

# GOD GATHERS CHRISTIANS

# TO WORSHIP HIM

## WHAT IS CHRISTIAN WORSHIP?

The word 'worship' is related to 'worth-ship'. Worship deals with the question: What is of worth? In worship God's worth is proclaimed or revealed and God's worth is acknowledged.

**GOD COMES TO US** In the first instance Christian worship is God's revelation of himself by his word and actions. In worship God comes to his people and reveals his worth to them by what he says (the word) and by what he does (the sacraments). The focus of Christian worship is the Lord Jesus Christ because through Jesus God most clearly shows his worth to human beings as the God who loves us, accepts us, forgives us and cares for us.

## WE RESPOND

The second aspect of Christian worship is our response to God's words and actions. We recognise and acknowledge God's worth. Our response indicates what God is worth to us; we show by our words and actions that we believe God is worthy of praise, honour, loving obedience and willing service. We can pray to God for mercy and for all our needs. At the same time we acknowledge our own unworthiness (confession of sins).

We sometimes call our worship 'divine service' because in worship God serves us and this prompts us in turn to serve him. This highlights an essential difference between Christian and non-Christian worship: in non-Christian worship the initiative tends to be with the worshippers who try to establish the connection with their god and demonstrate their own worthiness by the earnestness and intensity of their prayers and other ritual acts (contrast the worship of the prophets of Baal with that of Elijah, 1 Kings 18:16-39; also the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18:9-14).

**WORSHIP IN THE BIBLE** The basic pattern of worship outlined above can be seen already in the Old Testament. When people like Noah and Abraham build altars and 'call on the name of the Lord', this follows some

gracious action of God (saving Noah, calling Abraham). In the Old Testament times the special places of worship were places where God had 'appeared' — made himself known. Although the people of God knew that God could not be confined to a building (2 Chronicles 6:18), God nevertheless instructed them to erect first the tabernacle and later the temple as his 'house' where he would graciously come to be with them. The Israelites were also given special times for worship. On the sabbath day they were to put aside their work and remember the mighty work of God as their Creator and Rescuer (Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15). Every day by their sacrifices they were to honour the God who had set them apart to be his own covenant

people. There also special worship festivals which focused on God's merciful deliverance (eg Passover, Day of Atonement).

The New Testament begins with Jesus and his disciples observing

the worship pattern of Israel. However, like the prophets in the Old Testament, Jesus called for worship that was not mere empty ritual but was sincere devotion (Matthew 6:5-13; 15:1-9), 'in spirit and in truth' (John 4:24). As God in human flesh, Jesus himself is the New Testament tabernacle and temple — the 'place' where God's glory is fully revealed (John 1:14; 2:19-21). Jesus promised his followers that he would be present even when only two or three of them came together in his name (Matthew 18:20). Christian worship is not restricted to certain rituals at particular places and times (Colossians 2:16). The sabbath having fulfilled its purpose, Sunday came to be observed as 'the Lord's day'. On this day Christians celebrate God's supreme work of deliverance through the death and resurrection of Christ. Luther explains what the third commandment means for Christians:

... we should not despise God's word or refuse to hear it. Instead, we should recognise that God's word is holy and be glad to hear and learn it. (*Luther's Small Catechism*, Openbook edition 1996)

In worship God comes to his people to strengthen them, prepare them to be his servants, and encourage them to love one another and share his gifts.

Theological Foundations of LIFE Curriculum

The 'church year', arranged around the festivals of Christmas, Easter and Pentecost, helps Christians to celebrate the mighty works of God for the salvation of all people.

For God's people all of life is worship — listening to the word of the Lord and responding in service to him and to other people (see Romans 12).

**FORMS OF WORSHIP** The essentials of Christian worship consist in God coming to people through word and sacrament and people responding through adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication. There are various ways of worshipping. Over the years many Christians have valued a set liturgy which they believe maintains the proper focus of worship. The value of good liturgy is that it allows worship to be carried on 'in a fitting and orderly way' (1 Corinthians 14:40), and enables the church to confess its doctrine clearly. The danger some Christians see in set liturgy is that it can easily become mechanical and thoughtless routine.

The Lutheran confessions stress, however, that neither liturgy nor any other form or style of worship is commanded by God. For example:

*We further believe, teach and confess that the community of God in every place and at every time has the right, authority and power to change, reduce, or to increase ceremonies according to its circumstances, as long as it does so without frivolity and offence but in an orderly and appropriate way, as at any time may seem to be most profitable, beneficial and salutary for good order, Christian discipline, evangelical decorum, and the edification of the church. Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration Article X, 9.*

Christians are free to choose in the area of forms of worship. Decisions about worship forms, however, must be made in genuine concern for the welfare and unity of the body of Christ and in Christian love for all members of the body. In all our worship — whether in our congregations or schools or classrooms or homes — our concern must surely be to use forms that best help us and fellow Christians (young and old) to recognise, express and respond to God's worth revealed in Jesus Christ.

### FOR REFLECTION AND/OR DISCUSSION

1. What questions do the Background Notes raise for you? What questions do you think your students will have on the topic of worship?
2. Why is this an important topic to teach to your students? What implications might the topic have for the life of your school?
3. More important than teaching children **forms** of worship (eg to understand the liturgy) is to teach children to **worship** (to understand what worship is all about). Comment: What can be done to enrich the worship in your school?
4. How do we handle the problem of children saying that worship is boring? (See *Good Question*, ed B Schwarz, Openbook Publishers, p 132)
5. Should worship be compulsory in a Christian school? Is it appropriate to expect non-Christian children (including children of other religious backgrounds) to participate in Christian worship?

### FOR FURTHER READING

*Our Lutheran Heritage* (What is distinctive about Christian worship particularly from the Lutheran point of view?) by EW Janetzki in *Praise God in His Sanctuary* Vol III

*A Lutheran Approach to the Theology of Worship* (LCA Commission on Worship) in *Doctrinal Statements and Theological Opinions* Vol 2

*Luther's Large Catechism: The Third Commandment*

*Augsburg Confession* VII, XV, XXVI, 40ff; XXVIII, 30 *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* Article IV, 49