

# What's the Use of Praising God?

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Suspicion at empty praise silences true praise. People who live in commercial societies that are dominated by television become mistrustful of praise. And rightly so! If they don't, they become victims of advertising and self-promoting celebrities. The more suspicious they become, the more they are bombarded by advertising that praises products to sell them, and the more they are manipulated by people who boast about their achievements in order to sell themselves.

We are therefore taught to be critical of the claims that people make. Our system of education is designed to sharpen our critical faculties. It teaches us to be wary and suspicious, to examine and test what is said to be good for us. We are trained to distinguish the empty praise of false advertising from what is truly worthy of praise. And that is good! But it is also bad for us. Criticism promotes suspicion, which, in turn, breeds cynicism. All this can gradually make us blind to what is actually good. Nothing seems to be really good any longer. Like the evening news on television, we notice the few things that go wrong and ignore the many things that go right in our daily lives. We no longer recognise the good gifts that we all receive from the world around us and from God. If we do discover something good, we find it hard to share our enjoyment with others, because the words that we once used to praise have become so tainted by abuse that they are regarded with some suspicion.

This climate of mistrust makes it hard for the church to speak the gospel to people. What it offers is too good to be true. Pastors cannot truly communicate the mystery of Christ, except by praising him. Yet when they resort to praise, we suspect that they are out to manipulate and con us with their promises of heavenly bliss. And we become even more suspicious of God and his promises. Yet at the same time this suspicion of praise provides the church with a new opportunity. Mistrustful people do listen to right praise, the praise of what is truly good. It stands out like a bed of flowers in an ugly slum. It rings true in contrast with the hollow sound of advertising and self-promotion. But it must be true. The praise of God is heard most clearly when it rings true to his word and to human experience.

We Christians are called to praise the triune God. That, in fact, is the main purpose of our life here on earth (1 Pet 2:9). It is part of our vocation as members of God's royal priesthood. We have been redeemed from a life of suspicion and mistrust to be praise singers. This is no occasional task, something we do once a week, or every now and then when we feel moved to do so. Nor is it something that we do by ourselves. Since we belong to the church, we have joined God's heavenly choir here on earth. This means that our whole life is, in some way, caught up in praising God. We are well-placed to do so, because we, like the holy angels, have access to God and grace.

Since we stand in the light of his presence, we can reflect that light in our rejoicing.

## **The New Theology and Practice of Praise Singing**

Right from its beginning the church has been a community of praise. It has always praised the Triune God in all its services. Songs have always been sung in its liturgy. The Lutheran church has always been a singing church. In recent times these established traditions of liturgical song have been challenged by a new kind of praise singing. It began in the Pentecostal circles. Under the influence of the charismatic movement it has entered the Lutheran church and other confessional churches.

There is much in this way of singing that resembles what has always been done in the church. But there are also some things that are different and new. The praise singing movement does not just compose new kinds of songs that are accompanied by electronic instruments rather than the organ or piano. It introduces a new liturgy based on a new theology of praise. In fact, it tends to equate worship with praise. And that is part of its appeal, the reason for its success in touching and moving people.

We cannot understand this new practice of praise singing unless we appreciate its historical origins and its theological foundations. It came out of the revival movements that swept across America in the nineteenth century. These promoted a pattern of worship in which a series of lively gospel songs introduced an address that culminated in an altar call, a challenge to make a decision for Christ. This pattern of worship was reshaped by the Pentecostal movement. The old style Pentecostal churches used a time of praise to lead to speaking in tongues and singing in the Spirit. This was often followed by prophecy and healing. The sermon came after that as a kind of appendix to the time of worship. Thus the singing of praise was connected liturgically with the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The theology that is enacted in this kind of praise is quite simple. God is enthroned in the praises of Israel<sup>1</sup>. Through the performance of praise, God's people have access to his heavenly presence. When they enthrone him in their hearts by singing his praises, their spirits ascend, as on a ladder, by the power of the Holy Spirit into the heavenly realm, where they stand together with the angels before God's throne. There they present their offerings before him and receive his heavenly gifts. Thus praise singing is regarded as a kind of heavenly escalator by which believers ascend, as on the wings of an eagle, from earth to heaven. It presupposes that neither the risen Lord Jesus, nor God the Father, is really present with his people in the divine service. When Christ ascended bodily into heaven he left his disciples and gave them the Holy Spirit to substitute for him in his absence. By their performance of praise, believers join Christ in the heavenly realm; they stand with him on holy ground before the throne of God.

