

# Proclaiming the Gospel in Worship

Johnold J. Strey

**Author's Note:** Due to an inadvertent error, the published essay (*Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Volume 105, Number 4, Fall 2008, pages 248-284) included edited sections of email communication between the author and editorial committee, but it did not include the additional paragraphs intended to address the editorial committee's suggestions. Those corrections are noted in this version with ~~strikeout text~~ for intended deletions and underlined text for intended inclusions. Bracketed and highlighted page numbers for the published version are also included for the reader's reference.

[248]

## INTRODUCTION

Worship is one of the most passionately debated and discussed subjects among Lutherans in our time. Many pastoral conference agendas, including the one for which this essay was originally written, have included essays about one or another aspect of worship. The WELS Commission on Worship website regularly ranks among the groups receiving the most hits on the synod's website. The triennial WELS National Conference on Worship, Music, and the Arts draws a larger crowd of adults than any other single event sponsored by the Wisconsin Synod. Clearly the matter of public worship is on the minds of pastors and parishioners alike!

The word typically used to describe the believers' weekly gathering around Word and Sacrament is *worship*. As a noun, worship simply refers to the regular assembly of Christians. But in common usage today, the verb to worship refers only to the Christian's response to God's grace. The church's assembly, however, is not so much about believers worshipping God as much as it is God's *service* to his people in the means of grace. God convicts and condemns, but then he absolves and forgives. He strengthens and equips. He applies the saving and redeeming work of his Son in the waters at the font, in the Word proclaimed from the pulpit, and in the meal at the altar. In other words, God's divine service to us through the gospel is the primary aspect of our worship life.

Confessional Lutherans agree that the good news of Jesus' saving work is the predominant element in our congregational worship life. Lutheran pastors want to ensure that what takes place in worship will place the spotlight on the cross and the empty tomb of our Lord. But there are many worship trends in Christian churches today that fail to keep the focus on the gospel. The challenge for the Lutheran pastor is to continuously evaluate the worship forms and trends occurring in the church to see whether or not these forms and trends [249] will be an asset to gospel proclamation. This essay is intended to do that. We will look at various elements of worship: in particular, the structure of the service, the symbolism employed, and the songs we sing. As we analyze these aspects of our congregational worship life, we want to ensure that the gospel is proclaimed loud and clear to those we have been called to serve.

## PROCLAIMING THE GOSPEL—IN STRUCTURE

Quite a bit has changed in the worship life of WELS congregations during the past generation. From 1941 to 1993, *The Lutheran Hymnal* served as the primary worship book in the pews of WELS congregations. In preparation for the eventual publication of *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* in 1993, the WELS Commission on Worship published the *Sampler* in 1986, a thin paperback service book with a modestly revised version of the Common Service, a few psalms set to simple chant tones, and 21 hymns. I remember the reaction Originally presented at the WELS California Pastors' Conference, January 31, 2006, St. Mark's Lutheran Church; Citrus Heights, California. Expanded and revised for a presentation to the WELS Commission on Worship, October 29, 2007, Faith Lutheran Church; Antioch, Illinois. Pastor Strey serves at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Belmont, California and is District Worship Coordinator of WELS's Arizona-California District.

that took place among the students at the WELS grade school I attended the day after the *Sampler* was used for the first time in worship. It wasn't pretty. I'm sure that my fellow ~~fifth~~ sixth graders were just echoing the complaints of their parents, but I haven't forgotten the controversy that was stirred up after the new service was introduced. Yet it was hardly new! A few updated pronouns, contemporized language, very minor adjustments to the music from *The Lutheran Hymnal*, a modest sample of new hymns—that was all it took to ruffle some feathers about the direction of worship in the WELS.

That was 1986. Now fast forward two decades. The new hymnal, *Christian Worship*, is not so new anymore. We generally don't hear voices begging to bring back Elizabethan English to our services. The overwhelming majority of WELS congregations have adopted *Christian Worship* wholeheartedly. The WELS Commission on Worship regularly offers encouragement and practical ideas to utilize the liturgy with more attention and creativity than at any previous time in our synod. At the same time, there is a new worship movement in the WELS, a so-called contemporary worship movement. Worship forms and songs from Evangelical Protestants are becoming more common. It is no longer an anomaly for a WELS congregation to offer a contemporary service alongside a traditional service each weekend, or to designate one Sunday each month as a contemporary service. In recent years, a few authors of articles in *Forward in Christ* magazine have suggested that WELS congregations need to find different forms of worship if we want to attract younger generations to the gospel.

The greater attention given to the liturgy and the growing attention given to forms of worship not previously used in the Lutheran church have caused a new set of spirited debates in our midst. Hardly [250] a pastors' conference passes without the matter of public worship being discussed. Discussions about worship often raise issues such as what musical styles people like today, or the degree of freedom that the doctrine of adiaphora allows. But there is another, far more important question that must be asked and answered before we can discuss musical styles and freedom to use forms. First we must ask, "Does the form of worship we use proclaim the gospel clearly and without compromise?"

### ***The Structure of the Liturgy***

The general outline of the liturgical service that has come down to us today has been around for about 1,400 years. Some elements, like the Preface, are nearly as old as the New Testament itself. The service of the Word finds its origins in the Jewish synagogue service. The *Gloria* is a sixth century addition, borrowed from the Eastern Church's rite for Morning Prayer. The *Kyrie*, *Sanctus*, and *Agnus Dei* have clear scriptural roots in their texts. While the liturgy does have ancient roots, the primary reason for using this historic order is not nostalgia, a mere longing for the past, but anamnesis: we remember past events—in this case, the events of our salvation—in a "living way" today. The salvation Christ won for us in the first century is proclaimed and applied to us in the twenty-first century.

The liturgy brings us the story of salvation in a number of different ways. The overall content of the service recalls the saving work of Christ. The *Gloria* proclaims Jesus' deity, the universal atonement, the exaltation of Christ, and the Trinity. The ecumenical creeds are so concise in their biblical instruction that we still use them as outlines for our youth Catechism and adult instruction classes today. The *Sanctus* reminds us of the holiness and omnipresence of God. The *Agnus Dei* takes us to the depth of Jesus' humiliation and again reminds us of the universal atonement. The texts of the Ordinary proclaim the gospel by proclaiming key biblical truths and doctrines.

The overall structure of the service recalls the life of Christ. Near the beginning of the service, we sing "Glory to God in the highest" just as the angels did on the night of Jesus' birth. The Gospel accounts frequently take us to an event from Jesus' three-year ministry. As we progress into the Holy Communion portion of the service, we are reminded of the key events of our salvation that took place during Holy Week: Jesus' Palm Sunday entrance is recalled in the words, "Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" We are transported to the Upper Room as we hear the Words of Institution, and we are taken to the foot of the cross as we sing, "O Christ, Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world."

[251]

The fact that the liturgy's structure outlines the life of Christ is more of a happy coincidence than an intentional development. Amalarius of Metz (c. 780–850 A.D.) is credited as the one who popularized this view of the liturgy in the early Middle Ages.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, this structure can certainly be used as a teaching tool for pastors and a devotional device for worshippers.

The most obvious ways that the gospel is administered in the liturgy is through the means Christ has given us: in baptism; in absolution; in the Word of God read in the Lessons, sung in the responses, and proclaimed in the sermon; and in our celebration of the Lord's Supper.

### *The Structure of a Praise Service*

In order to gain first-hand experience with the typical form of worship used in Evangelical congregations, I visited a number of different churches in the San Francisco Bay area in preparation for this essay. One group of churches I particularly sought out was congregations that professed to be theologically conservative and that utilized a worship and praise<sup>2</sup> format for their services. There were some differences among these services, but there were certain key elements that were nearly identical:

- Near the beginning of the service was a lengthy section of singing led by a praise band or other musicians. Several songs were sung in sequence at this point.
- Prayers were included between or after the songs, and at several other times in the service.
- There was little or no use of Scripture apart from the sermon.
- The sermon occurred near the end of the service and was the sole peak of the service's progression. The main point of the sermon was to encourage sanctification, and more often than not this was done apart from any application of the gospel.

Note the key elements in these services: prayer, praise, and preaching that is focused on sanctification. The main direction is sacrificial (us to God), rather than sacramental (God to us).

The structure of the praise chorus section, the first bullet point above, deserves some additional attention. A casual observer might [252] not realize that there is often a deliberate progression of songs used in the opening section of praise choruses. James Brauer, professor of worship at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, describes a "five-phase model" that often shapes the pattern of choruses used in a worship and praise format service:

The *invitation* accepts people where they are and draws them into worship. It is celebratory, upbeat and praise-oriented. The lyrics are directed toward the worshipers, not God, and tell them what to do. The *engagement phase* employs a lyric that addresses God, not worshipers. These texts are attentive, serious and engaged. In the *exaltation phase* the people sing out to the Lord with power. The texts focus on the transcendence of God. The pitch span is wider. People stand. The *adoration phase* gradually subsides in dynamics. People are seated. The melodies have a smaller range. The key words of texts may be addressed to God (you, Jesus). There is both transcendence and closeness. The *final phase is intimacy*. The music is quiet, personal, addressed to God (Abba, Daddy). The lyrics use the personal "I." An acoustic guitar works well in this phase. The whole procedure ends with a closeout chorus to bridge to the next part of the service.

Here we have an insider's description of how to organize praise choruses in order to be "effective" in

---

<sup>1</sup> Gary Macy, *The Banquet's Wisdom* (Akron: OSL Publications, 2005) 85, 120.

<sup>2</sup> The term "worship and praise service" is, in this author's opinion, preferable to "contemporary service" because the former more accurately reflects the *content* of the services. A worship and praise service that uses old Baptist hymns may not be considered contemporary, and a liturgical service with piano, guitars, flute, and percussion probably shouldn't be called traditional. The primary issue is not musical style, but structural content.

creating a sense of closeness to God—to feel the presence of the Spirit. The key is not so much in the texts of the individual songs, though they are useful as his description defines useful. The key is creating the experience of feeling close to God, to each other, to feeling spiritual. This illustration reveals that the feeling close to God is the measure of it. It reveals the primary test, namely, creating an experience of God. That is how it is to be measured for “effectiveness.”

