

Theology of Worship

of Immanuel Lutheran Church, Loveland, Colorado
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Theology of Worship

It is the mission of Immanuel Lutheran Church and School to make disciples ASAP¹. One of the ways we accomplish that is through corporate worship, that is, by “announcing and celebrating Jesus’ love through Word and Sacrament.” This *Theology of Worship* serves as a foundational statement when evaluating, forming, and developing the corporate worship life of Immanuel Lutheran Church and helps answer the question, “What is worship?”

The Priority of Worship at Immanuel

From a biblical standpoint, corporate worship takes the number one priority within the ministries of Immanuel Lutheran Church. This is not meant to diminish the importance of other ministries or activities but we recognize that the Lord desires our worship above all else. Everything that we *are* and everything we *do* as individuals and as a community of faith flows from the context of worship. While all of life is an act of worship (See Romans 12:1) this document will focus specifically on our corporate worship as a community of faith.

Throughout the Old Testament, after great acts of God, the response of faithful people was to worship, to set up an altar, to sacrifice or give an offering. (See Noah in Genesis 8:18-21; Miriam in Exodus 15:20-21; Abraham in his travels in Genesis 12:7-8, with the near sacrifice of his son Isaac in Genesis 22:1-14; Isaac in Genesis 26:24-25; Jacob at Bethel in Genesis 28:16-22; Moses after defeating an enemy in Exodus 17:14-16.) In the commandments in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, we are told to “have no other gods before the Lord our God” and that we are to “remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.” In the New Testament, Jesus permitted a woman to worship Him by anointing Him with expensive perfume, much to the dismay of some. Jesus went on to explain why what she did was so important. (See Luke 7:36-50 and John 12:3-8.)

We further base our priority of corporate worship on the call from God to His people to come together to worship Him. (See Exodus 24:1; Deut. 4:10; Psalms 47, 66, 95, 96, 100, 133, and 150; Matthew 11:28-29 and John 4:24.) We are called to respond to who God is (God the Father, Creator of the universe), what God has done (God the Son, Redeemer of the world) and what God continues to do in our lives (God the Spirit, Comforter and Counselor.) God’s call for us to worship Him is not vague. And, like all of God’s commands, it comes from a context of love and out of wisdom in knowing what is best for His people to live life on earth to the full.

Based on God’s call to worship Him and what He desires our response to be, we summarize the practice of worship at Immanuel Lutheran through this foundational statement: *worship is all people coming together to experience, respond to, and grow in God’s love.* The following sections clarify each part of this statement.

¹It is the mission of Immanuel Lutheran Church and School to make disciples **ASAP** by:

Announcing and celebrating Jesus’ love through Word and Sacrament

Sharing the message of Jesus’ free gift of love, forgiveness, and life with friends and acquaintances

Actively participating in the Body of Christ

Providing a loving and caring environment where people can grow and be nurtured in their faith, knowledge of God, and relationships with God and each other

“Worship is all people coming together to experience, respond to, and grow in Jesus’ love”

Worship is...All People

We invite and encourage *all people* of all ages, of all walks of life, in whatever stage of their faith journey, to come, participate, and participate in the corporate worship services at Immanuel, trusting and praying God to do His work among us and through us.

Throughout the Old and New Testaments, when God’s covenant people came together, children were part of the gathering. In the same way, we recognize the importance of including children within the context of worship, knowing the blessings they can receive and the blessings they can be. We affirm, as Jesus did, that even the youngest among our community of faith are important (Mark 10:13-16) and we include children in the phrase *All People*. Children possess the gift of faith through Baptism and the work of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38-39; Matthew 18:3-6). Because of that, they have gifts and talents to offer and share. As *A Family Place*, Immanuel not only encourages children’s participation in worship but also places a high value on families worshipping together.