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<sup>1</sup> This teaching is often based on the translation of Ps 22:3 in the RSV: "Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel." The NIV gives a much more accurate translation: "Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the praise of Israel."

This spiritual ascent into heaven takes place in three stages which are marked by three different kinds of praise (Ps 100:4). These three stages correspond with the three main divisions of the tabernacle and temple in the Old Testament: the outer court with its gates for **thanksgiving**, the inner court with the altar for the offering of **praise**, and the Holy of Holies with its throne for the **worship** of God. God's people enter the gates of the outer courtyard with songs of thanksgiving for what God has done. So the service begins with exuberant acts of thanksgiving that are accompanied by the clapping of hands, bodily movement, and up beat music. From there praise takes them into the inner court. There they focus on what God means to them personally now, their experience of him. The songs that are sung become more emotive and intense as they pour out their hearts to God. Some members of the congregation may speak in tongues, while others may sing in the Spirit. All this culminates in their entry into the heavenly Holy of Holies and their performance of true worship. Worship is understood as an act of awesome adoration before God himself in which the spirit of the believer surrenders itself to him, as if it were prostrate before him, and experiences a deep sense of holy intimacy with him. Their entry into God's presence for worship is accompanied by a final bracket of songs that are much more solemn than previously, more measured, reflective, and reverent. This is the place where God's people experience the presence and power and glory of God.

This pattern of praise singing has subsequently been modified in two ways. First, some churches have run the first two stages together. They do not therefore distinguish so clearly between thanksgiving and praise. Second, praise singing used to foster speaking in tongues, prophecy and healing. But now, in the interests of outreach, this is no longer the case in many Pentecostal churches. Instead, entry into the heavenly Holy of Holies culminates in the presentation of the tithe, the offering of money to God, so that flood gates of blessing and prosperity will be opened for God's people on earth (cf. Mal 3:10-12). But, despite these modifications, we still have the same basic theology of worship that is enacted in praise singing.

The practice of praise singing has created a new liturgy for the church, a new order of worship based on a new theology of worship. In it the emphasis is on our service of God, rather than on God's service of us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It equates worship with praise singing. Everything else is peripheral and secondary. In the service of praise singing the lead singer replaces the pastor as the worship leader. Preaching is reduced to the teaching of principles for godly living. The Scriptures are not read, except in snatches to introduce a song, or as a proof text to back up a point in the sermon. No intercessions are offered for the church and the world. The Lord's Supper has no real function in the service except as a memorial meal that can be tacked on almost anywhere.

Now it is true that there are some very helpful features in this practice of praise singing. Praise is indeed an important part of our worship. It is a heavenly activity. We do perform songs of thanksgiving, praise and adoration to God together with the angels in the heavenly sanctuary. The Holy Spirit

does produce praise in the hearts of God's people. We do reach out to the world when we praise God. But we do not ascend into heaven in our song of praise. In the divine service the triune God comes down to earth for us and meets us here on earth in the proclamation of his word and the celebration of the sacrament. As Luther so aptly reminds us, Jacob's ladder reaches from heaven to earth so that God can meet us where we are. We build our worship around his physical descent to us, rather than by the ascent of our spirits to him. Our songs of praise announce and celebrate the presence of the triune God with us here on earth in the divine service. That is the place for our thanksgiving and adoration.

We have much to learn from the increasing popularity of praise singing in all the churches around the world. We will not meet its challenge by criticising it, no matter how important it is to do so, nor by pointing out its theological deficiencies. Instead, we need to promote a sound theology of praise as taught in the Scriptures and enact it in a way that is consistent with our Lutheran tradition. We need to promote the practice of orthodoxy, the right praise of the triune God as taught by God himself in his word, so that we can fulfil our vocation as members of the heavenly choir.