Liturgy creations that are labeled “seeker-sensitive” or labeled more generically “contemporary worship” may consciously or unconsciously employ practices that support and express a doctrine of the Holy Spirit that centers on making an experience of the presence of God which is dependent more on the exercise than on the gospel. Music is the primary tool of the exercise, any gospel is secondary or maybe of no importance.<sup>3</sup>

Brauer’s concern about adopting or adapting this concept into Lutheran services demonstrates the theological assumptions that underlie the worship and praise format. In this model, music, not Word and Sacrament, becomes the means of grace. Bryan Gerlach notes this trend and the curious exegesis that contributes toward this thinking:

“Praise and Worship” charismatics make much of an expression from Psalm 22:3 (KJV): “God inhabits the praises of his people.” [253] Other translations do not render this with the sense of the KJV; rather, “God is enthroned on the praises of Israel” (RSV). The NIV reads, “Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the praise of Israel.” The charismatic interpretation of this verse makes music into a means of grace, not music as carrier of the word, the old Lutheran concept of *viva vox evangelii*, but rather the musical-emotional experience of singing together.<sup>4</sup>

The liturgy’s format focuses primarily on sacramental aspects of the service. Even in the sacrificial parts of the liturgy, the people’s response of thanks and praise echoes back the words and works of Jesus; even the congregation’s praises proclaim the gospel. The format of the praise and worship service, however, is weighted far more heavily toward man’s response to God, a response that often does not clearly state the reason for our gratitude, the gospel. The late Robert Webber, a leading voice for worship renewal among Evangelicals, expresses the same concern about this tendency:

I have attended many evangelical worship services in which the underlying drama of Christ’s work has not been central and clear. I have longed to hear the words, “Christ has overcome all the powers of evil. Be at peace.” But this message, the very central proclamation of the faith, is frequently missing. Often the service tells me what *I* have to do rather than celebrating what *Christ* has done. I’m told to live right, to witness, to get myself together, to forgive my enemies, and to give more money. But that’s only part of the story. I also need to hear and experience the triumphant note that God has put away evil through his work in Christ. This is the word that gives me the peace of the Lord and stimulates me to offer my life in the service of Christ.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, just because a church uses a liturgical rite doesn’t safeguard it from losing its focus on the gospel. One unintended consequence of the trend to find a common theme in the lessons, prayers, hymns, and sermon for each Sunday is that we may place our primary emphasis on the theme of the day and only a secondary emphasis on the gospel. Dennis Smolarski writes,

We do need to focus our energies and not let our liturgies float off to never-never land. But “focusing” frequently degenerates into “what is the theme of this liturgy?” The liturgy, *any* liturgy, has only one

---

<sup>3</sup> James Brauer, essay delivered at Opus Dei Forum (Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, 18 March 1997), 5. Emphasis added.

<sup>4</sup> Bryan Gerlach, “The Role of Music in Worship: An Evaluation of Two Twentieth-Century Developments,” *Logia* 14, no. 3 (Holy Trinity 2005): 54. Available online at <http://www.wels.net/cgi-bin/site.pl?2617&collectionID=765&contentID=35664&shortcutID=15158>.

<sup>5</sup> Robert E. Webber, *Worship Is a Verb: Eight Principles for Transforming Worship* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1992), 34. Emphasis in original.

“theme”—giving thanks to God for his action in our world [254] as particularly expressed through Christ’s death and resurrection. Anything more is frosting on the cake.<sup>6</sup>

The warning of overly thematic services aside, Lutherans have retained the use of the liturgy in worship because the structure and content of the liturgy is centered in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Even if the pastor has a bad day in the pulpit, even if the hymns’ content is less than ideal, the use of the liturgy assures that the gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed and professed each week (although it is not an excuse for poorly prepared preaching or sloppy song selections). Likewise, the reason that many Lutherans issue cautions about worship and praise services is because the basic structure of those services is not intended to emphasize gospel proclamation, but praise from the people, and this approach often brings with it a “music as the means of grace” mentality.

### ***Can We “Lutheranize” It?***

At this point in the discussion, a question is sometimes raised by those who would like to experiment with other worship forms: Can we remove the objectionable features of the worship and praise service so that it will be fitting for Lutherans to use? After all, wasn’t this Luther’s own practice? Luther took the objectionable elements out of the Roman Catholic Mass and created a form that was appropriate to use. Could the same concept allow us to adapt a worship and praise format for today’s Lutheran congregations?

Those are fair questions, and the thought process behind those questions is reasonable. However, it would be inaccurate to say that Luther “lutheranized” the Mass. Luther *retained* the parts of the service that carried the gospel. He did not adapt or alter a portion of the service that was grounded in false theology; instead, he *eliminated* or *replaced* any part of the Mass that promoted the false doctrines of Rome. In the case of the canon of the Mass, he simply removed it because it turned the Sacrament into man’s action instead of God’s action:

That utter abomination follows which forces all that precedes in the mass into its service and is, therefore, called the offertory. From here on almost everything smacks and savors of sacrifice. And the words of life and salvation [the Words of Institution] are imbedded in the midst of it all. . . . Let us, therefore, *repudiate everything that smacks of sacrifice*, together with the entire canon and *retain only that which is pure and holy*, and so order our mass.”<sup>7</sup>

[255]

In his 1523 baptismal service, Luther replaced one of the old Collects with his now famous “flood-prayer.” Three years later, he revised his baptismal service again, this time eliminating those features “which were apt to becloud the essentials of the sacrament.”<sup>8</sup>

In his plenary address at the 2005 WELS National Conference on Worship, Music, and the Arts, James Tiefel explains the underlying principles behind Luther’s worship reforms, particularly that Luther was not adapting a bad form to fit his theology, but that he was retaining a good form and eliminating the objectionable elements that Rome had added over time.

It’s certainly true that the Roman Church and the Lutheran Church both use the ancient Christian liturgy. I’ll tell you why. That young priest named Martin Luther eventually discovered that whatever was wrong with the Catholic Church—and there was plenty wrong—wasn’t to be found in the church’s ancient liturgy. The bad stuff, especially the prayers that had turned Holy Communion into a sacrifice for sins, had been added during the Middle Ages, long after the liturgy had taken its basic form. What Luther said was this: The service now in common use everywhere has genuine Christian beginnings. We’re not going to get rid of it just because the Roman Catholics abused it. Instead, we’re going to continue to use the

<sup>6</sup> Dennis C. Smolarski, *How Not to Say Mass* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist, 2003), 39. Emphasis in original.

<sup>7</sup> *An Order of Mass and Communion*, AE 53:25–26. Emphasis added.

<sup>8</sup> *The Order of Baptism: Newly Revised*, AE 53:106. Editor’s introductory comments.

liturgy just as the early Christians did: to proclaim the words of Jesus. Luther said one time: “Among Christians, the whole service should center on the Word and the Sacrament.” That’s exactly what the liturgy did.<sup>9</sup>

The worship and praise service has a different story. It was not a gospel-centered form that became clouded with false theology; the basic theological assumptions of the worship and praise format make it unsuitable for Lutherans because it is rooted in Arminian, anti-sacramental theology. Interestingly, Bryan Gerlach’s aforementioned article quotes Donald Hustad, “a leading voice in evangelical worship,” from a preface he wrote for a book that promotes the worship and praise format. In this preface, Hustad actually warns non-charismatic Evangelicals that they cannot simply adopt and adapt these forms, but that they must create and utilize worship forms that live up to their own theology rather than another theology. We do well to heed his encouragement:

Praise and worship music itself originated with the Charismatic Renewal Movement; all of the approaches identified in these chapters ... are carefully devised according to charismatic theology and Scripture interpretation and are expected to lead to characteristic pentecostal experiences. ... Charismatic believers have a right to develop their own worship to match their own theology and exegesis, and they have done this well. *Noncharismatics should not thoughtlessly copy or imitate their worship formulae, unless they expect to enter the same “Holy of Holies” in the same way. Instead, they should develop their worship rationale based on their scriptural understanding, and then sing up to their own theology!*<sup>10</sup>

The encouragement to stay away from a praise and worship format or to not incorporate aspects of this form into our own services is not intended to stifle creativity or put the church’s worship life into an historical straightjacket. There is still great opportunity for variety and creativity within the context of the liturgy. The church’s history shows us that believers have used other gospel-centered forms alongside the liturgy, such as the services from the Daily Office, and Holy Week’s Triduum services.

Newer worship concepts have also gained wide acceptance in the church because they too effectively carry the gospel. Taizé songs, with their simple scriptural refrains and time for meditation on the Word of God, have found a home in various Lutheran congregations and settings. Hymn festivals, popularized by Lutheran organist and composer Paul Manz, provide opportunities for those who enjoy singing to unite their voices with fellow believers as they declare the gospel’s truths in song. The concept of a gathering rite that combines the invocation, confession, and absolution under a common musical theme has proved to be a useful development in liturgical worship.<sup>11</sup> Who knows what new and useful forms believers will develop in the years ahead? We are free to use whatever worship forms will best benefit and strengthen the souls placed under our care. Let’s use that freedom wisely and make it our goal to use forms that proclaim Christ clearly and without compromise!

## PROCLAIMING THE GOSPEL—IN SYMBOL

One aspect of worship life that is often misunderstood is symbolism. Perhaps the reason for the misunderstanding has to do with the way the subject is often discussed. Symbolism in worship is often described in terms of a continuum, with “high church” smells and bells advocates on one hand, and “low church” straightforward and simple advocates on the other hand. Those who are in favor of historic vestments, processions, chanting, and other kinds of symbolism are considered high church, and those who prefer to vest in

---

<sup>9</sup> James P. Tiefel, “The Liturgy,” essay delivered at the WELS National Conference on Worship, Music, and the Arts (Gustavus Adolphus College, St. Peter, Minnesota, 19 July 2005), 4. Available online at <http://www.wels.net/cgi-bin/site.pl?2617&collectionID=901&contentID=35506&shortcutID=14858>.

<sup>10</sup> Barry Liesch, *The New Worship: Straight Talk on Music and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 10. Emphasis added. Quoted by Bryan Gerlach in “The Role of Music in Worship: An Evaluation of Two Twentieth-Century Developments,” *Logia* 14, no. 3 (Holy Trinity 2005): 55.

<sup>11</sup> *Christian Worship: Supplement* includes two gathering rites based on Lutheran chorale melodies. One focuses on the Word of God and the other on Holy Baptism.

an academic robe or not to vest at all, to minimize symbolic gestures and to conduct the service in a less formal fashion are considered low church. Unfortunately, these distinctions miss the point. Symbolism, ceremonies, and anything else that engages our senses in worship have one primary purpose: to proclaim the gospel in yet another fashion.

