

Reflections on Contemporary / Alternative Worship

Prepared by the LCMS Commission on Worship

Introduction

In Revelation 5 the apostle John records a wondrous vision of heaven in which the whole heavenly host is gathered around the throne of the triune God. In joyous song they proclaim the work of salvation accomplished by the Lamb of God--our Lord Jesus Christ--and raise their voices in thanksgiving to Him who has made them to be a "kingdom of priests" to serve their God (Rev. 5:10).

Although we do not directly experience the splendor of St. John's vision, the worship of God's people in every age is no less profound. Where the Word of God is purely proclaimed and the sacraments faithfully administered according to Christ's command, there God is surely present to save. In worship we are in the throne room of the triune God to receive His gifts and respond to His grace. Our voices are joined to that heavenly host as we acknowledge our Savior and Lord: "To Him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!" (Rev. 5:13).

In recent years a significant debate has emerged in our Synod concerning our way of worship. Partly out of a desire to communicate the Gospel more effectively both to members and to the unchurched, a number of congregations have altered the orders of service provided in our hymnals. For some this foray into what is commonly called "contemporary worship" entails substituting new materials for various parts of the liturgy. For others the services go well beyond altering existing worship patterns; rather, they have chosen to design services that clearly depart from the historic pattern of worship that has been handed down to succeeding generations of Christians for nearly 2,000 years.

A topic as crucial as worship demands careful thought and reflection, for the Church's worship is the place where God Himself distributes His life-giving Word and sacraments. Certainly the Church has a great responsibility to act faithfully in its worship as God's gifts of forgiveness, life and salvation are bestowed on His people.

The following reflections are not intended to be an exhaustive response to the debate on contemporary/alternative worship. Whether a congregation is presently using a "contemporary" service, is considering adding such a service, or has no intention of moving in this direction, it is the Commission's hope that the following comments will draw the Synod into a serious study of the significance of these matters.

Worship And Liturgy: Some Definitions

By definition Christianity is salvation-centered. That is the clear biblical witness, that God in Christ came to save sinners (1 Tim. 1:15). Certainly the Church's worship can be characterized in the same way. It, too, is salvation-centered as the people of God gather to hear the Word of life and to eat and drink the holy meal of Christ's body and blood. Hence, worship could be described as a lively interchange between the God who saves and sinners in need of salvation.

Without God's gracious intervention, however, we would be incapable either of receiving His good gifts or of uttering any praise of His goodness and mercy. As the psalmist succinctly puts it: "O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare Your praise" (Ps. 51:15). Any definition of worship, therefore, must go beyond the one-sided perspective that defines it essentially as something we do, as an act of "reverence offered a divine being or supernatural power" (Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary). Worship is, first and foremost, God coming to us with His gifts of forgiveness, life and salvation. Faith receives these gifts with thanksgiving and praises and extols the Giver for His merciful goodness.

In the liturgy God's gifts are distributed to His people. Because God's Word and sacraments do not exist in a vacuum, the liturgy serves to provide a structure through which these gifts are delivered to the congregation. Since earliest times, that structure has exhibited two basic patterns: one for daily prayer in morning and evening and the other for the regular, weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper. Over centuries of cautious development, various biblical texts have become constant components of these historic liturgies. In general these texts focus attention on God's plan of salvation, on the person and work of Christ, and on the nature and blessings of the Lord's Supper.

When discussing liturgy, it is important to explain what liturgy is and what it is not. For some, liturgy is associated with a particular service in a worship book (e.g., page 15 in *The Lutheran Hymnal*). While a specific service might be an expression of the Church's liturgy, the two cannot be equated. Similarly, when speaking of using the liturgy, some assume that this implies that there is only one way of worshiping and that no deviations are permitted.

Both of these views fail to recognize the richness of the Church's liturgy. The liturgy, as it has been handed down over the centuries, is a living, breathing structure. It includes standard texts (e.g., the Kyrie, Creed, Sanctus, Agnus Dei, common responses, etc.) which are set within a framework that provides ample opportunity for variety (based on the theme of the day as provided in the lectionary). Far from being a straightjacket, the liturgy provides constancy within the service even as it allows for creativity in the best sense of the word.

