

# MORE THAN WORDS

A brief introduction to the sights  
and actions of worship

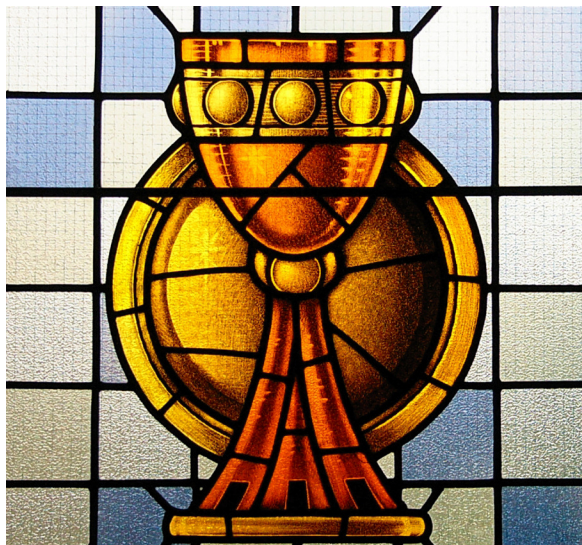


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## More Than Words

God created us as physical beings giving us not only a brain with ears and a mouth, but also eyes, a nose, arms, legs, hands and, most of all, a heart.



Presumably, God expects us to use all these parts and not become overly dependent on any one aspect of our functioning as a human being.

Throughout the past few centuries our culture has moved from being primarily agriculture to industrial and, today, technological. A major emphasis has been placed on knowledge, causing us to be quite dependent on our brainpower, verbal communication and listening skills.

This is especially true in protestant churches. As worshipers became more educated and literate, a greater emphasis on the spoken and sung proclamation of God's Word gradually overshadowed the other means which God provided for us to know God and experience God's love and forgiveness — the sacraments.

God is far smarter than are we. God knows that minds can wander and that short attention spans are the norm for many of us.

He understands what any teacher or parent knows, that lectures need to be accompanied by actions, experiments, pictures or videos. We've heard it said, "A picture is worth a thousand words."

And so liturgical renewal has grown over the past forty years or so, challenging us to look at the whole tradition of worship as

presented by the witness of the New Testament Christians and throughout history.

We are encouraged to not limit ourselves to one avenue of communication and form of response. We should not assume that lots of words alone are the best way to hear God's Word or to return thanks and praise.

We should regularly hear God's Word proclaimed and preached, as well as through participation in communion at the Holy Eucharist, responding not only with our voice through songs, creeds and prayers, but also through our whole bodies by bowing and kneeling, standing and sitting, processing and splashing, sprinkling and smelling, embracing and smiling, touching and moving and signing ourselves with the most powerful Christian symbol of all, the cross.

## What Does Scripture Have to Say?



*"You were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body."*  
~ 1 Corinthians 6:20

*"Therefore since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire."* ~ Hebrews 12:28-29

*"Beware of practicing your piety before others, in order to be seen by them." "Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."*  
~ Jesus, Sermon on the Mount

*"I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."* ~ Romans 12:1

## We're a Part of the Church "Catholic"

Since the time of the Reformation, the word "catholic" has frequently been misused and misunderstood. The word itself means "universal." "Catholic" refers to the understanding that the Church is a body of believers, which cannot fully be seen since it extends to all corners of the world and beyond the bounds of human time. This is very difficult for us to understand as human beings who function within an earthly understanding of space and time.

However, our faith tells us that who we are and what we do in this place at this time is only a small glimpse of the whole catholic Church. Therefore, it is crucial that we do all we can to find ways to connect ourselves, our lives as Christians, and our worship practices to this universal Church. We do this by rooting ourselves firmly in God's Word as shown us through the scriptures, and carefully examining the traditions of the Church throughout the centuries and in all cultures. There have been common words, music and liturgical actions, which have united Christians from all corners of the Church throughout all Christian time. We need to know them, explore them and, if we find them to not be in conflict with the faith, use them boldly and without apology.

## The Sign of the Cross

Receive the instruction offered through the Lutheran Church: Having come to your place, bow your head or kneel, make the sign of the cross as a reminder of your baptism, and say a prayer for reverent participation in worship. ~ *Worship Supplement, 1969*



The sign of the cross is made by touching the tips of the fingers to the forehead, the breast, and then the shoulders in turn. This is appropriately done at the Trinitarian Invocation, at the last phrase of the

Creed, before and after receiving the elements of Holy Communion and at the Benediction. ~ *Worship Supplement, 1969*

The sign of the cross marks the Christian as united with the Crucified. Each time Christians sign themselves or is signed with the cross, they acknowledge that their place in the kingdom has been given them in view of the death of Christ. They rest securely in the faithfulness of God, known by God as God's very own sons and daughters. ~ *Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship, 1974*

As the sign of the cross is made, the minister says: "Name, child of God, you have been marked with the cross of Christ forever".