### *Symbolic Communication*

Many worship leaders and committees in WELS congregations probably do not spend a great deal of time thinking about *symbolic* communication of the gospel in the context of the liturgy. Most WELS congregations consist of people from Western, European cultures, and these cultures generally have less formalized ritual and sign systems than others. Additionally, WELS congregations have used the liturgy for less than half of our history: fewer than seventy years have passed since *The Lutheran Hymnal* made its way into the Wisconsin Synod and WELS members were first exposed to a complete version of the liturgy. One consequence of our non-liturgical roots is that, as a church body, we simply don't have much experience with symbolic communication in worship. James Tiefel suggests that our synod's history has caused us to be somewhat suspicious of the liturgy's potential for symbolic communication through ceremony.

Despite the heartening move toward Lutheran confessionalism, Wisconsin was not ready to abandon the nonliturgical practices of Pietism. This was certainly true of its members, but especially true of its pastors. The move toward confessionalism, guided, of course, by the Holy Spirit, was an intellectual move, born out of study of the Scriptures and the Lutheran confessions. But Missouri's brand of liturgical worship and its tastes in hymnody ran counter to what Wisconsin's founders and early leaders had experienced from their youth. Wisconsin was ready for a confessional adjustment, but the assimilation of liturgy, ceremony, and objective hymns didn't feel right to many pastors and people born and bred in Pietism.<sup>12</sup>

Certainly the gospel can be faithfully proclaimed in a simple service without ceremony. Simplicity can be beautiful and effective, and no one ought to suggest that you will go to liturgical hell for not using [258] formal ritual and symbols in your services! At the same time, it may be beneficial for us to explore symbolic communication, because symbolic communication is intended to engage the senses. Think of the means of grace: God absolves us as we read and study his Word (sight), as we hear the pastor speak the absolution (sound), as the waters of baptism are poured on a new believer's head (touch), and as we come forward to receive the body and blood of the Lord in Holy Communion (taste).<sup>13</sup> God could have stopped with the printed and spoken Word, but he chose to administer his grace and forgiveness to us in several, multi-sensory ways. Think of the law-proclaiming object lessons that the Lord commanded Ezekiel to act out, including the prophecies about the siege of Jerusalem (Ez 4–5) and the Babylonian exile (Ez 12). Think of the ceremonies and symbolism that God himself prescribed in the Old Testament: the Passover, the sacrifices, the scapegoat, the incense burning in the temple, the showbread, and the ornate vestments of the High Priest. God could have limited himself to the Ten Commandments and to his gospel promises, but he chose to communicate his law and his promises in several, multi-sensory ways.

Communication involves more than explicit verbal speech and frequently takes place through implicit, non-verbal ~~elements that accompany what is said or written~~ means. For example, if I greet you saying, "It's good to see you again," you may take my words to be customary politeness, sincere warmth, or bitter sarcasm based on whether or not I shake your hand, give you a hug, look you in the eye, and smile. If I mumble the words under my breath, ignore your outstretched hand anticipating a handshake, and roll my eyes, you know that my words meant nothing.

---

<sup>12</sup> James P. Tiefel, "The Formation and Flow of Worship Attitudes in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod," essay in *Not Unto Us: A Celebration of the Ministry of Kurt J. Eggert* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2001), 150. Available online at [http://www.wels.net/s3/uploaded/34699/Worship\\_Attitudes\\_in\\_WELS\\_Tiefel\(Logia\).pdf](http://www.wels.net/s3/uploaded/34699/Worship_Attitudes_in_WELS_Tiefel(Logia).pdf).

<sup>13</sup> We do need to be careful using the means of grace as an analogy for symbolic communication. This illustration does not intend to suggest that the Sacraments are mere symbols of God's grace, but that they are the real application and administration of God's grace and forgiveness in multi-sensory ways.

Consider another example of communication through ceremony and symbolism, that of a wedding.

Any society evolves ways to express what the union of a man and a woman means. . . . Generally, there are a whole series of activities—with words, songs, actions, objects—that convey beyond any philosophical or legal or religious or sociological language all that this society wants marriage to mean. In themselves, these things are simply elements from life—a ring, a kiss, a dance, hands joined together—but in the context of the society they have all kinds of meanings that express beyond any words what marriage is all about. These ritual actions and objects can strengthen that meaning for the particular couples and for all who witness them.<sup>14</sup>

[259]

Ceremonies and symbolic communication may prove to be a beneficial addition to our worship life because symbolism expresses ideas in ways that words cannot. Ceremonies and symbols have a way of communicating that reaches even the less literate and non-literate person—an increasingly useful quality as we enter into what is more and more a “post-literate” culture in America. Words are directed at our left brain; symbolism and ceremony stimulate our right brain. The use of ceremony helps us to engage our whole being, both intellect and emotions.

[Symbols] are not explanations or evidence, although they can and do communicate meaning and truth. Perhaps we can think of symbols this way: they work much like jokes or cartoons do. A joke is not funny if one has to labor at explaining it. Cartoons are humorous only if we supply the “missing links”—the elements that make the picture incongruous and therefore funny. Jokes and cartoons, like symbols, are “cool” media. Provided we participate in them and supply the “missing information,” their impact can be powerful and immediate; otherwise, there is no impact at all. Jokes and cartoons work by way of indirect suggestion, allusion, and innuendo. The best ones are subtle without being murky or obscure. That is the way it is with symbols, too. Unlike doctrines, symbols do not appeal directly to common patterns of rational evidence or logical thinking. For this reason some scholars today refer to symbols as “pre-logical” or “pre-rational.” This means that symbols appeal to a level of human experience that is more primary than logic or conceptualization.<sup>15</sup>

As an example of this concept, consider the early church’s practice of giving newly baptized converts milk and honey after they had been brought into the Eucharistic assembly. This symbolic gesture had its roots in the Roman culture of the day. A newborn baby would be brought to the *pater familias* who would then give the infant a drink of milk and honey. This symbolic action indicated the father’s desire to welcome this new addition into the family and to nourish the child as a member of the family. Imagine the connection that new converts in the early church would have made when the presider offered them milk and honey.<sup>16</sup> Given the cultural significance of that symbolic action, the presiding minister didn’t need to offer an in-depth explanation of the ritual in advance; in fact, to do so would have blunted its message. To borrow from the previous quotation, this symbol communicated in a “pre-logical” or “pre-rational” manner.

[260]

~~A secular example of what I’m saying~~ modern example of this type of communication would be a husband buying his wife a dozen red roses for their anniversary. He wouldn’t would not come home and verbally explain ~~how red roses are a symbol of love, and because it’s their anniversary, that’s what these roses are intended to express.~~ the flowers’ symbolic message: “I have bought you these flowers as a symbol of my love for you on our anniversary. Red is a traditional color used to symbolize love, and the sweet smell of these

<sup>14</sup> Gabe Huck and Gerald T. Chinchar, *Liturgy with Style and Grace* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1998), 4.

<sup>15</sup> Nathan Mitchell, “Symbols are Actions, not Objects—New Directions for an Old Problem,” *Living Worship* 13, no. 2 (February 1977).

<sup>16</sup> Mark Francis, *Shape a Circle Ever Wider: Liturgical Inculturation in the United States*, (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2000), 28.



flowers is intended to express that you have been my sweetheart for these many years. These flowers will also provide further opportunities for me to symbolically express my love for you, because in time they will wither, and so I will need to purchase new flowers for the next special occasion in our married life together.” He’d just come home and surprise her with the flowers. A rational, verbal explanation would kill the romance! The husband would just come home and surprise her with the flowers. No explanation is needed.

~~Now, to be sure, the verbal/rational presentation of those truths needs to precede the non-verbal/pre-rational symbolic gestures for symbolism to communicate—particularly when those symbols aren’t as well-known as what a dozen red roses mean. I will make that point later in the essay. I am not suggesting that we ought to pursue worship that relies more on symbolism than a clearly spoken proclamation of the gospel. What I am suggesting is that we let symbolism communicate in the way it is designed, without adding John Madden-like color commentary to the flow of the liturgy. The point of this section is to explain how symbolism communicates, not to discourage teaching what symbols means, or supplanting verbal elements of worship with non-verbal elements.~~

### *Sign, Signal, Symbol*

To gain a better grasp on the way that symbols communicate, it is helpful to understand the distinction between sign, signal, and symbol as we are using the terms here.

- A *sign* simply conveys information. No response or involvement is required.
- A *signal* requires one response. After the response, nothing more is required.
- A *symbol* invites our participation. It invokes our own thoughts, associations, and significance in a meaningful way.<sup>17</sup>

Since those definitions are somewhat obscure by themselves, consider these examples of signs, signals, and symbols in everyday life.

- *Example of a sign:* You are driving down the freeway with your family on vacation. Alongside the road is a blue sign with the picture of a gasoline pump. The sign conveys the information that a gas station is available at the next exit. Since your tank is three-quarters full, you decide not to respond to the sign and you keep driving. Had your tank been close to empty, you might have made use of the information that the sign offered, but a response in this case was unnecessary.

[261]

- *Example of a signal:* After exiting the freeway, you’re driving along a city street and you come up to a stop sign. Despite its name, the sign is really a signal. Unlike the gas station sign along the freeway, this requires you to stop. There is one appropriate response. You stop. But once you have stopped, the sign no longer applies, and you can drive on.
- *Example of a symbol:* All this driving has taken you to your hometown for the annual Fourth of July parade. As you stand at the side of the street and watch the parade pass by, a soldier leads a group of military personnel solemnly carrying an American flag. The flag brings different thoughts to mind for different people. You can’t help but recall the scene at Ground Zero on September 11, 2001, where the firemen planted the flag amidst the sea of debris. The elderly Pearl Harbor survivor recalls his service to our country during World War II. The immigrant who just was granted American citizenship remembers what she left behind in her homeland and what she has now gained by becoming a United States citizen. Each of these associations is different, none of them immediately fades away from mind after the flag has passed by, and all of them are appropriate connections to the symbol of the flag.

---

<sup>17</sup> Mark Francis, “Meal Sharing as Symbol Making,” course lecture for PLIT 232, The Eucharist, Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, California, 25 June 2007.

These distinctions and illustrations are useful to keep in mind because symbolic expressions in worship are often treated as signs rather than symbols. Instead of allowing the gospel message that a particular symbol conveys to encourage devotional reflection on God's grace, we can severely limit its impact if we treat it an academic way.

