

Worship and Mission from the Synagogue to Today

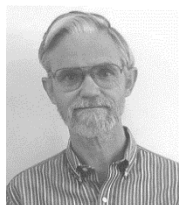
Jim Found

Abstract: Worship has led God’s people into mission since before the time of Christ. Paul came across Gentiles who had become “God-fearers” through the synagogue in their midst. By continuing the synagogue worship pattern with its systematic exposure to God’s Word, the people of God continue to represent God in the community, provide nurture for believers, and become equipped to go forth in mission.

The Origin of Our Worship Pattern

Why is it that the New Testament does not give as many details for worship as the Old? For one thing, a great many of those “worship details” in the Old Testament had to do with food laws and keeping the Sabbath, but these are no longer required for Christians (Col 2:16). Many other details had to do with the animal sacrifices, but they have been fulfilled and abrogated by the sacrifice of Jesus. Instead, we now receive the benefits of Christ’s one sacrifice as we partake of Holy Communion. It is noteworthy that the longest section in the New Testament about worship details are Paul’s instructions about celebrating Holy Communion together in 1 Corinthians 11.

Admittedly the New Testament does not tell us how to organize a worship service. But it did not need to. The description of a church service recorded by Justin Martyr¹ in around the year 138 makes clear that the earliest believers, having grown up with the synagogue service, would have seen its activities as the exemplar for what people are to do when they gather for worship. Synagogue worship is not described in the Old Testament, since the synagogue emerged later, in the intertestamental period, but Jewish documents from the first century show that it consisted almost entirely of ingredients from the Hebrew scriptures, such as Psalm-singing, scripture-reading, and the Aaronic benediction, ingredients that we still use today.²



Jim Found is on the teacher roster of synod. He retired in 2006 after serving as a DCE, a missionary to Taiwan, and with the Oswald Hoffman School of Christian Outreach at Concordia St. Paul. His email is Learner9696@yahoo.com, and his website is foundbytes.com

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From Synagogue to Church

The systematic exposure to the Torah, Prophets, and Psalms that characterized the synagogue service is what became and remains the backbone of the Service of the Word. Even though the Eucharist had been celebrated in Corinth in the context of a meal, by the time of Justin Martyr the norm was a Eucharist celebration joined with elements from the synagogue service.³

The need to explicate the Hebrew scripture readings in the local languages grew into the sermon. Jesus used this pattern of “scripture followed by explication” in Luke 4:16-21, and we still use it today. Jesus used that reading from Isaiah as the opportunity to proclaim the gospel about Himself. For us the sermon still is the place where the scriptures are applied to believers as law/gospel, for the gospel “is the power of God for salvation” not only to outsiders, but “for all who believe.” (Rom 1:16). The gospel is also announced in the absolution. Evangelism and nurture both find their power in the gospel.

Paul’s list of actions in 1 Timothy 4:13, Colossians 3:16, and Ephesians 5:19, (reading the scriptures, teaching one another, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs) are actions that were found in synagogue worship. We still read from the Old Testament, and Justin Martyr attests that his church had added readings from “the memoirs of the apostles.” We still make use of the Psalms. The Psalms put the teachings of the Torah into expressions of worship and prayer. It was through the repetition of Psalms through one’s entire life that the Israelites built up a concept of God’s nature, and the Psalms still serve the same purpose for us, even though we now read them through Christian eyes.⁴ Even though the plan of salvation has reached a different stage with the coming of Christ, we are still the same people of God, have the same (though renewed) covenant, the same concept of God, and can express that the same heartfelt reliance as we use the Psalms.

The songs added to the service in later centuries were also largely based on scripture. Both Eastern and Western traditions followed synagogue practice by including Isaiah 6:3, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” In AD 514 the Western church added the Gloria, which included the angel’s song from the Christmas story, and in AD 687 added a song addressed to the Lamb of God (Agnus Dei) from John the Baptist’s designation of Jesus in John 1:36, “Behold, the Lamb of God!” These songs both included the appeal for mercy of Psalm 51:1, “Have mercy on me, O God” also familiar as the cry for help addressed by the blind man to Jesus in Mark 10:47. That cry was used as a refrain in a litany, which was the form used for the general prayer when it was moved toward the beginning of the service around AD 370. In AD 595 Pope Gregory removed the petitions, keeping only the refrain, but the use of a litany was restored to Lutheran use in the Service Book and Hymnal of 1958. The Lord’s Prayer is attested as being in common use in AD 251.⁵