~ *Lutheran Book of Worship, Holy Baptism*

"In the morning, when you rise, you shall make the sign of the holy cross, and you shall say: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." ~ *Martin Luther, Morning Prayer, 1529.*

"In the evening, when you go to bed, you shall make the sign of the holy cross, and you shall say: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." ~ *Martin Luther, Evening Prayer, 1529*

"Whoever believes in the Son will have eternal life. Cling to his neck or to his garment; that is, believe that he became man and suffered for you. Cross yourself and say, 'I am a Christian and will conquer.'" ~ *Martin Luther, Sermons on the Gospel of John, 1537-1540*

"To go one's way under the sign of the cross is not misery and desperation, but peace and refreshment for the soul, it is the highest joy." ~ *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship*

"Almighty god, the Father, + the Son, and the Holy Spirit, bless and preserve us." ~ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*

## Standing | Sitting | Kneeling

Standing and sitting, two simple, routine postures, seem to have very little unique significance. Yet, along with kneeling, they say a great deal about our understanding of specific parts of the liturgy.

We kneel as a sign of humility, when we enter into the sacred space to prepare for worship, as we confess our sins, as we offer God intercessory prayers on our behalf and for others, and when we receive Christ's Body and Blood in Holy Communion.

We sit to receive instruction through the reading of lessons and preaching. We stand when we sing, especially during a procession. This is good stewardship of the bodies God has given us, because standing is the best posture for breathing well and singing confidently.

It is also a sign of respect and attention to stand.

Standing is good for participation. Therefore, we stand as we recite the creed together boldly and participate in prayers of a more proclamatory nature.

During the fifty days of Easter, Christians follow Saint Augustine's command, from the 4th century, to never kneel during that season of rejoicing. Therefore, we stand for all prayers and to receive communion during those seven weeks.

## Water | Bread & Wine | Oil

God chose very common earthly elements to use as vehicles in offering us God's own grace. Water, the very stuff that keeps us alive, cleans and refreshes us, is the vehicle through which God makes new Christians, along with God's Word, at Holy Baptism.



Bread, a basic staple of human sustenance, is used as the very basic nourishment we receive as Christians, Christ's Body. Wine, a common, although risky, substance is a drink of great joy and festivity. It can also lead us into trouble. But so can our faith! With our faith comes responsibility.

As human beings, however, we sometimes falter in our lives and are not able to receive the wine. Understanding human frailties, we follow Martin Luther's lead in acknowledging that The Living Body must also be filled with the Blood of Life. Therefore, the complete offering of God to us is available under one kind, the bread (or wine), if necessary.

Oil, a common biblical symbol, is used as an expression of healing, a way of making "priests," that is, Christians, at Baptism, and a sign of renewing one's commitments, especially at Affirmation of Baptism, commonly known as Confirmation.

## Color

Colors are an important form of communication in our world. Think of a stop sign, for example. The impact is made largely by the vividness and directness of the color red.

In church we see seasonal color changes in the paraments on the altar and in the vestments of the presiding and preaching ministers. **WHITE**, a color of festivity and purity, is used on all festivals of our Lord: nativity, epiphany, transfiguration, resurrection, ascension and the reign of Christ the King, as well as All Saints Day and other commemorations of saints who were not martyred. Only gold supersedes white as a color of unbridled joy and solemnity. It is used at the Great Vigil of Easter.

**RED**, the color of blood and fire, is full of energy. It is used on the festival of Pentecost as the power of the Holy Spirit is released, symbolized through tongues of fire, at the birth of the Church. In the Lutheran tradition, it is also used on Reformation, often understood as a rebirth of the Church. Days which commemorate saints who have been martyred for their faith are also marked with the color red. **BLUE**, the color of the sky, is a sign of hope. During Advent we use blue to heighten our sense of patient expectation as we wait for the coming of our Lord as an infant in Bethlehem, through the Eucharist each week and, finally, at the end of time.

**PURPLE** is traditionally a color of penitence. Used during the forty days of Lent, purple reflects the penitential character of the season. It also shows us Jesus' human nature, as witnessed in his forty days of fasting in the wilderness prior to his passion and death. Purple is also a color of royalty, reflecting the divinity of Jesus, albeit in a much more restrained manner than the gold and white of Easter.

**GREEN** represents growth, as seen in lush vegetation. It is used during the time of year when the Church focuses on spiritual growth and development, that is, a focus on the teachings of Jesus, rather than on the events of his life. Green is used during the Sundays after Epiphany and the long stretch of time following Pentecost.

On Good Friday, the Church uses no color. Instead, our worship space is bare. At the conclusion of the Maundy Thursday liturgy, the chancel is stripped, just as Jesus was stripped of his clothes and dignity before being led to the cross. It is left this way until the Easter Vigil, when the Church erupts in song and lots of color, greeting the resurrection.

## Bowing

“At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow.” These words from Paul’s letter to the Philippians have inspired a simple gesture among Christians since the earliest days of the Church..

Bowing, in one form or another, is a way of expressing our humility and showing respect and reverence to God. Christians use this simple gesture as a means of reminding themselves where they are and why.