Mark Francis tells the story of an Easter Vigil he attended shortly after the death of his grandmother. Her passing was on his mind, and he hoped to gain some sense of comfort from the service. The Vigil began outside the church with the lighting of the Paschal candle, the primary symbol used in the Vigil. The candle was brought into the church where the worshippers were gathered. Instead of continuing with the rite, the priest inserted a detailed explanation of the Paschal candle that went something like this: "This is the Paschal candle. I just lighted it outside the church. It has five wax nails to represent the five wounds of Christ on the cross." And the priest went on to explain all the details of the paschal candle. As a result, the candle became a sign, not a symbol. Francis said that this intrusion into the service actually annoyed him rather than bringing him hope and comfort.<sup>18</sup>

~~Do things automatically work as signs or symbols? Is not some explanation implicit or explicit needed? Many wedding ceremonies have used a unity candle without a printed or verbal explanation of [262] what the symbols: the two individual candles, the center candle, lighting the one and extinguishing the two. People "get it" without commentary on it. Now, yes, worshippers at some point probably learned what the unity candle means, but once they learned that, repeated explanations were not necessary, and I would argue, would become an intrusion.~~

The symbol and its power to awaken devotional thoughts had been turned into a sign, a mere factoid for the assembly to remember and possibly regurgitate if asked. Worshippers could have taken a quiz after the Vigil to demonstrate that they knew what the wax nails, the Alpha and Omega, and the year on the candle represented. However, it is unlikely that any of them thought about the gospel message conveyed by the symbol, nor how that message applied to themselves as individuals.

Imagine the same Easter Vigil without the narrations inserted into the rite. The lighted Paschal candle is brought into the darkened church. All eyes are drawn to the light in the evening darkness. The young man grieving the loss of his grandmother sees the Paschal candle, the symbol of the risen Christ, and his mind recalls the truth that the risen Lord has conquered death by his resurrection—even the death of his grandmother. Another man with his own grief is in the congregation. He is struggling with a pet sin and is severely weighed down with guilt. He sees the candle's light piercing the darkness, and he finds comfort in the truth that Jesus, the Light of the world, has dispelled the darkness of sin by his resurrection and has forgiven him for his many failures. A woman is seated elsewhere in the church. She was converted to Christ as an adult and was baptized at a Vigil similar to the one she is now attending. At that service, she was given a candle lighted from the Paschal candle after her baptism. She remembers the Bible's message that baptism connects us to Jesus' death and resurrection, and she recalls with gratitude the new life that her Lord gave her at that wonderful event just a few years earlier.

In the preceding examples, the symbol of the Paschal candle was not bogged down with explanatory language that turned it into a mere sign, a piece of liturgical information. Because the Paschal candle was allowed to remain a symbol, individual worshippers could apply the basic message of that symbol—the resurrection of Jesus—to themselves in personally meaningful ways.

To be sure, the symbols we use in worship do require some degree of education. ~~But my goal to this point is to help the reader understand how symbolism communicates, not to discourage the necessary explanations that need to take place at some point. I am responding to what I call the "Maddenization" of the liturgy where every detail gets [263] an explanation before it's done. This is along the lines of C.S. Lewis's often told comparison between liturgy and dancing; when you're learning to dance, you're not dancing; when you're explaining items in the service repeatedly, it interrupts the flow of what's happening in worship. So the~~

---

<sup>18</sup> Francis, "Meal Sharing as Symbol Making," 25 June 2007.

~~point of the preceding discussion is to allow symbolism to communicate the way it naturally does.~~ No one will know what the Paschal candle and its various facets mean without some explanation. Banners, paraments, vestments, gestures, and ceremonies cannot serve as symbols (or even as signs) if people do not have some acquaintance with them. Occasional bulletin explanations will help with this effort. In this writer's experience, the best place for that education is in Bible Information Classes. At the conclusion of each session, the pastor can briefly discuss how various doctrines and truths taught in Scripture are conveyed in worship. The students will be given the mental connections that will make symbols a meaningful expression of the gospel in the context of worship.

The parish pulpit must also be in order for symbolism to be effective. Worshippers will hardly be able to make appropriate gospel-based applications if the gospel is not being preached and applied from the pulpit. Without solid preaching and teaching, the connections that people make with symbols will create other associations, but not necessarily biblical associations. In that case, symbolism becomes mere religious ambiance at best. But symbolism in the context of faithful preaching will underscore and reinforce the message of Christ and his redemptive work on our behalf. When law and gospel are faithfully proclaimed in each sermon, the people in the pew will see symbols as reflections of what they have been taught. The mental connections they make will recall gospel truths that benefit their faith.

C.S. Lewis once noted the similarity between dancing and liturgy. A dance that is continually stopped for verbal comments isn't really a dance; at best, it is teaching someone how to dance. In a similar way, worship with regularly inserted explanations and rubrics interrupts the natural flow of the liturgy. Such verbal additions are certainly not wrong, but they do prevent symbols from communicating in their natural manner. The preceding explanations are not intended to discourage or devalue the verbal aspects of worship, especially the reading and preaching of the Word. These explanations are given so that we better understand the way symbols communicate.

Rather than adding color commentary each time a prominent symbol is used in worship, let the symbol speak for itself. Most worshippers understand the message behind the lighting of the unity candle at a wedding service; they understand why the infant brought for baptism is wearing a white baptismal gown. Preach the Word verbally, and worshippers will understand the gospel clearly. Let symbols communicate *symbolically*, and the gospel message will be underscored beautifully.

### ***High Context vs. Low Context***

Another useful way to understand symbolism is to view it in terms of cultural communication. One of the distinctions among cultures that sociologists have noted is the difference between a high context culture and a low context culture. Quite simply, low context cultures are cultures in which words speak louder than actions; high context cultures are those in which actions speak louder than words.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps that is an oversimplification, but it is a useful way to remember the distinction. A few examples will demonstrate this concept.

A Korean gentleman stepped into my office one day. As our conversation finished, he asked for my business card. I handed him my [264] card, he held it at the bottom center of the card between the thumb and index finger of both hands and looked at it for several seconds before he put it in his pocket. His action might have seemed strange, but about 18 months prior to that incident, I remember learning an interesting tidbit about certain Asian cultures. The proper and respectful way to receive a business card among some Asians is to do exactly what that man did in my office. He was expressing his respect and his appreciation for my time by his action. If I handed my business card to one of you, I wouldn't expect you to gaze at it as you held it between specifically prescribed fingers, because that gesture is not a part of our American cultural experience. We tend to be a low context culture. If you wanted to express your appreciation, you would say "Thank you" and be done with it. But in this man's high context culture, his actions spoke louder than his words.

---

<sup>19</sup> Mark Francis, "In Search of Liturgical Spirituality," course lecture for SPIR 279, A History of Liturgical Spirituality, Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, California, 13 July 2004.

High context cultures express themselves not only in secular life, but also in church life. I recall some Japanese guests who attended our Christmas Eve service a few years ago. My congregation has the custom of using a processional cross in festival services, and the Christmas Eve service is one of the services that begins with a processional hymn. The congregation stands and faces the cross as one of our young people carries it through the assembly. I remember what happened as the cross passed the pew where our Japanese guests were standing: They bowed low—and I mean low—to the ground. Their faces couldn't have been more than two feet from the floor. It is customary in some churches to bow toward the processional cross, but I didn't envision it to look like this. In the Japanese culture, the lower you bow, the more respect you are showing to the person you are bowing toward. So these guests were showing their sincere respect and reverence for Christ by their action. If I had suggested that my congregation start this practice, I'm sure I'd get a room full of incredulous blank stares (and no bows toward the pastor!). That gesture is not a part of our American cultural experience. We are a low context culture. But in these guests' high context culture, their actions spoke louder than their words.

America may be a low context culture, but that does not mean we are a no context culture. We still remove our hats and put our hands on our hearts for the national anthem. The father still walks his daughter down the aisle and gives her away in the wedding ceremony. Military personnel still salute the President. We still stand when the casket is carried out of the church after the funeral service. Do you remember the symbolism in President Ronald Reagan's funeral? As I watched the Reagan funeral, I was annoyed by the play-by-play color commentary the television announcers felt obligated to repeatedly add to the sight. The words were an intrusion to the sight [265] and symbolism of that solemn occasion. The actions and the symbolism spoke louder than words.

Our churches may find themselves in the midst of a low context culture, but that does not mean our services represent a no context culture. We make the sign of the cross at the absolution. We raise our hands for the blessing. We invite our people to bow their heads for prayer. We face the altar for sacrificial parts of the service and the people for sacramental parts. We lay our hands on the newly ordained pastor and on the members of the confirmation class. We vest in order to emphasize that we are Jesus' servants and that we proclaim Jesus' message, not our own. We change the colors of our paraments and stoles to represent the church seasons. We use an altar, pulpit, and font to represent the means of grace.

As our world continues to get smaller and our people continue to be exposed to cultures and ways of communication beyond their own experience, we might discover that our members desire to experience higher context, symbolic expressions in worship. The Good Friday Service of Darkness (*Tenebrae*) with its rich symbolism has become common in our circles. More congregations have begun to include the imposition of ashes on Ash Wednesday. *Christian Worship: Occasional Services* includes rites for these aforementioned items, and offers many more possibilities for congregations looking to explore greater symbolic communication in worship.

As our synod strives to proclaim Jesus' gospel to multi-ethnic North America, we will discover that many other cultures are closer to the high context end of the continuum than Western cultures. "People of other cultures interpret gestures much more symbolically and can be offended when individuals from a technologically oriented society, for example, take a pragmatic attitude toward certain actions and things."<sup>20</sup> As we become a more multi-ethnic church body, we will likely find that symbolic gestures and actions are an important tool to communicate the gospel in our congregational worship life.

### ***Formal Correspondence vs. Dynamic Equivalence***

We are accustomed to the terms *formal correspondence* and *dynamic equivalence* from our biblical studies and translating. Formal correspondence refers to translations that are quite literal, that strive to translate the text word for word so that the reader knows what the idioms of the Greek or Hebrew text say. Dynamic equivalence refers to translations that are more concerned about communicating the idea in the receptor

---

<sup>20</sup> Smolarski, *How Not to Say Mass*, 17.

language's idiom so that the reader [266] grasps the intended meaning even if the translation doesn't follow the original words closely. Each side has its pros and cons. Sometimes a formal correspondence translation is so wooden that the average reader will not be able to fully understand the thought. Sometimes a dynamic equivalence translation is so free that it fails to capture the original meaning. The best approach will vary, depending on which option explains the intended meaning of the text most faithfully and clearly to the reader.