### **Praising the incarnate Son of God**

The praise of the triune God in the church differs from the acts of praise in all other religions because it is based on the incarnation of God's Son and our present union with him. It depends on his invisible physical presence with us in the Lord's Supper. That determines its nature and its function. Praise confesses and announces the mystery of Christ among us, the foretaste and pledge of our glory (Col 1:27).

In his great vision of heavenly worship in Revelation 5:6-10, St John sees twenty-four elders singing a new song. The elders, twelve for the patriarchs of Israel and twelve for the apostles of Christ, represent the people of God in both testaments. As John watches, they rise from their thrones and fall down before Jesus the Lamb, because he has just received the sealed scroll from God. That scroll is his script for the last act in the drama of world history. Each of the elders holds two things in their hands, a lyre for accompanying their songs of praise, and a bowl full of incense for presenting the prayers of the saints to God. As they fall prostrate before Jesus, they sing a new song of praise to him. In this song they acknowledge that by his sacrificial death, Jesus has created a new international priesthood for God. Their task is to reign with him on earth. And they reign in a strange way indeed. As those who stand before God and have access to him, they reign by their performance of prayer and praise.

This vision shows us how singing of praise is connected with the incarnate Christ. He himself has created this priestly choir by his self-sacrifice as the Lamb. This choir now performs its song of praise in his presence here on earth. In music and song it acknowledges and praises him. It sings its song together with all the angels and the whole of creation (Rev 5:11-14; cf. Psalm 148). By that song it proclaims the hidden kingship of Christ to the world and

announces what he is doing as the cosmic world-ruler. He does not reign as the Lion of Judah, but as the Lamb of God. In its song of praise the church proclaims the presence of the incarnate Son of God and tells of his work as the redeemer of the world.

The liturgical song of praise began with King David in the Old Testament. He established the divine service for the temple that his son Solomon built in Jerusalem. God commanded David through the prophets Nathan and Gad to establish the choir for the performance of praise as part of that service (2 Chron 29:25). That choir was appointed to sing the Lord's song each morning and evening as the lamb for the burnt offering was offered up to the Lord on the altar. This song was announced by the clash of cymbals and was accompanied by lyres and harps. At the end of each verse, sung by the choir as it stood before the altar and faced the assembled congregation, the priests sounded their trumpets to announce the presence of the heavenly king and his readiness to receive the petitions of his people. The song of the Lord consisted of a psalm of praise that was performed in his presence.

The song of praise performed a very significant theological function in the temple service. It was not spoken to God as a gesture of flattery, or even as an act of adoration, but was addressed to the congregation. As is shown in 1 Chronicles 16:7-36, David proclaimed the goodness and steadfast love of the Lord to the congregation through the choir. He called on the people of Israel and all the nations to join him in seeking God's gracious presence and praising him to the whole world. The song of praise therefore proclaimed the Lord's name and his saving deeds to all people. It acknowledged his presence and announced his availability to his people. The presence of God in grace inspired the song of praise, even as the song of praise made his gracious presence known to its hearers.

This connection between access to God's presence and the performance of praise is shown most vividly by the account of the dedication of the temple by Solomon in 2 Chronicles 5:11-14. This story tells us that after the priests had placed the ark in the inner sanctuary of the temple and had come out of the temple, the full choir began to sing a song of praise to the accompaniment of lyres and harps. As soon as they began to sing the Lord's song, the glorious presence of the Lord filled the temple. But the glory of the Lord was not seen, because it was hidden in a cloud. It was revealed to the people audibly to the human ear in the song of praise, rather than visibly to the human eye. The performance of praise in music and song disclosed the hidden presence of the Lord and announced his acceptance of the people.

The presence of God and the gift of his blessing at the temple in Jerusalem prefigured and foreshadowed the incarnation. St John claims that, since the Word became flesh, the glory of God now tabernacles among us in the humanity of Jesus (John 1:14). It is hidden in the flesh of Jesus, rather than in a cloud. His body is now the temple of the living God, the place where God meets with us and we meet with God (John 2:21). Hence the body of Jesus is now the place for theophany and praise. There God is available to us; there we have access to God. It is the place for praise.