We also include those outside the Christian faith in the phrase *All People* and believe that a congregation’s worship service is one of its prime outreach tools. In Matthew 28:19-20 Jesus gives the Great Commission to us as His people. In that Commission we are commanded to “make disciples of all nations,” by baptizing and teaching. While that Bible passage is not a specific statement regarding worship, we believe that Baptism and Teaching are vital parts of corporate worship. There were no distinctions made regarding who should or should not be reached out to, but rather that we were to target *all people*. In another instance, when Jesus was cleansing the Temple in Mark 11, He stated that, “My house will be called a house of prayer for *all nations*.” Reading the Psalms we hear regularly of “the nations.” The spirit of the Psalms is that worship is to have an impact on *all nations*; the Lord ultimately desires that *all* be drawn to worship. (See Psalm 33, 47, 57, 67, 72, 96, 98, 148.)

All worship is a re-enactment and celebration of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We trust that as Jesus is present in worship (Matthew 18:20, “For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them”), the Holy Spirit is present as well (John 4:23, “Jesus said, ‘Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.’”) And the Holy Spirit will do His work of conversion, conviction, and growth when and where and how He chooses (John 3:8), including within the context of a worship service. While people attending a worship service may not have a relationship with Jesus – and because of that not be able to truly worship Him – they can watch, observe, and be impacted by the Holy Spirit and God’s Word. We dare not limit God in His work nor underestimate the power of His Word to touch people’s hearts as it is spoken, sung, heard, shared, experienced, and proclaimed (1 Peter 2:8-12).

Worship is...Coming Together

Within the concept of all people “coming together” we focus on relationships and community.

We recognize the vertical relationship (our relationship with Jesus) as the main reason for our coming together in worship. It is from that central relationship with Jesus that this “coming together” finds its true meaning and power (Acts 4:12). In Baptism and through God’s Word, God establishes a personal relationship with each one of us. It is the Lord in our hearts that draws us to Jesus in the first place and continues to motivate us to come together (John 6:44: “Jesus said, ‘No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.’”). Through our time spent in worship, study of God’s Word, and

prayer, we can come to know the Lord more and more and our relationship with Him deepens. It is our commonality in Jesus that brings us together as a community of faith to worship Him.

It is from that vertical relationship with Jesus and our oneness in Him that we find motivation to establish and develop our horizontal relationships, that is, our relationships with each other (1 John 4:7-8). We come together in our diversity in many areas of life (age, culture, occupations, interests, etc.) precisely because of our common faith in Jesus as our Savior and Lord.

Coming together amidst great diversity is not easy. The reality is, coming together is hard work and, at times, very messy as there can be many different kinds of people with many different backgrounds gathering at the same time. This can create situations with which we may be uncomfortable. Yet we are not called to be comfortable but we are called to be one in Jesus. It is OK – even preferable – to recognize and include the beautiful mosaic and variety of people with all our differences coming together to celebrate our oneness in Jesus (Galatians 3:26-29).

As we deal with those differences, we have a God-directed responsibility to deal with each other in forgiveness, just as we have been forgiven. We work to restore broken relationships out of love for Jesus and for each other.² There is a true joy evident among God’s people as we live out our faith and practice His forgiveness in such a way. Using again the picture of Jesus cleansing the Temple in Jerusalem, we know that worship and activity at the Temple was segregated in multiple ways (Jews/Gentiles, men/women, clergy/non-clergy, etc.). Yet Jesus proclaimed, “My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.”

It is important that we strive to know one another, just as we strive to know Jesus. As we come together, no one should be made to feel like an outsider who doesn’t belong. With Jesus’ love in our hearts, we look for opportunities to reach out, welcome, and love all who come together in worship. Our relationship with Jesus should move us to deepen and strengthen our relationships with one another. Thus our relationships with one another should serve to deepen and strengthen our relationship with Jesus.

The Lord creates this sense of community among us. Within community, not only do we come together but we also “do” together. (See the sections, “*Worship is...To Respond*,” and “*Worship is...To Grow*” for more on this.) As a community of faith gathered for worship, it is appropriate to celebrate our oneness and sense of community and to encourage this to be a part of the worship experience.

Jesus breaks down all the walls that divide us as a diverse people (Ephesians 2:13-22). He invites us to come together regularly to deepen our relationship with Him and with one another and to celebrate our oneness in Him.