The concepts of formal correspondence and dynamic equivalence can be applied to symbolism in worship. The purpose of symbolism is not to create a reverent ambiance (though it may do that) or to add an historic element to the service (though it often does that, too). The purpose of symbolism is to proclaim the gospel in yet another fashion. If ceremonies and symbolism are approached in a formal correspondence way, then the goal simply becomes to reproduce a certain custom that's been around for a while. There's a technical term for that kind of thinking: rubricism. Rubricism is being more concerned with following the service rubrics (directions) than asking what the rubrics and customs are trying to convey. Rubricism is nostalgia at best and legalism at worst.

Rubricism was the way of life in the Roman Catholic Church from the Council of Trent right up to the Second Vatican Council. Prior to Vatican II, there were over 360 ways that a priest could sin by not properly following the rubrics of the Mass. Some of these were even considered mortal sins. It was also a common practice for priests to conduct a mock Mass at an annual retreat in the presence of a canon lawyer, who afterward would critique the priest and tell him what changes had to be made in the way he conducted the Mass.<sup>21</sup> The Vatican II document, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, attempted to bring an end to the Roman Catholic Church's 400-year era of rubricism. "Even in the liturgy the Church has no wish to impose a rigid uniformity in matters that do not effect the faith or the good of the whole community. ... Provisions shall also be made, even in the revision of liturgical books, for legitimate variations and adaptations to different groups, regions, and peoples, especially in mission lands, provided that the substantial unity of the Roman Rite is preserved."<sup>22</sup>

If we approach ceremonies and symbolism with a dynamic equivalence mindset, we will be less concerned about doing the rite thing and more concerned about communicating the right message in the [267] rite. Then the goal for symbolic communication is to communicate the truth of what is happening at a certain point in the service through non-verbal means.

An example of this occurs in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Paul spends the first section of chapter 11 dealing with the matter of women wearing a covering over their heads in worship. Paul encourages the women of the congregation to wear a head covering as recognition of their God-given roles in the order of creation. Lest Paul appear as though he was making a new ceremonial law for the Christian assembly, he closes the discussion with this comment in 1 Corinthians 11:16: Εἰ δὲ τις δοκεῖ φιλόνηκος εἶναι, ἡμεῖς τοιαύτην συνήθειαν οὐκ ἔχομεν οὐδὲ αἱ ἐκκλησίαι τοῦ θεοῦ. A literal, formal correspondence translation would be, "But if anyone seems to be quarrelsome, we do not have such a custom, nor [do] the churches of God." The NIV's translation is somewhat confusing because the final phrase is translated, "We have no other *practice*." This sounds as if Paul is saying that women without hats are not permitted in the church. In reality, Paul is telling the Corinthians to follow their local custom because the custom was an acknowledgment of God's design for the genders. Paul didn't tell other congregations to follow the custom because it wasn't part of their experience; doing so would have created the first and only New Testament ceremonial law.

As we bring the liturgy to new groups, settings, and cultures, especially those on the high context end of the continuum, our goal will not be simply to reproduce worship in the new setting the same way we do it "back home." Our goal will be to find dynamic equivalent expressions so that those in the new setting comprehend what is happening in worship. The often-told story about the initial mission work of the WELS in Africa is a good example. Our missionaries brought *The Lutheran Hymnal's* "Order of Holy Communion" with them to

---

<sup>21</sup> Mark Francis, "Introduction to Ritual," course lecture for PLIT 222, Introduction to Liturgy, Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, California, 11 July 2005.

<sup>22</sup> "Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy," III, 37. *The Liturgy Documents, Volume One*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2004), 11.

these new Lutheran brothers and sisters. After a while, the African congregants recognized that the texts of the service clearly carried the gospel, but the tunes just didn't carry the message in their culture. So the African church developed its own ceremonies and music to express more faithfully in their own cultural ways what was occurring in their services.

In West African Roman Catholic congregations, it is common practice to stand, sing loudly, and dance joyfully during the Alleluia and Verse (what *Christian Worship* calls the "Verse of the Day") as the Book of Gospels is brought to the center of the assembly for the reading of the Gospel. The people are physically expressing exactly what their "Alleluias" mean. But as soon as the Gospel is about to be read, the people sit. In African culture, if you're standing, you're moving, and if you're moving, you can't concentrate as well. So, in order to show respect for the words and works of Jesus in the Gospel, West [268] Africans are seated, while nearly every other liturgical church around the world stands for the Gospel. The actions appear to be the exact opposite when they are in fact dynamic equivalents.<sup>23</sup>

### ***Liturgical Inculturation***

If we synthesize the ideas we have considered so far, we discover a concept called *liturgical inculturation*. Quite simply, liturgical inculturation is the practice of using symbols, ceremonies, and expressions in a cultural context that faithfully communicate what is taking place in the congregation's worship. Liturgical inculturation is not interested in making universal laws about ceremonies and symbolism (formal correspondence), but about letting each culture organically develop rites and customs that faithfully proclaim the gospel in that particular setting (dynamic equivalence).

For the sake of clarity, we should also note what liturgical inculturation is *not*. Liturgical inculturation is not surveying the unregenerate to ask what they want in worship. We bring the sacred to the secular, not the secular into the sacred. The church's guide for what it does in worship is the Scriptures, not poll results from interviews with those who cannot begin to understand what worship is all about. We need to be careful even when we ask ourselves and our members what we want in worship. The Old Adam may have been drowned in baptism, but he's a good swimmer and he rears his ugly head every day in our lives.

Liturgical inculturation is not adding or adapting practices from other cultures into our services that will entertain instead of edify. African Christians may dance during the Alleluia Verse, but one could hardly argue that importing a Saturday night social dancing style into our Sunday morning services is the American cultural equivalent to what African Christians do in worship.

Liturgical inculturation is not an attempt to flavor worship with a particular cultural ambiance. Although we strive to communicate in a way that people from each culture will understand, we cannot forget that original sin permeates every culture in the world. Daniel Deutschlander reminds us:

Have we taken into account the fact that the message of the law and the gospel is always counter-cultural? No one wants to hear that he is by nature a doomed and damned sinner. ... Indeed the chief difference between one culture and another may well be the different ways in which each culture displays its inherent and [269] utter depravity. But regardless of the culture no one wants to hear that Jesus is everything, the whole of salvation, its beginning, its middle, its end, and that heaven is and can only be a gift purchased and won by Jesus alone. No one wants to hear what the liturgy confesses week in and week out, that we are still sinners, in desperate need of grace and pardon.<sup>24</sup>

Consider the following example in which an attempt to make the liturgy culturally relevant produced a highly inappropriate association. Roman Catholic missionary priests from Europe came to an African parish to conduct a Mass for the congregation. Without consulting the members of the congregation, the priests discussed

---

<sup>23</sup> Mark Francis, "An Overview of Liturgical History and Inculturation," course lecture for PLIT 222, Introduction to Liturgy, Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, California, 15 July 2005.

<sup>24</sup> Daniel M. Deutschlander, "Hold On... To the Narrow Lutheran Middle," essay delivered at the WELS Michigan District Convention (Michigan Lutheran Seminary, Saginaw, Michigan, 8 June 2004), 4. Available online at <http://www.wlssays.net/files/DeutschlanderNarrow.pdf>.

how they could make the service culturally relevant for the African congregation. They decided to replace bells with drums as the way to call the community to gather for worship, since bells seemed like more of a European concept than an African concept. The priests looked through the church building and found some old drums that were stored away in the attic of the church. The drums were sounded to call the assembly together. The gathering worshippers had strange and confused looks on their faces when they arrived for the Mass. The priests explained their rationale to the African congregation. The worshippers subsequently informed the priests that the drums they just sounded had been stored away because they had been used previously as part of pagan orgy rituals before this community had been converted to Christianity!<sup>25</sup> These well-meaning but uninformed missionaries wanted to inculturate the call to worship; instead, they unwittingly produced a pagan and sinful association. This example may be a worst case scenario, but it clearly demonstrates that expressions which are particular to a given culture are not necessarily useful in the church's worship life.

Cultural concerns can never predominate over our ultimate goal and purpose in worship: to proclaim the saving gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. We must exercise pastoral sensitivity and wisdom any time our congregations contemplate the introduction of new concepts or unfamiliar historic concepts in worship. As we look for edifying ways to inculturate the liturgy and whatever other Christ-centered worship forms we use, we will keep gospel proclamation at the heart of our services while communicating in ways that are appropriate and meaningful to the people we serve.

[270]

## PROCLAIMING THE GOSPEL—IN SONG

Musical styles and texts are arguably the area of worship that is most hotly debated, discussed, and disagreed upon. Among the churches I visited in preparation for this essay, the musical styles used varied rather broadly. On one hand, I heard Renaissance-era four-part motets sung by a cassock-and-surplice vested choir. On the other hand, I also witnessed a service with an eight-piece band, dressed in what can only be described as a “conservative grunge” style, playing Christian rock songs with heavy percussion. There are many angles and facets about music that we could consider, but the focus of this essay narrows our discussion. Our goal with service structure and symbolic communication is to proclaim the gospel. Our goal for the songs we use in worship is the same. The text, of course, is the most obvious way that the gospel is proclaimed in song, but the music we sing can also help or hinder gospel proclamation. We will briefly consider text and music issues in this part of the essay. While our study will certainly not exhaust these topics, our intention is to note some of the concerns that should be on our radar screen as we contemplate worship and music planning in the parish.

### *Textual Clarity*

When we prepare and preach our sermons, we strive to be understood, but we also strive to not be misunderstood. We don't want people to walk away thinking that the main use of God's law is to give practical advice for daily living. We don't want people to walk away thinking that the good news of the gospel is a “get out of hell free card” that gives us a license to live however we please. We certainly don't want people to walk away with a heavy heart because they were led to think that the life, death, and resurrection of Christ are somehow insufficient to forgive their sins. When we preach the law, we preach so that it convicts the sinful heart, and when we preach the gospel, we preach so that it consoles the repentant heart. We proclaim law and gospel clearly and without compromise.