Bowing towards the altar upon entering and exiting the worship space is a sign of reverence to God, reminding us that we are in God’s house. Bowing as the cross, another symbol of God’s presence, passes in procession, at the words, “Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,” or simply as the name “Jesus” is spoken or sung, are traditionally times when Christians have offered this gesture of respect.



A deep bow, during the Great Thanksgiving, at the singing of “Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might: heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest!” expresses the “awesomeness” of the moment, as heaven and earth are joined in singing praises, just as we are joined by sharing the Body and Blood of Christ.

A bow (or even kneeling) during the Nicene Creed at the words, “For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven; was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary, and became truly human,” is a physical way of expressing the humility which Christ endured by becoming human for our sake.

On Good Friday, the day we celebrate our Lord’s passion and death and offer public expressions of adoration to Christ the crucified, the bows we offer could rightly be the most profound of the whole liturgical year. Traditionally, the presiding minister on that day prostrates himself before the altar (lying completely on the

ground), in profound thanksgiving for the ultimate humility which Christ suffered—death on a cross.

## Furnishings

There are three important pieces of furniture in our worship space. Each is a physical reminder of one of the “means of Grace,” a way in which God promises us his presence, love and forgiveness.

The altar stands as a symbol of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, accomplished once and for all many centuries ago. Each time we gather around the altar, we retell the stories of our faith, especially Christ’s death and resurrection, and how he promises to come to us through bread and wine each and every Lord’s Day. It is through the telling of these stories and by becoming part of that on-going story ourselves by sharing in Holy Communion, that we too are truly present at the cross and the empty tomb.

The ambo is the place from which God’s Word is proclaimed and preached. A large Bible, containing the truths of God, is kept at that location, symbolizing the strength of God’s Word. We do not publicly read God’s Word from flimsy, thin, individual sheets of paper. That would give inaccurate witness of our faith in the scriptures.

The font stands at the entrance to our worship space, because Baptism stands as our entrance into God’s family, the Church. As the Small Catechism tells us, Baptism is just the beginning—we are to repent daily and renew ourselves in the waters of Baptism constantly.

Our faith is not always neat and tidy. Use that water—dip, splash, sprinkle, cross yourself—regularly, as a reminder of your Baptism.

## Seasonal Sights and Smells

Certain sights in the worship space and actions and gestures of the liturgy are only observable during specific times of the year.

The sight and smell of evergreens at Christmas remind us of the eternal life promised by the newborn Savior, even in the dead of winter.

Nature’s symbol of beauty, flowers, are in abundance on certain festivals, while noticeably absent on others.

Fasting during Lent may be reflected visually through the veils which hide certain works of beauty from our eyes, and aurally through the absence of bells and postludes. Human frailty is felt and seen through the ashes on Ash Wednesday.

Banners of all types communicate through fabric, color and visual symbols, expressing the nature of the day or season.

There are far too many sensory heightening things in worship to address in this booklet. Keep your ears, eyes, noses and minds open and experience your faith with all your senses.

## Processions

We are a pilgrim people. We are sojourning on this earth for only a short while until we reach the final destination of our heavenly home.

Besides the practical matter of getting worship leaders to their seats in an orderly manner, processions are vivid reminders of that restlessness we know as God's people. We cannot be content to sit still on our faith. If faith is alive, it moves us to action and concern.

We process at the beginning and end of each liturgy, especially the great festivals, just as a parade often marks important events in a community. We sometimes process to the midst of God's people as the Gospel is proclaimed. What better place is there from which to hear the good news of how Jesus came among his people to preach and be known?

We process to the altar as we dare to offer simple human gifts of money, bread and wine, to be used by God in a divine way to give us God's own self.

We process at communion as we humbly, yet joyfully, approach God's presence in that sacred meal.

Throughout the church year, we process for special reasons: to receive ashes, to be individually forgiven, to adore the glory of sacrificial love as offered on the cross and to give thanks for the light of Christ breaking into our dark lives.

Processions are important to Christians. More than utilitarian acts, they are our movement towards the throne room of the king of heaven, who is already present with us each time we gather to worship.

## Incense

Throughout history, incense has served both practical and symbolic purposes in worship, clearing out musty old cathedrals and carrying worshipers' prayers to heaven. It is most clearly understood through the words of Psalm 141, "Let my prayers rise before you as incense," sung at many Evening Prayer liturgies.



Incense, a beautiful, fragrant offering, was one of the gifts offered to the Christ-child by the Magi.

The Old Testament is full of examples where Israelites were required to burn incense as part of their offerings. The visions of heaven in Isaiah and Revelation give a mystical glimpse of the life to come, complete with clouds of incense.

The sweet smell of reconciliation can be experienced with our under-used sense of smell. For centuries, incense has been used as a sign of purification and honor, thus the altar, cross, gifts of bread and wine and the worshipers themselves were "censed" at every celebration of the Eucharist in some parts of God's church.



About the author:

Scott Weidler had been Associate Director for Worship & Music for the Evangelical Church in America from 1995. He authored this pamphlet while serving as Cantor at The Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd in Lancaster, PA — a position he held from 1989 - 1995.