Worship is...To Experience

The Lord intended worship to be a time to engage all our senses. To read of worship in the Psalms, we find emotion, music, deep reflection, learning, and celebration (See Psalms 145, 148, 149, 150).

²Seeking forgiveness of sins is the highest form of worship: Apology to the Augsburg Confession IV “Justification,” 154. Referring to the story of the woman who came to Jesus at the home of Simon the Pharisee, read Luke 7:47, “The woman came, believing that she should seek the forgiveness of sins from Christ. This is the highest way of worshipping Christ. Nothing greater could she ascribe to him. By looking for the forgiveness of sins from him, she truly acknowledged Him to be the Messiah. To truly believe means to think of Christ in this way, and in this way to worship him and take hold of him.”

Worship is an encounter with the living God, being in the very presence of the Lord Himself. He tells us, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart" (Jeremiah 29:13). Jesus said, "Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Matthew 18:20). Jesus also said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind"; and, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27). As we read the Epistles we know that we are created with varieties of spiritual gifts and talents (Romans 12:4-8; 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4:11-16; 1 Peter 4:8-11). The social sciences inform us of varieties in learning styles, personalities, and behaviors. To help all people experience Jesus' love in worship means that we also need to engage all our senses. While not dependant on our experiences or senses, we value them as gifts to enhance worship and our experience of Jesus' love, making worship more memorable and meaningful.

Worship is participatory, not a spectator sport. Just as in other areas of life, the Lord desires us to use and share our gifts and talents in worship. There are different levels of participation: for some, simply coming to worship is a level of involvement (more will be said about this in the next section, "***Worship is...To Respond.***") For many others, actively participating in times of worship makes the experience of worship even more meaningful - singing, ringing, ushering, serving communion, reading Scripture, etc. Providing multiple ways to be involved in worship serves not only to offer support to worship services but provides additional ways for individuals and families to experience worship.

To experience God's love in Jesus includes both lows and highs. We experience appropriate guilt, sorrow over sin, and terror of a holy God as well as the joy and peace of knowing His love and forgiveness. This also includes vicarious experiences: listening to others tell of God's action in their lives, testimonies of what God is doing, storytelling to make a spiritual point, etc.

It's important to find a balance when talking about the arena of experience. Jesus raises this in Luke 10:27 when He says, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind." Our experience of God is not just emotion or intellectual learning or activity, but a combination and healthy balance of all of these areas. So we value visual experiences or stimulation with colors and the arts, aural with music and speech and sound, touch with human contact, aromas that elicit certain responses and memories, quiet reflection that pushes us deep into our souls, order and tradition that appeal to our logic, taste with Holy Communion, intellect with challenging questions that engage our minds, stories that touch our hearts, movement that involves our bodies. We are created as whole beings with many facets and so it is important to engage the whole person in worship with varieties of experiences.

The sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper are the ultimate experience of our worship and the very presence of God. As such, they also serve as God's stamp of approval on experience as we look at the multi-sensory way in which He created these means of grace.

Worship is...To Respond

Worshiping God naturally elicits a response. It is important for worship planners to intentionally create appropriate opportunities for worshipers to respond, both within the context of worship as well as outside of the worship setting. We would present opportunities to all people so the individual worshiper can respond in a way that is appropriate for her/him out of love for the Lord and not out of guilt or manipulation.

We recognize two different kinds of responses: short-term responses during a worship service (standing, sitting, singing, clapping, praying, confessing, crying, laughing, greeting, offering, introspection,

meditation, silence, liturgical responses, testimonials, etc.) and long-term, life-changing commitments made over a lifetime but are elicited during a worship service (inviting friends to worship, meeting with someone to pray after services, behavioral or lifestyle changes, practical opportunities for serving and demonstrating compassion toward other people, becoming involved in a ministry, etc.).

The response not only can, but prayerfully will be, acted out in daily life. When worship is concluded in the sanctuary, the congregation is sent out into God's world to our respective callings. Within those various callings we respond to Christ's love and gifts by being compassionate, loving, and caring for others, and in so doing we demonstrate the love of Christ in a concrete way, often at the same time being blessed ourselves. Another way we respond is to act on the fact that Jesus has broken down the sinful walls of individualism, by forgiving those who have hurt us, and actively working to cement together our community of faith.