In recent years, phrases like "contemporary worship" and "alternative worship" have become popular designations for liturgies that diverge from the historic model. Given the fact that there is no common definition for these phrases, contemporary/alternative worship has come to mean many things. For some, allowing the liturgy's richness to blossom is what is meant by contemporary. Others start with the historic liturgy and then make alterations to the basic structure, adding materials in some places and removing them from others. For still others, contemporary/alternative worship has come to mean something quite different from the Church's historic liturgy. While a pattern faintly similar to the historic liturgy may be recognizable, nearly every particular feature is replaced with new material.

Reaching The Unchurched

Our Lord Jesus commanded His Church to go into all the world and make disciples by baptizing and teaching all that He had commanded (Matt. 28:19-20). Beginning with the story as told in the book of Acts and continuing to the present day, the history of the Church is one of carrying out our Lord's Great Commission.

That there has been a renewed interest in recent years in reaching the unchurched is beyond dispute, and we thank God for it. There are billions of people who do not know Christ, meaning that they do not have a share in the life that He has won for them. Without faith in Christ they will be forever lost. This sad reality should rightly grieve us and fill us with the same compassion that Jesus had as He looked out over the shepherdless crowds (Matt. 9:36).

The Commission on Worship is keenly aware of the challenge of reaching the unchurched. It regrets any lack of evangelistic zeal among those who promote the use of the Church's rich liturgical heritage. But it also laments the unfortunate mind-set that has pitted the Church's worship against her task of taking the Gospel to the nations.

The Commission believes it is not helpful to ask whether the congregation's worship is for confessing Christians or for the unchurched. Inasmuch as the service is the place where God comes through Word and sacrament to grant life to His people, it is obviously beneficial to both. To those who do not have faith, the service will be, in one sense, incomprehensible, since the things of the Spirit of God are only received by those who possess the Spirit (1 Cor. 2:14). Nevertheless, the reading, singing and preaching of God's Word are clearly means whereby the unchurched may be edified (see Isa. 55:10-11). Furthermore, the service demonstrates that God is in our midst, and may therefore lead the unchurched to further instruction, to Holy Baptism, and finally to admission to the Lord's Table (1 Cor. 14:24-25).

In an effort to reach out to the unchurched, some have identified the Sunday-morning service as the primary place to evangelize. Recognizing that the unchurched have little or no familiarity with our liturgical and hymnic heritage, some congregations have chosen to simplify the service by removing various segments, eliminating hymns that are not known outside Lutheranism, and introducing songs written in other styles (e.g., pop, rock, country, jazz, blues, etc.). The purpose of this approach is to find a point of entry through which the unchurched can enter the Church.

This approach holds to an assumption, namely, that the unchurched do not find the Church's traditional liturgy and hymns effective means of communicating the Gospel. Not all, however, would hold to that opinion. There are, in fact, many unchurched people who would prefer to attend a service that is best described as "traditional" (see George Barna, *Evangelism that Works* [1995], p. 60). In addition, the deep yearning in our society for a spirituality that goes beyond the here and now is precisely what the Church's historic liturgy aims to nurture as it joins us to the worship of the whole Church, including the saints in heaven.

The Liturgy Is A Teacher Of The Faith

Changes in the Church's liturgy have always been made cautiously and, therefore, slowly. One factor that has contributed to this caution is the liturgy's role as a teacher of the faith. Modern technology has made it relatively easy for the Church's historic liturgy to be displaced by other forms, and this raises some important questions. Chief among them is the question of why the liturgy has been retained by the Church for centuries, despite dramatic changes in diverse human cultures. While there have been numerous additions and deletions to the historic liturgy over the years, there remains a basic structure--with standard texts--that has survived one reformation after another. What is to explain this preservation of the liturgy?

Over the centuries, the Church has recognized the vital role its worship plays in the formation of faith in the lives of God's people. Through weekly repetition of basic, Gospel-centered texts from Holy Scripture, the people of God are schooled in the fundamental teachings of the Christian faith. The liturgy and hymns serve as building blocks for a lifetime of receiving God's gifts through Word and sacrament.