The incarnation produces a new song of praise that applauds and lauds the presence of the incarnate Son of God. The gospel of St Luke explores this mystery in the story of the appearance of the angels to the shepherds on Christmas evening (Luke 2:8-20). That story however makes full sense only in the light of the Old Testament. According to Psalm 29, the angels who stand before God in heaven and behold his glory face to face, react to their vision of God by glorifying him. Heaven was therefore the place where the angels sang doxology to God. But with the birth of Jesus something remarkable has occurred. The place for doxology has been extended from heaven to earth. The radiant presence of God, his glory, is now associated with Jesus. Wherever he is present, human beings can join with the angels in singing: "Glory the God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours." Like the shepherds, all God's people glorify and praise God for what they hear from Jesus and see in him. The theophany of God in his human body creates a new choir, in which people combine with the angels in the performance of doxology.

St Paul explores the implications of this in Ephesians 1:3-14. As he writes this extravagant sentence, he contrasts the new choir created by Christ with the old choir at the temple. The temple choir had been appointed to praise God for the blessings that the Israelites had received from him here on earth. Each of the musicians had been given their allotted place at the temple before the Lord. Their vocation from God was to praise him whenever they were rostered for duty there at the temple. But now Christ has created a new cosmic choir. The church is that choir. By his incarnation he has united earthlings with angels, just as he has united Jews and Gentiles by his death on the cross. Both human beings and angels are now subject to his headship. He has redeemed people and made them holy by their union with him. They now have the same status as Jesus. They share in his sonship and have every blessing that belongs to him as God's Son. They join the angels in a single choir that spans heaven and earth. That choir consists of both Jews and Gentiles. Through the incarnation of Jesus, human beings have access to the heavenly realm as they continue to live on earth. Both angels and people have the same vocation as praise singers. Those who have been redeemed by Christ have been appointed as praise-singers for God the Father here on planet earth. They are called to live for the praise of God's glory (Eph 1:6,12,14).

They cannot do this in his absence. In and through Jesus they praise God the Father as those who stand 'holy and blameless before him' (Eph 1:4), for Christ has united them bodily with himself and has taken them bodily with himself into the Godhead. As recipients of God's grace they sing the song of God's amazing grace to the world. In fact, God is so utterly good and gracious, so much more generous, philanthropic and loving than the best human being, that they can only communicate something of that grace by wholehearted, full-bodied praise. The praises of the church then are full of wonder and amazement at the great mystery of the incarnation, by which the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily in Jesus, so that we humans can come to fullness of life in and through him.

## Jesus the Praise Singer

A puzzling prophecy is recorded in Zephaniah 3:17. The Israelites usually sang their songs of praise to the Lord in his presence at the temple in Jerusalem. These songs of praise were either addressed to God or, more commonly, sung about God. Yet in a strange reversal of roles, this prophecy announced that in the age to come the Lord himself would be a singer of praise in Zion. He would, in fact, rejoice over his people and exult in them with loud songs of jubilation.

The New Testament shows how Jesus fulfils this prophecy. He came on earth so that his joy would be in his disciples (John 15:11). As the Messiah he is the second David. He outdoes David. Jesus is depicted as the true singer of the psalms. The psalms not only speak of him; he is, most strangely, the speaker in the psalms, their player, the singer who performs them. He enacts the psalms both by himself and together with his disciples.

The letter to the Hebrews touches on this enactment of praise by Jesus in its meditation on the incarnation in 2:5-18. God's Son took on human flesh and blood, so that he might sanctify us totally and make us his priestly brothers and sisters, holy praise singers together with him. As our brother he stands among us when we gather for worship and leads us in our praises. In 2:11-12 we read:

Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are all of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers. He says, "I will declare your name to my brothers, in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises."

As our praise-singer Jesus not only proclaims his Father to us as our Father, but also praises him for us and together with us. He became our brother, so that he could sing the praises of God to us here on earth and include us in that song of praise. We may therefore join with him in his song. He is our true praise leader.