The texts of the songs we sing ought to be held to the same high standard. At the same time, we recognize that poetry is a very different genre. In one of the many hymnal committee meetings leading up to the publication of *Christian Worship*, Kurt Eggert is said to have remarked, “Let the poet have his room.”<sup>26</sup> Poetry

<sup>25</sup> Francis, “An Overview of Liturgical History and Inculturation,” 15 July 2005.

<sup>26</sup> James P. Tiefel, comment from a course lecture for WOR 171, *The Form and Function of Christian Worship*, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wisconsin, Fall 1997. Eggert's comment was made in reference to the middle stanza of “This Joyful Eastertide”

is not merely [271] rhymed doctrine. We don't look for ways to paraphrase Francis Pieper's *Christian Dogmatics* so that it rhymes or so that it fits iambic pentameter. Poetry often utilizes symbols, pictures, and other rhetorical devices in order to communicate a message in a beautiful and memorable way. Our standard for hymns, songs, and poems is that they proclaim the Word of God clearly and without compromise, even though the way poetry accomplishes that is somewhat different than prose.

Since poetry may use symbolic communication, hymn texts are sometimes debated for their clarity. The hymn, "Amazing Grace" (CW 379) is a classic example. We sing about our salvation in the first stanza and about the culmination of our salvation in the final stanza, but nowhere is the source of our salvation, Jesus, mentioned. One of the middle stanzas hints at a synergistic view of conversion. Is this song suitable for Lutheran worship? In 1975, when the WELS celebrated its 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary under the theme, "Amazing Grace," the consensus was that "Amazing Grace" was not suitable for the WELS 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary hymn, so Kurt Eggert composed a brand new text, tune, and choir arrangement for the anniversary, "Not Unto Us" (CW 392), a hymn that has proven to be a wonderful contribution to confessional Lutheran hymnody in America. "Amazing Grace" did appear in the *Sampler* in 1986 and eventually found its way into *Christian Worship*, but only when the previously mentioned stanza that spoke about "the hour I first believed" was omitted.

Not everyone in our circles today agrees about the inclusion of "Amazing Grace" in our hymnal. The middle stanzas have more First Article content than Second Article content, almost suggesting that a better title would be, "Amazing Providence."<sup>27</sup> Do we need to consider whether or not it is wise to sing about our salvation and its culmination apart from Christ? Others may argue that the symbolic language of the text is intended to bring to mind everything Christ did for our salvation, especially considering the imagery taken from various Bible verses in the opening stanza. In this specific case, the best solution may be the one suggested by Silas Krueger: "Perhaps we should encourage the poets among us to write additional verses that do make a clear, gospel-oriented statement."<sup>28</sup>

"Amazing Grace" isn't the only hymn in *Christian Worship* that has raised concerns. I recall a Seminary chapel committee meeting in [272] which one of the committee members noted the confusing text of a stanza in the hymn, "God's Own Son Most Holy" (CW 17:3):

Thus, if we have known him And will not disown him  
Nor have loved him coldly But will trust him boldly  
He will then receive us, heal us, and forgive us.

While this stanza could be understood correctly, will the strong, "If...then" language in this translation lead worshippers to think that *they* are primarily responsible for coming to and remaining in the faith instead of the Holy Spirit?

Another hymn often cited is "To God Be the Glory" (CW 399). The text of stanza two says:

Oh, perfect redemption, the purchase of blood,  
To ev'ry believer the promise of God;  
The vilest offender who truly believes,  
That moment from Jesus a pardon receives.

It is not incorrect to speak about the moment that the Holy Spirit brought us to faith and we received the blessings of Christ's redemption (subjective justification), but the synergistic baggage attached to any discussion of the moment we believe causes some to be understandably uncomfortable with the language. It

---

(CW 160); in particular, the meaning of the phrase, "Since Jesus crossed the river." Those responsible for selecting the hymns in *Christian Worship* considered deleting this stanza because its meaning was unclear to them. Eggert's comment saved stanza 2 from deletion.

<sup>27</sup> Many Protestants use the term "common grace" to refer to what Lutherans normally call God's providence.

<sup>28</sup> Silas Krueger, "A Study of the Means the Holy Spirit Uses to Build the Church," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 101, no. 4 (Fall 2004): 270. Available online at [http://www.wels.net/s3/uploaded/34701/WLQ101\\_4\\_Krueger.pdf](http://www.wels.net/s3/uploaded/34701/WLQ101_4_Krueger.pdf).



wouldn't take much to adjust the text and clarify the thought. Here is one suggestion that fits the hymn's meter: "The vilest offender who truly believes, From Jesus, our Savior, a pardon receives."

These examples make us realize that even when we use Lutheran resources, we need to exercise pastoral sensitivity and wisdom. Just as we do in our sermons, so also in our songs we strive to be understood, and also not to be misunderstood. We need to ensure that we are proclaiming the gospel clearly and without compromise.<sup>29</sup>

### ***First Article Hymns***

A brief aside worth noting is that some hymns fall into a category that we could call *first article hymns*. "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty" (CW 234), "Let All Things Now Living" (CW 260), and "O God, Our Help in Ages Past" (CW 441) are three well-known examples. These hymns focus primarily on God's creation, providence, and [273] protection. There is certainly room for this kind of hymnody. First article hymns follow the thoughts in the explanation of the first article from Luther's Small Catechism. After confessing what the Scriptures teach about our Lord's creation, providence, and protection, Luther concludes: "For all this I ought to *thank and praise*, to serve and obey him." However, Lutherans seldom conduct a service in which *all* the hymns are first article hymns. The church confesses the first article, but the church stands on the second article. The main factor to keep in mind is *balance*. We may touch on many different articles of faith in our preaching, but the gospel is the primary message in our sermons. We may touch on many different articles of faith in our singing, but the gospel is the primary message in our songs.

### ***Praise Is Proclamation***

Pastors frequently receive Christmas gifts from their members when the end of the year arrives. When you acknowledge those gifts in a thank you note, what do you write? "Thank you very much. I just love the gift. I feel so appreciated when I think about it. I really want you to know how grateful I feel." Hopefully not! How about this: "Thank you very much. Your gift was wonderful, thoughtful, considerate, and heartfelt. When I received it, I could tell just how much sincerity was behind your gift. Thank you for your kindness." We can still do better than that. "Thank you very much. My wife and I truly appreciated the gift certificate to the department store that you gave us. We plan to buy our kids some new clothes since they grow out of their old ones so quickly! We appreciate your thoughtfulness." That's better. When we thank someone for a gift, we don't primarily explain how good we feel about it, or how neat the gift is. We thank them for *the specific gift* that was given. If you receive a thank you note that didn't acknowledge the gift you had given, you'd probably be a little puzzled.<sup>30</sup>

When we sing our songs of praise to the Lord, what is the highest form of praise we can return? Isn't it to proclaim what he has done for us? Isn't it to thank him for *the specific gifts* he has given us in Christ? Look at the great songs of the Scriptures. Look at the Messianic Psalms. Look at the Song of Mary and the Song of Simeon. Look at Saint Paul's encouragement in Colossians 3:16: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly ... as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God." The words of God, the promises of the gospel—these are not only the reason for our praise but also the content of our praises. Robert Webber makes the same point:

[274]

---

<sup>29</sup> Clarity should not be confused with complexity. The richness of Lutheran chorale texts is a wonderful treasure in our church, but their complexity will prevent them from being used in every situation. Hymns such as "Children of the Heavenly Father" (CW 449) are taught to little children before they learn a text like "Jesus, Priceless Treasure" (CW 349). New mission congregations might not be able to tackle "In the Midst of Earthly Life" (CW 534) on their first try. However, we certainly ought not abandon the richness of chorale texts, either, but find ways to teach and incorporate them in appropriate and meaningful ways.

<sup>30</sup> For a similar illustration, see Klemet I. Preus, *The Fire and the Staff: Lutheran Theology in Practice* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2005), 147.

I was discussing with Henry Jauhiainen the idea that worship celebrates the Christ-event. He summarized the point very well: “Worship often degenerated into celebrating the believer’s dedication to God. After a while you wake up and say, ‘Hey, what are we celebrating here? Not my dedication. We’re celebrating the work of Christ!’”

Pastor Jauhiainen’s point is extremely important. We don’t go to worship to celebrate what we have done. We don’t say, “Look, Lord, isn’t it wonderful that I believe in you, follow you, and serve you!” No! We go to worship to praise and thank God for what *he* has done, is doing, and will do. God’s work in Christ is the focus of worship. And it is the focus we need to recapture as we seek to renew our public worship experience.<sup>31</sup>

There is an additional reason why it is wise to proclaim the gospel even as we thank and praise our Lord Jesus in song. Not only are worshippers strengthened by the gospel that is proclaimed to them, but they will also be strengthened by the gospel they sing to one another as they thank Christ for his gift of redemption. Like it or not, corporate worship is the one activity of the church where many of our members get their only contact with the gospel each week. Therefore, let’s give them a generous application of the gospel: in Word, in absolution, in preaching, in the Supper, and even in their singing!

### ***Emphases in Praise Songs***

My church occasionally receives mailings from Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI), the organization that provides copyright licenses for churches that use praise songs in worship. The mailings usually contain advertisements inviting our church to sign up for their service. One of the mailings I received in 2005 also listed the top 25 CCLI songs specifically used in Lutheran churches in the United States. The most recent list containing the top 25 CCLI songs used in all churches in the United States may be found on the CCLI internet site.<sup>32</sup>

Many songs like these contain non-Lutheran theological concepts that are subtly, or not so subtly, implied in the texts. This is one of the main reasons why the members of the WELS Commission on Worship have advised against many of the songs that comprise the “worship and praise” genre. Perhaps the best way to demonstrate this concern is with a few examples. The four praise songs that follow are found on both of the aforementioned CCLI lists.

[275]

#### *“Shout to the Lord” by Darlene Zschech*

My Jesus, My Savior, Lord, there is none like you;  
All of my days I want to praise the wonders of your mighty love.

My comfort, my shelter, Tower of refuge and strength;  
Let every breath, all that I am never cease to worship you.

Shout to the Lord, all the earth, let us sing  
Power and majesty, praise to the King;  
Mountains bow down and the seas will roar  
At the sound of your name.

I sing for joy at the work of your hands,  
Forever I’ll love you, forever I’ll stand,  
Nothing compares to the promise I have in you.

---

<sup>31</sup> Webber, *Worship Is a Verb*, 30. Emphasis in original.