Inextricably joined to this concept of the liturgy as a teacher of the faith is the discipline of the lectionary. Each year the Church enters into the story of Christ and His work of salvation, beginning with the anticipation of His coming (Advent) and proceeding through His ascension and sending of the Holy Spirit (Pentecost). Here again the worshiper is schooled in the fundamentals of the faith by being linked to the life and work of Jesus.

One of the important blessings of the Church's liturgical heritage is repetition. Through repetition of basic, important truths, Christians learn by heart. With the heart we believe and with the mouth we confess (Rom. 10:9). By repeated confession in the Church's public prayer, the Christian faith is so grounded in the worshiper that it provides a foundation on which the person can build for a lifetime. When, on the other hand, the repetition of texts is abandoned in favor of new materials each week, the opportunity to impress unchanging truths onto the hearts and minds of God's people, especially children, is seriously compromised.

The benefit that is gained through repetition of crucial texts is the development of a common language. In every community and profession there is a unique vocabulary or a standard procedure that enables the work to be done as efficiently as possible. Architects have symbols that cause a blueprint to come to life with information. Carpenters learn how to drive a nail in as few hammer blows as possible. Bankers have formulas that make the compounding of interest a simple matter.

Likewise, the Church has a common language that speaks of sin and grace, repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation, righteousness, etc. These expressions of the faith are taught in the sermon and Bible class, to be sure. But this common language is also imparted as the liturgy and hymns are sung week after week. Together with the Small Catechism, they develop within the Church a common way of speaking that equips us to be faithful witnesses as we confess the saving truth before this increasingly confused and darkened world.

One of the reasons often given for simplifying or discarding the liturgy is the concern that the Church's liturgy and hymnody contain elements and concepts that are not understandable, both to the unchurched and to the average church member. Obviously, the Church does not want to promote a liturgical order that confounds or confuses people. That does not mean, however, that whatever is done in worship must aim for the lowest common denominator. The genius of the liturgy is that even as it speaks a clear message of Gospel, it also continually invites us to further reflection and devotion.

As an example of this principle, consider the Lord's Prayer. None of us can count how many times we have prayed that model prayer. We even prayed it as children when its meaning was relatively obscure to us. But does that mean that we shouldn't teach this prayer, or other texts, to children? Or that once the meaning has been mastered, we needn't pray it anymore? Hardly. Instead, we learn the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds and other fundamental texts so well that we can spend the rest of our lives growing into them. Only after these texts have become a part of us can we be freed to appreciate the fullness of their message.

We Are Members Of "One" Church

In his letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul rejoices in the truth that the Church is one: "There is one body and one Spirit--just as you were called to one hope when you were called--one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:4-6). Though St. Paul goes on to speak of the various callings within the Church, the purpose is not to emphasize the diversity but to see how God uses the various gifts to

strengthen the Church's unity: "...so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith ..." (Eph. 4:12b-13a).

This biblical emphasis on the Church's unity and order (see also Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 12:12-26; 14:40) needs to be remembered when a congregation considers adding a contemporary/alternative service. Often, congregations are advised to offer several different "styles" of worship in order to attract the greatest number of people from our unchurched culture. The rationale is that a congregation's unity is not dependent on everyone worshipping the same way (see Alan Klaas, *In Search of the Unchurched* [1996], pp. 57-63).

It is true that there is no biblical mandate demanding that a congregation use the same worship format at every service; congregations will nevertheless want to be concerned for unity and order. The solution of providing two, three, or even four different styles of services within a single congregation may answer a perceived need for variety that communicates the Gospel to people of different backgrounds and experiences. The end result, however, is not necessarily an improvement. In effect, the members go their own way (i.e., to their preferred service) on the basis of their own personal tastes. Rather than learning how to live and worship with the whole body, together with all of the rejoicing and struggling that that may entail (1 Cor. 12:26-27), the impression is given that the Church is made up of individuals who segregate themselves on the basis of their likes and dislikes. How does this manifest the unity of the Church?