The full force of Hebrews 2:11,12 is felt only if we note the origin of the quotation. It comes from Psalm 22, the psalm that Jesus prayed as he hung on the cross. This psalm is remarkable because it juxtaposes a terrible lament at utter abandonment by God in verses 1-21 with a resounding act of thanksgiving for divine deliverance, coupled with an open call to participation in an eucharistic banquet, in celebration of that deliverance in verses 22-31. When the writer of Hebrews quotes the pivotal verse 22, in which the singer of this heart-rending lament begins his song of praise, he implies that we are to understand that verse in the light of the whole psalm.

If that is so, we have here a truly astonishing interpretation of the incarnation through the use of this verse from Psalm 22. The inscription of the psalm identifies it as a psalm of David. He then is the apparent singer of this psalm. But it is not just his song. It is the song of Israel in its experience of abandonment by its own God. Indeed, it is the song of everyone who has ever felt forsaken by God. The writer of Hebrews claims that it is also the song of

Jesus. God's Son shared our flesh and blood, so that he could taste the worst of death on behalf of all people. As the one who suffered the agony of rejection by his own dear Father physically on the cross, he sings our human song of betrayal and death, so that we can join him in his song of deliverance and thanksgiving. He takes up our angry song in the face of death and makes it part of his song of victory over death and all the powers of darkness. By his incarnation he brings about a wonderful transposition. He transposes our song of rejection and loss into his divine idiom, even as he also transposes his divine song of grace and acceptance into our human idiom. They do not, however, remain two separate songs that clash with each other. In Jesus they cohere; they combine to form a single song which speaks of a common experience of abandonment and acceptance, of suffering and celebration, of death and resurrection. The dissonances of earthly life have, as it were, been incorporated and resolved in his act of praise.

Jesus leads the church in its songs of praise. He does not just proclaim his Father's name to those who are his brothers and sisters; he invites them to join with him as their lead singer. He teaches them to praise by giving them his word (Col 3:16) and his Holy Spirit (Eph 5:18-20). The church then sings its songs of praise together with Jesus. This amazing result of the incarnation is expressed in a number of different ways in the New Testament. Both individuals (Rom 1:8) and the church (Rom 7:25; Col 3:17) give thanks to God the Father **through** Jesus. They give thanks to him **in the name of Jesus** (Eph 5:20). Jesus is also the leader of the church in its performance of doxology. As people who serve with Jesus in the heavenly sanctuary we give glory to God **through** Jesus (Rom 16:27; 1 Pet 4:11; Jude 25) and **in Christ Jesus** (Eph 3:21). So, since we have Jesus as our great high priest who is physically related to us and able to stand in for us physically with his heavenly Father, we are to offer a sacrifice of praise to God **through** Jesus (Heb 13:15).

The church then follows Jesus in singing its songs and in performing its praises. It does not, however, sing its own song; it sings the song that it receives from him. Nor does it sing that song by itself with its own instruments. The vision of St John in Revelation 15:2-4 shows how the saints hold 'the harps of God' in their hands as they sing 'the song of the Lamb'. The song of the Lamb is the song of Jesus, the song that he sings as he adores his divine Father. Jesus does not copyright that song, but he makes it freely available to us. We can sing it with him because he sings it for us, like a mother teaching her child to sing.

Now all this analysis would be rather theoretical and unreal if we divorced the performance of sacred song from its specific location in the church. Jesus the incarnate Son of God sings his song of praise 'in the midst of the congregation' (Heb 2:12). There he addresses his physical sisters and brothers and invites them to join with him in praising their common Father. By its reference to the act of thanksgiving in Psalm 22, Hebrews implies that Jesus most obviously serves as our praise-singer in the Sacrament of the Altar. That banquet celebrates his suffering for us and his deliverance from death for us. In the prayer of thanksgiving that he prays for us, he proclaims

what our holy Father has done for us and leads us in our thanksgiving to our God. The performance of praise by the church has therefore always revolved around the celebration of Holy Communion. There we adore our holy God together with the angels. There Jesus becomes involved with us physically by giving us himself bodily to us. There we rejoice in his embodied presence with us and our real presence with God the Father through him. There in faith we may approach the Father bodily together with Jesus, since both our hearts and our bodies are cleansed from all impurity (Heb 10:22). How else could we celebrate that wonderful event than with a song of praise?