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The English word *church* translates the Greek term *ekklesia*, literally a “calling out,” and was a common word for a gathering in Hellenistic times. (It is used in this way in Acts 19:39, “But if you seek anything further, it shall be settled in the regular assembly.”) The Jewish scholars responsible for the Septuagint selected the word *ekklesia* to translate the gatherings of God’s people in the Old Testament (an example is in Psalm 107:32, “Let them extol him in the congregation of the people, and praise him in the assembly of the elders”). *The New Testament use of this term connects the early Christian community to that of the Old Testament, as the whole "Israel of God" (Gal 6:16).*⁶

Worship and Mission

It is clear that Gentiles in the Roman and Persian areas were positively impacted by the presence of Jews and were drawn to attend synagogue worship. Acts 13:43 refers to them as “god-fearing proselytes (NASB).” Other English translations say, “devout converts to Judaism” (NIV), “religious proselytes” (KJV), and “Gentiles who worshipped God” (CEV). Because there were synagogues in their midst, Gentiles were attracted to the idea of monotheism and to the ethical principles of the Jews. The centurion in Acts 10 seems to be an example of such a person.

A similar strategy was used by the Irish monks who brought the gospel back into Europe after the devastations wrought by the Vikings. Their strategy was to set up self-sustaining monasteries with regular worship services in pagan areas as bases from which to influence the surrounding populations. As in the synagogues, the gatherings of God’s people are like beachheads for the ultimate goal promised to Abraham, that “in your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 26:4). Paul clarifies that this verse refers to Jesus. But we are now Jesus’ body, and we continue His work so that, at the end, people from every tribe and nation will be worshipping him (Rev 5:9-10).

Today again new church plants are seen as one of the best ways to bring the gospel to new areas. As a recent example, Robert Zagore writes in the February 2022 *Lutheran Witness REPORTER*: “Statistically, church planting is the most successful way to reach new believers. It re-engages believers in Christ’s mission ... it is the most successful way to reach out to ethnic groups, the unchurched, and those who have wandered from the faith.”⁷

Worship Communities as Discipling Centers

The nurture and formation of children raised by Christians comes from Old Testament stories as well as New. Both before and after Christ, the systematic repetition in the worship gathering of the records of God’s actions and of the characteristics of God found in the Psalms enriches the concept of God and thus invites trust in God.⁸ After outsiders profess faith in Jesus, the church is there to provide the place for instruction for Baptism, strengthening of faith in Holy Communion, and ongoing nurture. The Lutheran Heritage

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Foundation is devoted to providing Luther's Small Catechism and other nurture materials in many of the world's languages. The article by Robert Zagore cited above also states that "the LCMS has an exceptionally strong record of bringing in and retaining adult members, being among the top five church bodies (by percentage) in the US, with its emphasis on catechesis."⁹ This statistic motivates us to be even more deliberate in energetically discipling those God has placed into our respective circles of care.

Discipling includes teaching what it means to be a member of God's people. The object of discipling is to transform lives through growth toward maturity (Heb 6:1) in order to bear fruit (Jn 15:8).¹⁰ Though there is continuity from the Old Testament to the New, for we are partakers of the covenant with Abraham, the New Testament provides us with additional revelations about our identity now, after the resurrection of Jesus. Paul refers to some of these as mysteries, like the fact that the Gentiles are co-heirs (Eph 3:6), and about the mystery hidden for ages but now revealed, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory (Col 1:27). The power of the Holy Spirit that was recognized in figures like Elijah and David is now for all believers, as Joel had prophesied (Acts 2:16-18). The promises in Ezekiel 36 have come true: we have a new heart and a new spirit (verse 26) and God has put His Spirit within us, which is the cause of us walking in His statutes (verse 27). Calling God "Abba" expresses a personal relationship, and Jesus Himself taught us to address God as "our Father.

Some concrete objects from the Old Testament are now spiritualized: for example, we are now the temple of the Holy Spirit. The splitting of the temple curtain at Jesus' death is used in Hebrews 10:20 to show that we can draw near to God in full assurance of faith. Our prayers continue to use Old Testament phraseology, but we now offer prayer in the name of Jesus. Christian Baptism transformed Jewish ceremonies with water into a union with Christ and His death and resurrection (1 Cor 6). Though the animal sacrifices are no longer needed, the concept of sacrifice reappears in the New Testament as a sacrifice of praise (Heb 13:15) and as an offering of ourselves as living sacrifices (Rom 12:1). These are the truths that are passed on as the local church nurtures disciples.