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.ccli.com/US/WhatWeOffer/ChurchCopyrightLicenses/Top%20Songs.aspx>

Perhaps the best understanding we can take from this text is that it is a First Article song. Apart from the reference to Jesus as “my Savior” in the opening line, there are no specific references to salvation, only to God’s creation and protection. We have already noted that First Article songs can have a place in corporate worship, but we also noted that an appropriate balance must be achieved. Klemet Preus notes in his book, *The Fire and the Staff: Lutheran Theology in Practice*, that a common symptom in contemporary Protestant preaching is to stress God’s providence over his grace.<sup>33</sup> Is it any surprise, then, that many songs with Protestant background praise God more for his providence than for his grace? Furthermore, is it beneficial that the most frequently sung praise song in Lutheran churches during 2005 refers to “My Jesus, My Savior,” and “the promise I have in you” apart from any direct reference to God’s gospel promises or the redeeming work of Christ?

Another concern with these lyrics is the underlying assumption that the purpose of God’s grace and providence toward us is so that we will praise him. In the first four lines, each statement containing God’s titles or characteristics is immediately followed by a statement of praise apart from any clear acknowledgement of our salvation. The fact that we praise God is a natural *result* of his grace and providence, but it is not the *purpose*. The purpose of God’s grace is to rescue us from sin, death, hell, and the devil. My sanctified living and my sanctified praises are a fruit, or result, but not the purpose. We see the opposite assumption in Evangelical and Protestant preaching. Protestant preaching often uses the gospel as a springboard for the third use of the law. Sanctified advice and didactic exhortations become the *purpose* of Protestant preaching, just as the Christian’s praises become the purpose of God’s goodness in this song.

*“Open the Eyes of My Heart” by Paul Baloche*

Open the eyes of my heart, Lord.

Open the eyes of my heart.

[276] I want to see you.

I want to see you.

To see you high and lifted up  
Shining in the light of your glory.

Pour out your power and love  
As we sing holy, holy, holy.

Holy, holy, holy.

Holy, holy, holy.

Holy, holy, holy.

I want to see you.

At first glance, someone might note the similarity between this song and the Lutheran hymn, “Lord, Open Now My Heart to Hear” (CW 282). But a closer look reveals very different assumptions behind each text. In Johannes Olearius’s hymn, we sing, “Lord, open now my heart to hear, and *through your Word* to me draw near.” We ask God to enter our hearts through his Word, through the gospel in the means of grace. The second stanza shows us what that Word of God will do.

Your Word inspires my heart within;  
Your Word grants healing from my sin.  
Your Word has pow’r to guide and bless;  
Your Word brings peace and happiness.

Compare this text with the theological assumptions behind “Open the Eyes of My Heart.” The song is a prayer for God to open our hearts, but nowhere is there even a suggestion about how the Lord accomplishes this. The assumption is that the Holy Spirit will enter into our hearts because we are praying to him. Prayer

---

<sup>33</sup> Preus, *The Fire and the Staff*, 336–346.

becomes the means of grace. This is the same theology behind the altar call and the so-called sinner's prayer. Evangelicals believe that God works apart from the means of grace, and Evangelical songs like this portray that theology. Lutherans should ask themselves whether or not the unspoken but real emphases in these songs belong in our services.

*"The Heart of Worship" by Matt Redman*

When the music fades and all is stripped away  
And I simply come longing just to bring  
Something that's of worth that will bless your heart,  
I'll bring you more than a song,  
For a song in itself is not what you have required.  
You search much deeper within.  
Through the way things appear  
You're looking into my heart.  
I'm coming back to the heart of worship  
And it's all about you, all about you, Jesus.  
I'm sorry, Lord, for the thing  
I've made it, when it's all about you,  
All about you, Jesus.

[277]

King of endless worth, no one could express  
How much you deserve.  
Though I'm weak and poor, all I have is yours,  
Every single breath.  
I'll bring you more than a song,  
For a song in itself is not what you have required.  
You search much deeper within.  
Through the way things appear  
You're looking into my heart.  
I'm coming back to the heart of worship  
And it's all about you, all about you, Jesus.  
I'm sorry, Lord, for the thing  
I've made it, when it's all about you,  
All about you, Jesus.

The repeating phrase, "It's all about you, Jesus," initially appears to indicate a better direction for this song. Worship is supposed to be all about Jesus! Notice, however, the way in which worship is all about Jesus. "*I ... come longing ... to bring something that's of worth that will bless your heart.*" The lyrics imply that worship is all about Jesus because Jesus is the one who *receives* our praises. The lyrics do not indicate that worship is all about Jesus because *Jesus serves us* in the means of grace. As noted in the introduction of this essay, common usage of the word *worship* today tends to focus only on our praise to God. Gary Parrett's observation applies to this text:

The word *worship*, when applied to public gatherings of the saints, must not be reduced to a synonym for singing praises to God. For many today, especially in evangelical churches, worship is only that portion of the service that we devote to singing praises. This represents a significant and recent shift in our worship vocabulary. ... Almost every time I hear the word *worship* used by believers today, it is clear that they are referring to singing praises. Many, of course, if pushed on this matter, would confess that worship involves far more. But words matter, and our language betrays our misperceptions. When we

call those who lead us in song our “worship leaders,” our true convictions are revealed. It is imperative, then, that we work diligently to reform the vocabulary of worship.<sup>34</sup>

*“Breathe” by Marie Barnett*

This is the air I breathe.  
This is the air I breathe.  
Your holy presence living in me.

This is my daily bread.  
This is my daily bread.  
Your very word spoken to me.

[278]

And I, I’m desperate for you.  
And I, I’m lost without you.  
This is the air I breathe.

*Christus pro nobis* is the primary message of the Scriptures, but *Christus in nobis* is the primary message of this song. Even that conclusion is generous, since Christ is not mentioned unless he is implied in the pronouns, “you” and “your.” The vagueness of this text would allow virtually anyone from any religion to agree with its message. Unfortunately, there is nothing clear about this text except the person’s desperation apart from the unnamed second person personal pronoun.

It would be unfair to place a blanket “heretical” label on the entire genre of praise songs. Every song, whether it is found in *Christian Worship*, in *Lutheran Service Book*, or on the CCLI song list, needs to be analyzed individually for its ability to proclaim the gospel. Nevertheless, we cannot naïvely ignore the tendency of so many praise songs to minimize the gospel and to operate with theological assumptions that are contrary to our confession. Fortunately, there are many hymns and songs, new and old, that are suitable for Lutheran worship, that carry biblical, Lutheran theology, and that will not compromise our message or cloud its clarity. Out of love for the souls in our care, let’s choose our songs wisely.

### ***Music and Association***

A few summers ago, I attended a conference on contemporary worship at which Lutheran church growth advocate Kent Hunter was one of the featured speakers. Hunter’s presentation had to do with cultural exegesis and worship. He suggested that we need to become better students of our society and expertly analyze our culture so that we can communicate with the people around us in more relevant ways. One example of this kind of analysis and application was the use of country music styles in church. Hunter noted that country music is one of the most popular musical styles enjoyed by Americans, and yet it is the least used musical style in worship. He cited the example of one American mega church with 17 services each week done in a wide arrange of styles; among these worship styles were services called “traditional,” “café service,” “light contemporary,” “edgy,” and “country.”<sup>35</sup>

Hunter’s operating assumption is that musical forms are neutral. That doesn’t surprise us, given his advocacy of church growth methodologies. What may surprise us a bit more is that this kind of thinking [279] made its way into a WELS convention resolution at the beginning of the last decade. James Tiefel comments:

The 1991 convention of the Wisconsin Synod passed a resolution which included this clause: “Whereas musical notations and rhythm are neither inherently good nor evil, but become such to the individual

---

<sup>34</sup> Gary Parrett, “9.5 Theses on Worship,” *Christianity Today*, February 2005, 38–39. Emphasis in original. Available online at <http://www.ctlibrary.com/ct/2005/february/24.38.html>.

<sup>35</sup> Kent Hunter, “Cultural Trends and Your Worship Service,” presentation delivered at the Contemporary Worship Conference, St. Mark Lutheran Church, De Pere, Wisconsin, 6 August 2005.

conscience” (*Proceedings*, p. 100). The statement is naïve at best and irresponsible at worst. It ignores the music philosophy of antiquity as well as the music psychology of the last half-century. Ask Musak if its researchers believe music is neutral.<sup>36</sup>

The understanding of music’s use in church—and, for that matter, in society—is more of an art than a science. However, pastors’ dogmatically and exegetically trained minds lean more towards scientific thinking than artistic expression. Perhaps that’s why some believe that music genres begin as a neutral medium and associations are subsequently added. But musical styles have always carried a message with them. A few examples from familiar hymns will demonstrate music’s ability to appropriately carry (or inappropriately get in the way of) the message.

- The words of “Amazing Grace” (CW 379) also fit the meter for the tune ANTIOCH (“Joy to the World,” CW 62), but the text of “Amazing Grace,” does not match up well with this melody. The theme song to “Gilligan’s Island” even fits the meter, but it doesn’t fit the message!
- Consider the different perspective given to the hymn “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” (CW 411) if we substitute the tune CONVERSE with JEFFERSON (*LSB* 338) or EBENEZER (“Thy Strong Word,” CW 280).
- Notice what happens to the hymn, “Thy Strong Word” (CW 280) if we change the mode from F minor to F major. The sturdy sounding melody that enhances the equally sturdy text is replaced with a tune that sounds bouncy and rather silly.