The Church's Worship Is Both Countercultural And Transcultural

As long as the Church has existed in the world, it has struggled to live faithfully according to Jesus' command to be "in, but not of" this world (John 17:11-18). Certainly that tension is keenly felt today as the Church finds itself in a world that is less and less hospitable to Christianity. From every angle we are bombarded with messages that entice us to enjoy the pleasures of this life and to strive for worldly success.

Coupled to the hedonism of the age is a new world view that challenges any belief in absolute truth. Unlike the modern age of the last two centuries which challenged biblical truths on the basis of scientific evidence, the postmodern world view advances the claim that each person is entitled to his or her own version of the truth. In such a climate, the Church's exclusive claim that salvation comes through faith in Jesus Christ alone (Acts 4:12) is unwelcome and readily dismissed by many. This postmodern view of the individual is a manifestation of the very essence of what it means to be a sinner. Emphasis falls invariably upon the self. Rather than being guided by the will of God, it is one's individual feelings, wants and desires that are often the determining factor for all of life.

Another feature of our culture is the sway of utilitarianism and pragmatism. Simply put, these "isms" advance the attitude that we should use whatever means necessary to reach our goals. Perhaps this world view is best summed up with the phrase, "If it works, use it." The Scriptures, however, never promote the attitude that "the end justifies the means."

Increasingly our society is being defined by the twin dangers of passivity and isolation. While inventions like the television and computer have resulted in tremendous advances, they have also given us opportunity to withdraw from the society around us. We are rapidly losing the ability to interact with each other in any meaningful way. Certainly this trend poses a challenge to the Church's corporate nature, namely, that it is defined not as a collection of individuals but as the body of believers (1 Cor. 12:12-27; Eph. 2:19-22; 4:4-6).

Finally, our world lives for instant gratification. First the telephone, and now fax and internet allow us instant communication. Fast-food establishments, ATMs, cellular phones--all of these give us a sense that the world around us is ready to serve. Furthermore, there is the temptation to expect everything to be relevant to the here and now. If it isn't, then its usefulness comes into serious question.

In response to these pressures from the world, the Church's worship will often have to take up the task of opposing the culture. It is, in fact, countercultural. In reply to the increasing relativism of the age, for example, we must be resolute in our worship to proclaim the whole counsel of God, both His terrifying judgment of sinners and His comforting forgiveness for the sake of Christ. Though the world will forever persuade the Church to soften its prophetic message, we remain determined to proclaim the truth, fully aware that the Gospel--indeed, Christ Himself--is a stumbling block (Matt. 21:42; 1 Cor. 1:18-25). Of course, while the message of the cross will be an offense to some, this never means that we intentionally prepare or lead our worship in such a way that it turns people away.

Our worship will also strive to resist other trends that have come to characterize our society. For example, the perception that everything we do in worship must be relevant should not be an excuse for allowing our wants and needs to dictate the agenda of the service. The genius of the Church's historic liturgy--and why it has found continued use in diverse cultures over centuries--is its ability to focus on the heart of the matter, namely, our condition as sinners in need of a gracious God. While freshly written confessions of sin, absolutions and creedal statements for example may give the appearance of being relevant, the very attempt at relevance runs the risk of turning attention away from God and onto ourselves.

Similarly, the Church must be on guard against allowing her worship to promote the tendency toward passivity. Something as simple as the recent trend of calling those gathered in the sanctuary an "audience" highlights this concern. Audiences typically gather to watch a performance. The Church's worship, however, is anything but a performance; it is, rather, the gathering of God's saints around His gifts so that they may receive and have life. It truly is unlike anything else in the entire world. How the people of God gather for and conduct themselves in worship will, then, reflect that reality, namely, that this is heaven on earth. Far from being solely a somber and grave experience, the Church's worship will exhibit a full range of human emotions as God's gifts are received. Joy and exuberance will be as evident as solemnity. No emotion, however, exists for its own sake, but is the response of faith to the goodness of God's gifts.