The challenge is balancing the "life-change" responses we desire with allowing the experience and relationship with God to blossom and grow. We want people to "fall in love" with God and to respond to that relationship. We recognize the wide spectrum of people who come together in worship, with many different responses at many different levels. The act itself of coming to worship is a response of faith, as we know that people sometimes overcome many obstacles just to be at worship.

Worship is...To Grow

Worship not only fosters evangelism but discipleship as well. In Jesus' Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20, He includes "teaching" as a way of making disciples of all nations. The worship experience gives us an opportunity to learn more about God each week.

To expect growth assumes current inadequacy and immaturity. We must admit that we're not in a place of spiritual maturity where we should stay. But growth means change and change means some level of discomfort and tension. Growth is intertwined with the previous section, "***Worship is...To Respond.***" That is because growth produces a response and the act of responding often generates more growth (Hebrews 5:12-6:3). The Marks of Discipleship³ are specific areas of our spiritual lives that lend themselves to the areas of worship and growth. These are the basics of the Christian's life.

³Discipleship is the Christian's intentional journey in grace. Jesus commanded the Church to "go and make disciples" (Matthew 28:18). The goal of a disciple is maturity in Jesus Christ... "to grow into the maturity of the full stature of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13).

Being disciples of Jesus Christ is what Immanuel is all about. The Marks of Discipleship are significant components of our spiritual growth spoken of regularly by our Lord and laid out clearly in the Scriptures. While they are not "requirements," we lift these Marks of Discipleship as clarifiers. They help us more fully experience the joy and responsibilities of our faith. The Marks of Discipleship are the benchmarks to strive for especially for our leaders in the ministry. However, all members of Immanuel are encouraged to be continually growing in their relationship with Jesus Christ through the use of and growth in these Marks of Discipleship.

1. Personal faith demonstrated in daily *scripture* reading; Psalm 119:105
2. Personal faith demonstrated in daily *prayer*; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-19
3. Weekly *worship*; Psalm 122:1 and Hebrews 10:23-25
4. Active Christian *giving* through
 - a. serving in a ministry at Immanuel; 1 Corinthians 12:4-13
 - b. tithing, or a commitment to move to tithing; Malachi 3:10 and 2 Corinthians 8:12
 - c. involvement in at least one mission project outside of Immanuel at least once a year; Matthew 25:31-46
5. Commitment to ministry through *relationships*, be a team player; Mark 6:7

Worship is intended to be intellectually stimulating. There is an emphasis on the mind and on accumulation of knowledge. However, this growth needs to be relevant and connected to real life, to our current culture and society, and to the day-to-day world in which we each live. While growth is part of worship, it should be stated that growth obviously must continue outside of a worship service (Romans 12:1-3).

Worship is...In Jesus' Love

It is important that we state once again, very clearly, that the focus of our worship is on Jesus and His love for us (Hebrews 12:2). The focus is not on a generic god or even simply on God as our creator. Our reason for being and our reason for living is found in the message of the Gospel: the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins and for our salvation.

We must understand God's role in worship. It is God who draws us here (John 6:44), it is God who has initiated a relationship with us, it is God who has taken the initiative in giving to us His Word, His Son, His Holy Spirit, His means of grace in Baptism and the Lord's Supper, and it is God who speaks to us. God delights in us, in "those who fear Him." (See Psalm 33:18-21; 34:7-11; 103:11-17; 147:10-11.)

Worship is about God... and it is about us, a beautiful intertwining of this relationship. It is a gift from God Himself that allows us to come into His presence, to seek Him, to celebrate Him, to experience Him, to grow in Him and to be a community of grace and Christian love, the family of Christ.

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6. Intentional spiritual ***growth***; growth plan including regular Bible study with fellow believers; Ephesians 4:11-16
 7. ***Discipleship*** of at least one other person. Romans 15:1-2, (3-6)