Music can also produce mental associations. Those associations will either carry the gospel message we want to proclaim or get in the way of the message. J.S. Bach’s famous *Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor* may be one of the most recognizable organ works ever performed, and Bach is the composer of some wonderful and splendid church music, but Halloween and “Phantom of the Opera” associations have become connected to this work. It’s better suited for the concert hall than the divine service. Klemet Preus offers another example:

[280]

My friend John understood the concept of association. One Sunday we sang the hymn, “Glorious Things of You Are Spoken” to the tune AUSTRIA<sup>37</sup>, as it is written in *Lutheran Worship*. After church John came up to me and said, “If Grandpa had been here today, he would have gotten up and walked out of church at the singing of that tune.” AUSTRIA is the tune name for Adolph Hitler’s nationalistic song that had cast fear into the hearts of many a murdered Jew and not a few Allied soldiers. The associations with Hitler’s terror were too strong.<sup>38</sup>

The example of AUSTRIA is useful because it demonstrates that some musical associations may be lost or may change with succeeding generations. Most worshippers today probably do not connect the tune AUSTRIA to Adolf Hitler, but if we have members in our own congregation that do recall the association, then we should reconsider its use. Some considered J.S. Bach’s music fairly radical for his time, but now he is hailed as one of the greatest musical geniuses of history and no one balks at the appropriateness of Bach’s music in worship. If I suggest that we start using jazz concepts in our church music, you might raise your eyebrows, and understandably so. But if I suggest that we listen to examples of music with predetermined chord progressions that allow a soloist or instrumentalist to improvise, you probably won’t find the association of a smoke-filled nightclub coming to mind; in fact, you might even find the style fitting for worship.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> James P. Tiefel, “Some Thoughts about Music in Church at the End of the Second Millennium,” outline from a presentation delivered at a WELS worship conference (Wisconsin Lutheran College, Milwaukee, summer 1997), 5.

<sup>37</sup> This melody appears in *Christian Worship* with a paraphrased text of the *Te Deum* titled, “God, We Praise You” (CW 277).

<sup>38</sup> Preus, *The Fire and the Staff*, 157.

<sup>39</sup> Many music scholars have noted the similarity between jazz music and music from the Baroque era. Both jazz and some Baroque styles, including many examples from J.S. Bach’s music, involve improvisation on the part of some of the musicians.

Music does carry a message, and it does create associations. Neither ragtime nor rock and roll make suitable candidates for church music, even though the latter is “contemporary” and the former is older. Their secular associations are too strong. The styles would get in the way of the gospel message we want to proclaim.

Musicologists do not always know or agree on the precise aspects of music that cause it to indulge our emotions, but they all seem to agree that it can have dramatic, unintentional, and even dangerous consequences. Donald Grout, “a giant of American musicology,” asserts that “people have always generally agreed that some kinds of music, for one reason or another are simply not appropriate for use in church. Different churches, different communities, and different ages have fixed the boundary at different points, though the line is not always perfectly clear.” The type of music that moves the body, stimulates the emotions, and paralyzes the mind would be quite suitable for [281] any church seeking to elicit an emotional response to the message the people hear. Lutherans would avoid such music.<sup>40</sup>

Law and gospel are the two key doctrines of the Bible, the two central themes in our worship, and the two primary messages in our sermons. As we also sing law and gospel in our songs, we ought to ask ourselves what kinds of music will properly carry this message. Not every musical style has the ability to carry the weight of the law in “From Depths of Woe I Cry to You” (CW 305), the significance of Jesus’ Passion in “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded” (CW 105), the triumph of Christ’s resurrection in “This Joyful Eastertide” (CW 160), or the joy of faith given through Word and Sacrament in “Sent Forth By God’s Blessing” (CW 318). As our choir directors, keyboardists, and other musicians select music for the Lutheran service, let’s encourage them to find music that carries our biblical, Lutheran message in a fitting fashion.

### *Appropriate Musical Variety*

While we recognize that some musical forms will not find their way into worship, there is still a wide array of musical options available. The conference committee that originally assigned this paper also requested that the presentation include a small sampling of different musical styles that may be used in our congregations. These samples all fit into a liturgical service, but each sample is in a musical style somewhat different from the church’s standard ritual music today. These settings are all available through GIA Publications of Chicago. The order number is included in brackets.

#### *“Glory to God” by David Haas [G-3109]*

This is a contemporary setting of the *Gloria* and may be used as a substitute setting for the song of praise in any of the major services in *Christian Worship* and its companion volumes. The setting calls for a minimum of an accomplished pianist and soloist, and offers the options of guitar, treble instrument, and one or two voice choir. Percussion could easily be added to this setting. The assembly joins to sing the refrain. The publisher suggests that repeated exposure to this setting would enable the entire congregation to sing both the refrain and the verses. The Seminary Chorus used this *Gloria* setting during concerts in the 1998-99 school year; the treble instrument used was a soprano saxophone, which was a fitting complement to the musical style.

#### *“Taste and See” by Francis Patrick O’Brien [G-3775]*

This anthem is a refrained setting of Psalm 34. The music is written in an African-American gospel style with piano accompaniment. [282] Although it could be performed with guitar and unison choir, it will probably work best with piano and a good soloist. The music for the verses is such that a soloist could easily improvise based on the printed melody in order to bring out the text, and the publisher’s suggestions encourage that type of approach. The congregation sings the refrains. We occasionally use this setting at the congregation I serve.

#### *“Laudate Dominum” in Music from Taizé, Volume 1 (p. 10) [G-2433]*

---

<sup>40</sup> Preus, *The Fire and the Staff*, 161.

This is an example of a Psalm setting in Taizé style. The choir introduces the four-part refrain, and the congregation joins to sing the refrain continuously (and in harmony). As the assembly repeats the text, the cantor or choir sings the verses of Psalm 117 “over” the congregation. Many Taizé settings provide a variety of optional instrumental accompaniments that can also be played “over” the congregation and choir’s singing.

*“In the Silent Hours of Night” by Howard Hughes [G-3377]*

This is a simple but beautiful chant setting of Psalm 134 designed for evening services like Vespers or Compline. It is probably most effective with a capable cantor, although a unison choir could also sing the verses. An unhurried, slow pace will enhance the text effectively. Organists should use an extremely soft registration.

*“The Honduras Alleluia” by Rob Glover [G-4588]*

This piece is a flexible anthem not only because of its possible uses but also because of its bilingual possibilities. All texts are given in both English and Spanish. A wide variety of words are provided so that the anthem could be used as the Verse of the Day throughout the entire Easter season, or as a setting of Psalm 150. The minimum performing forces would be piano and vocal soloist, but the setting’s flexibility also provides music for guitar, trumpet, two or four part choir, and percussion. The frequent use of sixths and thirds in the harmony gives the music a slight mariachi flavor.

Some of these examples represent “dynamic equivalent” musical expressions that may not be suitable for every congregation, but that will be suitable in some congregations and settings. What works in Santa Ana may not work in Santa Clara, and what is appropriate in downtown Milwaukee may not be well received in rural Wausau. Pastoral wisdom and concern must play a part of the music choosing process in each and every congregation.

Above the piano in my living room, there is a little plaque on the wall with a quotation from Martin Luther. The plaque records Luther’s famous quote about the purpose of music: “Next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise. The gift of language combined with the gift of song was given to us that we should *proclaim the Word of God in music.*” Whether it’s Anglican chant, modern ritual music, Lutheran Chorales, or African-American Gospel, that is our goal for our worship music: to proclaim the saving words and works of Jesus. May God give us wisdom to make musical choices that will best carry his gospel message to the souls he has placed into our care.

## CONCLUSION

The Lutheran Church is once again at a crossroads in worship. Several possible directions lie before us. Will we merely resort to duplicating what has been done in the past? I know of no voices in our circles suggesting that. Will we retain the structure of the liturgy and other gospel-centered forms, whether old or new, and explore creativity and freshness in this context? This is the encouragement presently coming from the WELS Commission on Worship. Will we borrow forms from other Protestants and Evangelicals and adapt them to match Lutheran theology? Some voices are suggesting that this is the paradigm we need to follow in order to reach out to the lost and keep our own in the pews.

As we contemplate the direction that worship will take in our congregations, here are several thoughts worth consideration:

- The Lutheran Church faced a similar crossroads during the era of Pietism. At that time in our history, the liturgy was down-played because it did not correspond with Pietism’s doctrinal emphases. Practice was altered to match a change in doctrine. Will we be able to alter our practices and adapt forms originating from non-Lutheran theology without also altering our theology over time, even if we have no intention of changing our confession?



- The practices we adopt in our local congregations have ramifications that stretch far beyond the walls of our own local church. If the structure of our services is more similar to the local community church than other congregations in our synod, what will our members be inclined to do when they move to a new community? Will they transfer to a sister congregation with a service unlike their previous church, or will they gravitate toward the local community church with similar worship but substantially different theology?
- We frequently hear about the “freedom” side of adiaphora, but we have not heard about the “wisdom” side nearly as often. Is it beneficial to borrow forms of worship that were designed to rely more heavily on music and ambiance than the means of grace? In his own day, Luther lamented about the abuse of Christian freedom that led so many churches to go their own way in corporate wor- [284] ship. He also warned about those who never tire of novelty. Do Luther’s warnings apply to our situation today?
- The liturgy is a wonderful tool, but we must confess that we can too easily fall into a “liturgical autopilot” mode. Like it or not, worship is the area where most inquirers first come into contact with a Christian congregation. We must work hard to put our best foot forward at each service—in preaching, in presiding, and in music. If the same time, energy, and dollars are invested into liturgical worship as other churches invest in praise services, people will be far less inclined to be critical of the liturgy.
- One of the ways we walk together as a synod is by relying on our brothers in the ministry for useful advice and constructive criticism. Before we adopt a practice that differs greatly (or even modestly) from our sister congregations, it would be both wise and loving to consult our brothers for their thoughts. Listen to constructive criticism humbly; offer it lovingly.

Our gracious Lord has given us a wonderful treasure in the gospel. He has called us to the awesome responsibility of administering that gospel in Word and sacrament. May our regular study of his Word guide us to proclaim his gospel confidently and administer his sacraments faithfully so that everything we do in worship will confess, “*Soli Deo Gloria!*”

## APPENDIX: Listing of Selected Church Music Publishers

Northwestern Publishing House  
Milwaukee, WI  
1-800-662-6022  
[www.nph.net](http://www.nph.net)

Concordia Publishing House  
St. Louis, MO  
1-800-325-3040  
[www.cph.org](http://www.cph.org)

GIA Publications, Inc.  
Chicago, IL  
1-800-GIA-1358  
1-800-442-1358  
[www.giamusic.com](http://www.giamusic.com)

MorningStar Music  
Fenton, MO  
1-800-647-2117  
[www.morningstarmusic.com](http://www.morningstarmusic.com)

Augsburg Fortress  
Minneapolis, MN  
1-800-328-4648  
[www.augsburgfortress.org](http://www.augsburgfortress.org)

Oregon Catholic Press  
Portland, OR  
1-800-LITURGY  
1-800-548-8749  
[www.ocp.org](http://www.ocp.org)

*Another useful church music resource:*  
The Choral Public Domain Library  
[www.cpd.org](http://www.cpd.org)