## **Manifold Praise**

In his first letter Peter speaks about God's many coloured grace (1 Pet 4:10). God does not just speak to us in black and white, but declares his love for us in all the colours of the rainbow. Yet even that does not suffice, for human words cannot convey all that he wishes to lavish on us. And so he conveyed himself and his manifold grace to us by the incarnation of his Son. His multi-hued grace, in turn, produces an abundance of praise, praise that is voiced in at least three different ways - in proclamation, thanksgiving, and adoration.

The first and most basic kind of praise is proclamation. We use this sort of praise quite often in our daily lives. If something good happens to us, we speak to others about it and tell them what was so good about that experience. If people treat us well, we praise them to our friends; we speak well of them and praise them for what they have done for us. The greater the favour, the more extravagant the praise. This is, in fact, the commonest form of praise, for we rarely address our praise directly to them, for that can be mistaken as flattery, but we usually address our praise to others, for we too want them to share in our admiration of those who treat us well.

God does not need us to flatter him, but he does want us to tell others about his goodness, so that they too will put their trust in him and enjoy his good gifts. And that is what we do when we praise him in songs that proclaim his goodness. In fact, most psalms of praise do just that. They do not address the Lord, but address the congregation and anyone else who cares to listen. They sing about God and his goodness. These psalms have three main parts to them. First, they name the Lord and announce his presence in the divine service. Second, they praise his goodness and speak about the good things that he has done. Third, they invite their hearers to join with his people in receiving his gifts and praising him for his generosity.

Paul speaks about this kind of praise-full proclamation in Colossians 3:16 and explains how it functions in the church. He says: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God." The last clause could also be translated: "as you sing about God with Spirit-produced psalms and hymns and songs with grace in your hearts." Praise begins with Christ himself. Through his word, the message of the gospel, he teaches us God's grace and speaks that grace to us. By his word he gives us the reason for our praise and its content. And more than that, he

actually produces our praise by giving us his Holy Spirit through his word. So then, the more Christ's word dwells in a congregation, the richer and fuller its praise. This affects us corporately and personally. On the one hand, by the use of songs that are inspired by God's word and full of the gospel we teach and admonish each other to take in God's grace and to praise him for his grace. We therefore proclaim the gospel to each other in our songs of praise. On the other hand, as we sing the psalms and hymns and songs that the Holy Spirit generates, Christ plants his word deeper and deeper into the hearts of each person. The sung word imbeds God's grace there, so that it can bear its full fruit in our lives. That grace produces thankfulness, a sense of overwhelming gratitude at the generosity of God. That, in turn, issues in greater praise.

The use of Christ's word in this kind of praise-full proclamation accomplishes something wonderful in us. As we sing the song of praise about Jesus, or even hear it sung, that song sings God's grace into us. It brings the Holy Spirit into our hearts and strengthens our faith in him; it fills us with the Holy Spirit (Eph 5:18-20). Once the word of grace has sung itself into our hearts in a song of praise, that Spirit-filled word pervades our bodies with all their senses and enlightens our minds with all their affections. It sings Christ and his Holy Spirit into us. It fills us with joy and wonder, with awe and gratitude, with devotion and delight. As it sings of Christ, it changes us. It turns critics and cynics into thanks-givers and praise singers, people whose hearts are so full of God's goodness that they overflow with thanksgiving and praise. So once the word of grace has been sung into our hearts, it dwells there and produces a never-ending song of praise to God the Father.

Songs of praise are a form of corporate teaching and preaching. This has, it seems, been largely forgotten in many parts of the church today. When modern Christians speak of praise, they, at least if they have been influenced by the charismatic movement, identify praise, by and large, with either thanksgiving or adoration, which are quite properly addressed to God and spoken to him. But in praise we most commonly speak and sing about God. We do not sing Hallelujah to the Lord but to each other. That is why we have so many hymns in our hymnals which speak about God in the third person, like *Now Thank We All Our God*. They have become unfashionable. Few remain in most modern collections of songs for public worship. This means that a whole dimension of praise is ignored. When we praise the Triune God, we address each other and tell one another how good he is. Our song of praise, then, is the corporate proclamation of the gospel by the congregation in the very presence of the living God.