Worship Communities as Training Grounds for Mission

The worshipping community is needed as the place to strengthen believers to go out to have conversations with those who would not attend church. The Book of Acts records such conversations by Philip with the Ethiopian eunuch and by Peter with the Centurion. The grounding in the faith needed to witness outside the gathering is founded on the re-affirmation and strength found in the gathering. Today many churches provide instruction in evangelism and apologetics to equip members for those outside conversations. Synod and its associated groups provide workshops and web-based materials.¹¹ These helps all depend on support from congregations and in turn are utilized within those congregations.

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The worshipping community also is the group that sends forth individuals into mission, whether directly, as the church in Antioch sent Paul (Acts 13) or in concert with other local churches, like denominational mission boards. Lutherans go forth from their nurturing congregations with the proclamation that Jesus has already paid for all sins, knowing confidently that the gospel is the power of God for salvation to all who believe (Rom 1:16) and that the faith does come by hearing the word of God (Rom 10:17).

Conclusion

Though the New Testament does not designate a structure for what to do when gathered, it is noteworthy that churches throughout the world and throughout time have maintained the pattern of psalms, readings, sermon, and prayers that was familiar to the first believers from the synagogue service. That service nurtured God's people and resulted in non-Jews being attracted to the God of the Bible. And as we continue to use that pattern, with its systematic and lifelong repetition of God's Word, God's people are transformed and are equipped to go forth in mission.

¹ This early Christian worship service is described in *Apologia I*, part 67, by Justin Martyr, written around AD 150. It is quoted in Lucien Diess, ed., *Springtime of the Liturgy*, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1979), 93.

² Sofia Cavaletti, "The Jewish Roots of Christian Worship," in *The Jewish Roots of Christian Liturgy*, Eugene J Fisher, ed., (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1990). Synagogue and Christian services are compared on page 16 of this article. An opposing view (that early Christian worship did not use the synagogue as a model) is in Ferdinand Hahn, *The Worship of the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1973), 52; but he does state on page 72 that a "service of word and prayer" could also be held without communion.

³ Celebrating the Eucharist after eating together (a love feast) seems to be assumed in the Didache (late first century or later) but not mentioned by Justin Martyr, according to earlychurch.com/love-feast. That web page quotes *The Encyclopedia of Early Church History*, Everett Ferguson et al, eds., (London: Routledge, 1990), 17 as saying "There is general agreement that from the mid-third century, agape and Eucharist go their separate ways."

⁴ Thomas J. Winger, "Praying the Psalms with Jesus and His Body," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 84 (2020), 132f. He encourages us to see the Psalms as prayers of Jesus, in that because they are written by an anointed one (David) they are types of the final anointed one, Jesus. He also quotes Bonhoeffer saying, "we must first ask not what the Psalms have to do with us, but what they have to do with Jesus Christ." (from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing Company, 1970), 157.

⁵ The dates when changes were made to the liturgy are listed in the author's web article "Sunday Service" found at foundbytes.com/Sunday-service. I am dependent for such dates on Susan Lynn Peterson, *Timeline Charts of the Western Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999) and Benedict Steuart, *The Development of Christian Worship* (London: Longmans Green and Co, 1953).

⁶ Larry W. Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans: 1999, 55. He notes that the early Christians, by calling themselves by the Greek word for God's people, reflect their self-understanding "as being a legitimate continuation and heirs of Old Testament Israel."

⁷ This article is on page 2 of the Life Together supplement of the February 2022 *Reporter*.

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⁸ A reflection on the Old Testament stories as formative for Christian children is in the author's web article at foundbytes.com/tanakh

⁹ Life Together, Feb. 2022 *Reporter*.

¹⁰ A detailed look at growing towards maturity is at the author's web page foundbytes.com/your-own

¹¹ The LCMS program "Every One His Witness" can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/LCMSE1HW/>. Lutheran Hour ministries has workshops, and short videos on key topics that are valuable for evangelism can be found at <https://www.lhm.org/godconnects/>. This author has a teaching plan for an evangelism workshop at foundbytes.com/how-to-lead

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