today*. The Lord's Supper is a sharing of the body and blood of Christ *for the forgiveness of our sins*. With every baptism, we are reminded that our sins have been washed away and that we can number ourselves among the redeemed.

Worship full of forgiveness frees us from the burden of having to earn God's love and forgiveness. We are made free to love and serve our neighbors, especially by

telling them about Christ.

Our Christ-filled worship also *empowers* us for mission. In worship, Christ comes to us in the power of the Holy Spirit. Or, we could say that He comes to us as Spirit – a Spirit embodied in the words of the sermon, in the bread and wine, and in the baptismal washing. Jesus himself connects Spirit and mission : “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”(Acts 1:8) The Spirit of Jesus gives us the will and strength to be like him, that is, to be people sent in mission to proclaim the kingdom of God to all the world.

So worship makes it possible for us to be a Christian people in mission to the world, for Christ’s sake. That is why worship is central in the life of the church. Of course, this is not to say that other things are unimportant for the church. But they do need to be seen in their proper perspective.

Consider education and evangelism. Because worship is the sun at the center of the church’s life, education and evangelism to some extent revolve around worship. Accordingly, one goal of Christian education is to make us better worshipers. Specifically, it should teach us the vocabulary of worship and acquaint us with the bible, its historical background, and message so that we can better understand the lessons when they are read on Sunday morning. Of course, Christian education should help us to learn about other things (for example, about church history or the church’s mission in other parts of the world); but helping us to be good worshipers is central.

Evangelism likewise should be understood in terms of its relationship to worship. Evangelism must keep in mind the connection between Christian life and worship, namely, that being a Christian is about thanking and praising God for the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The last thing that St Luke tells us about Jesus’ disciples is that “they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God” (24:52). God’s call to thank and

praise him for Jesus is lived out on Sunday morning with other Christians in the church's worship. So the goal of making disciples is to add to the membership of the worshiping assembly – not simply to create “religious” people for whom worship is a highly individualistic matter.

Because worship is central to the church's life, congregations and pastors need to consider the following questions. Is everything in the worship ministry well-planned? Are readers and other assistants well-trained? Is there adequate teaching about worship in our congregation? Are there books or pamphlets available that help people understand worship? If we are truly convinced about the centrality of worship in the life of the church, the aim should be to do it well so that everyone can focus on Christ's gift of himself in word and sacrament, rather than on the mistakes made by the ministers during the service.

May God help us to work toward these goals.