The second kind of praise is thanksgiving. This too is common in our society. From childhood on, our parents teach us to be polite by thanking those who give us gifts. When we thank someone we acknowledge that we have received a gift from him and so recognise him as the giver of that gift.

Thanksgiving is a very important kind of praise in the church. Thus Paul repeatedly urges his hearers to give thanks to God the Father (Eph 5:4; Phil 4:6; Col 1:12; 3:17; 4:2). We are to abound in thanksgiving (Col 2:7). We are

not just called to give thanks for what we Christians have received from God, but also on behalf of those who do not thank him because they do not yet believe in him (1 Tim 2:1). Paul maintains that God wants us to give thanks to him in all circumstances (1 Thess 5:18). This, in fact, is what he wants to accomplish through us by uniting us with Christ Jesus.

God's purpose for producing thanksgiving congregations is not at all self-evident. He isn't interested in turning out polite, well-mannered people. He gains nothing for himself from our thanksgiving. Rather, we benefit from it. And so too do the people around us who notice our attitude of gratitude, our sense of being blessed in all circumstances.

Our problem is that we find it hard to believe that we receive anything as a free gift. Everything is earned. We have no one to thank except ourselves. So we find it hard to accept that we have received everything from God either as creatures in the world, or as children of God in Christ (cf. 1 Cor 4:7). God the Father does give us everything as a gift. But he makes it look as if we have gained it for ourselves from others or the world around us. We have been justified by his grace through faith in Jesus. When we thank him we receive our possessions as a gift from his hands and acknowledge him as the giver of all good gifts. We assume the right stance with him. We stand before him as beggars with empty hands and receive everything as an undeserved favour from him. We live by grace, and by faith in his grace. Thus thanksgiving shows that we have heard the gospel and actually received God's grace, just as a critical attitude to God and his people shows that we still live under the law.

We benefit from thanksgiving. The more we thank God the Father, the more we recognise how generously he deals with us. And vice versa. Thanksgiving opens our hearts and minds to his hidden generosity. It increases our confidence in his magnanimity and makes us more receptive to him. It attunes us to his grace. Thus Paul urges us to present our petitions to God the Father with thanksgiving, for as we thank him for the blessings that we have received, we gain increasing confidence to ask him for even better things (Phil 4:6).

In 2 Corinthians 4:13-15 Paul develops the connection between the preaching of God's grace (**charis** in Greek) and thanksgiving (*eucharistia*). He maintains that proclamation of God's grace and its reception through faith in the risen Lord Jesus produces thanksgiving. If we hear the gospel we will respond with thanksgiving. This is evident in the arrangement of the liturgy. The proclamation of the gospel in the service of the word and its enactment in the sacrament is accompanied by songs and prayers of thanksgiving, for by giving thanks we acknowledge God's gracious presence and bear the clearest possible witness to him as the lavish giver of everything that we receive in our worship. That's why the Lord's Supper is called the Eucharist. The place where we receive the greatest gift of all is the best place for thanksgiving. Our thanksgiving indicates that worship is a matter of reception from him. It encourages others to join us in receiving what he freely gives to all people on earth.

The third kind of praise is adoration. Have you ever noticed what you do when something really good happens to you? It does not matter what it is, a good holiday or falling in love, a lovely view or a delicious meal, a good film or the birth of a grandchild, an interesting book or a promotion. If something good happens to us we feel the need to speak about it. We don't keep it to ourselves; it must be shared. We praise it to anyone who will listen. When we praise something we don't speak about it in a matter of fact way, but with physical, verbal and emotional animation. The better the experience, the greater the urge to praise and the more animated its expression.