These countercultural aspects of the Church's worship are balanced by the fact that the Church's liturgy also serves positively as a transcultural force. The genius of the Church's liturgy is that it is not the product of one time or place but, rather, the very wisdom of the Church from every time and place. Over the centuries the liturgy has appropriated the very best from every community of faith. (Contrary to the often-stated opinion that it is essentially a northern European creation, much of the Church's liturgy is Mediterranean, having originated in southern Europe and North Africa.) In this process it has served as a unifying force within the Church, allowing Christians from every land and race to join together with one voice to praise their Maker and Redeemer.

The liturgy's appropriation of the best of God's gifts from every age is occurring even now. It is inherently a slow process as new hymns and liturgies are scrutinized to see whether they will stand the test of time. Certainly not everything that is written for worship in our day will be sung in the future. But there will be those particularly special gifts of God that proclaim the Gospel for generations to come.

Even as the Church's worship draws on the best from every Christian community, it does not do so indiscriminately. Not every form of expression is compatible with the Gospel. Certain styles of music, for example, are less appropriate than others for the worship of God's people. For this reason, it is essential that the music appropriately serve the text and not overpower it with other messages. Style, after all, is not neutral, but is intricately bound up with the substance that it proclaims.

Worship Requires Adequate Preparation And Resources

The effectiveness of the Church's worship ultimately does not depend on the quality of its execution; still, the Church will want to conduct worship in a way that gives the very best to God. This requires adequate and deliberate preparation. Pastors need to spend time not only preparing their sermons but also giving attention to all the details of the service. Congregations need to encourage their musicians to practice for each service and to seek out ways to enhance their skills. Together, pastors and musicians need to plan far in advance so that the services reflect the richness of our liturgical heritage and encourage the worshipers to lift their voices in thanksgiving to God.

This call for excellence in worship is constantly heard by advocates of contemporary/alternative worship styles. They urge congregations to employ the best musicians and acquire the finest musical instruments to lead their services. Sadly, in many of our congregations worship has not been given a high priority. We have failed to explain to our people the significance and meaning of what we do in worship. Pastors have not viewed worship planning as an important task. Many congregations have inadequately remunerated their musicians and have failed to encourage them to seek opportunities to improve their skills. Many churches have never provided adequate instruments for their musicians.

These comments do not mean to suggest that every congregation should have a professional music program with highly trained musicians. In most cases, our congregations will rely on the generous spirit of dedicated musicians whose compensation will be little more than a token gesture of thanks and an encouragement to seek further training.

The goal is not high quality for its own sake, but simply an offering of our best so that the worship of God's people will be enriched as they receive His gifts with thanksgiving.

Conclusion

While the preceding thoughts are not intended to be the final word on the topic of contemporary/alternative worship, they are offered in the hope that further reflection will take place. In many cases, the discussion over worship practices is filled with heated debate that seldom moves beyond the emotional level. The Commission desires to return this discussion to the underlying theological issues that demand consideration.

Finally, for congregations that are discussing this issue for the first time, there is undoubtedly a sense of urgency that has entered the debate. Whether it is a concern for reaching the unchurched, a concern over the fear of losing members to other congregations, or a concern for the general direction of the congregation, it is easy to conclude that a change in worship styles will take care of many of the problems.

The Commission hopes that the preceding remarks have demonstrated the complexity that surrounds the issue of contemporary worship. Worship is closely related to other concerns, such as the unity of the Church, formation in the faith, and faithfulness to the Word of God. A change in worship may indeed signal a change in doctrine. "What is prayed is what is believed" is the ancient wisdom of the Church. Our synodical founders provided in their constitutions that only "purely Lutheran hymnals, agendas, and textbooks" could be used in the congregations of the Synod. Out of faithfulness to God, love for the lost, and concern for future generations, Christians must pay careful attention to what is confessed in the public worship of the Church.

For these reasons, the Commission encourages congregations to proceed slowly before making any radical changes in their worship practices. Rather than rushing into a decision, it is essential that congregations study carefully all the issues that are related to the worship of God's people.

Additional Resources

Lutheran Worship: History and Practice. 1993.

The Unchanging Feast: The Nature and Basis of Lutheran Worship. 1995. [CPH stock no. S-02142]