Yet it is not clear why a good experience evokes praise that turns to admiration and adoration. Why is it that if I enjoy the sunshine I feel the urge to tell the people around me how wonderful it is and how much I am enjoying it? By praising the beauty of a bright spring day, I actually enjoy it. And I enjoy it by sharing my enjoyment of it with others and encouraging them to join me in enjoying its beauty. It seems that while bad things are easy to grasp, something that is truly good is hard to appreciate. So I need to dwell on it and praise it to appreciate it properly. I need to tell others about it and spell out what is so good about it, so that I can take it all in and enjoy it as fully as I am able. If they, too, share my enjoyment, my own enjoyment is enhanced and fulfilled. So praise has to do with shared enjoyment. It expresses our enjoyment and enlarges our capacity for enjoyment. In fact, some things, like the gospel, are so good that they can only be fully enjoyed by communal adoration.

Adoration arises when we experience something so wonderful that we are filled with amazement and awe, sheer joy and utter delight, something so overwhelmingly good that we cannot take it all in. Words fail us. We resort to poetry and music and song. While we do at times address our words of adoration to the person whom we admire, we, more commonly, voice our adoration to the people around us.

All thanksgiving ultimately leads to adoration of God (2 Cor 4:15). When we stand before him and discover what he is like, we cannot but adore him. That's what the angels do as they surround him and serve him in heaven (Rev 4:11; 5:12; 7:11-12). They sing: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty" (Isa 6:3; Rev 4:8). As they stand before him and see the glory of his Son, they sing: "Glory" (Ps 29:9; Rev 5:13). Ever since the incarnation of our Lord they invite us to stand with them before God the Father in the divine service and join with them in giving glory to him (Luke 2:13). Our adoration of God therefore gives us a foretaste of heaven. As we adore the triune God we begin to do on earth what we will do forever in heaven; we begin to enjoy our God who is so good and great that we never come to the end of our enjoyment of him.

Just as adoration is the highest form of praise, so our praise of God in the divine service culminates in the Great Gloria and the Sanctus. Since Christ has become incarnate and is now present with us to bring us peace and make us holy, we adore him, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, by singing these songs together with the angels and the whole communion of saints. The

angels who have been appointed as liturgising spirits to serve us assist us in our adoration of the Triune God (Heb 1:14; 12:22).

All forms of praise are linked together by their common content, the grace of God the Father who freely gives us his Holy Spirit and all spiritual blessings through his incarnate Son. Praise-full proclamation of God's goodness as revealed in his word leads to thanksgiving for it. And thanksgiving culminates in adoration, that overwhelming state of amazement, wonder, and delight in which we forget about ourselves and are utterly wrapt in God's glory and beauty, his holiness and lovingkindness.

We are transformed as we praise the triune God. As sinners we are turned in on ourselves and seek our own glory. Like Narcissus we admire ourselves and boast of our achievements. But praise of God changes our orientation, the idolisation of ourselves. It takes us out of ourselves and opens us up to the glory of God. As we contemplate and glorify our Lord Jesus, we too are glorified (2 Cor 3:18). We become what we are meant to be, people who reflect the glory of our Creator.

## **Conclusion**

What then is the use of praising God? We do not need to praise God so that we can ascend step by step into heaven. God does not need our praises. He gains nothing for himself from them. He is so modest about himself and his achievements that, even though he has created everything, he remains anonymous, the secret giver of every good gift for our use and enjoyment.

Nevertheless God is pleased with our praises. Praise is, in fact, one of the sacrifices that please him most of all (Heb 13:15-16). What's more, he has created the church as his choir to stand before him and praise him. He has appointed us as his praise singers for the good of the world and its people, for through our praise he reveals his glory and his grace to suspicious people in a fallen world. When we sing our songs of praise in the divine service we preach the gospel with the whole of our being to each other and the world. Our praises disclose the mystery of Christ, the incarnate Son of God, who reaches out to us in word and sacrament, to fill us with the Holy Spirit and give us access to God the Father. In praise the church not only announces that heaven has come to earth in Jesus; it also receives a foretaste of heaven as it gives thanks and adores the triune God. So then, by praising God we enjoy him and share our enjoyment of him with others. That's why God is so pleased with our orthodoxy, our right praise of him. We rejoice in him as he rejoices in us.

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