

# What Does It Mean To Be Evangelical Lutheran In Worship? <sup>1</sup>

[Presented as Keynote address at the WELS, Conference on Worship,  
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Twenty-five years ago, April 1971, the WELS conducted its first (and up to this time only) synod-wide Christian Worship Seminar. Held on the campus of Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minnesota, the seminar was conducted by the WELS Commission on Worship and chaired by the now-sainted Martin Albrecht. The topic it addressed was: “Meeting Contemporary Needs in Christian Worship.” Its’ stated purpose was:

to study and evaluate the problems that arise in the preparation, development, and conducting of our worship services. Such problems include the difficulties in language, new hymn texts and melodies, variations in the service, and the possibility of new worship forms.<sup>2</sup>

The number of participants was limited to invited guests—presenters and reactors for the most part. It was a relatively small gathering, nothing like the group I see before me today. A modest beginning, perhaps, but it was a start.

Now look at where we are, by God’s grace, today! With the publication and, within a very short period of time, the widespread adoption of *Christian Worship*, the WELS has tackled and, to a large degree, successfully overcome everything described back in 1971 as a “problem.”

Does that mean there’s no real need—or value—in a meeting such as the one being held here in July 1996? Hardly. In a certain sense worship is the most important thing Christians do. In the 43<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Isaiah our Lord God tells his church that he formed us for himself, he made us his people, that we might proclaim his praise. That we worship, therefore, as well as how we come into the presence of our Savior God, is of key importance to Christians, both individually and collectively. In view of the paramount importance of worship, a study of the why, the what, and the how of worship, interspersed with many opportunities simply to worship, such as we are doing at this conference, is worthy of all the time and energy we put into it.

In particular, we are talking about Lutheran worship at this conference. It seemed best, therefore, that right at the outset we should focus on the question:

## **WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN IN WORSHIP?**

I ask this question based on the assumption, with which I’m sure you all agree that our theology should determine our worship, not vice versa. **What** we believe should determine **how** we worship.

The Lutheran Church is a **biblical** church. The biblical doctrines our church holds should determine such things as the liturgical orders we employ and the hymns we use what in worship we leave to freedom of choice and what we reject.

The Lutheran Church is also a **confessional** church. Therefore we will want to be sure that how we worship is in harmony with the Lutheran Confessions.

What does it mean to be biblical, to be confessional, in short, to be evangelical Lutheran in our worship? Let me give six answers to that question.

### **One: Worship That Is Lutheran Will Put the Spotlight on God’s Actions on Behalf of Mankind.**

This is the place to begin, isn’t it? All other religions emphasize mankind’s actions, the things we must do to please God. I have taken a number of trips to India on behalf of the Synod’s Board for World Missions. The vast majority of India’s nearly one billion population practices Hinduism. Hindus worship literally millions of gods. But not a one of the millions says as Jesus did, “Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest.” The religion of the Hindus consists of man’s attempts to appease the gods. So it is with all

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<sup>1</sup> Presented in substantially the same form as the key-note address for the WELS Conference on Worship held on the premises of Carthage College, Kenosha, Wisconsin, on July 22, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> From the Foreword written by Martin Albrecht. The proceedings of this Christian Worship Seminar are in the library of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.

patently heathen religions and also all pseudo-Christian religions. From natural man, as Peter Brunner puts it in his classic book, *Worship in the Name of Jesus*, “nothing can issue but a perversion of the worship of God into a worship of idols.”<sup>3</sup>

The Scriptures, and therefore Lutheran theology, put the spotlight on God’s actions on behalf of mankind. They put the brightest spotlight of all upon the heart and center of God’s actions on behalf of mankind: God’s sending of his Son to this earth and all that it implies—the birth, the life, the suffering, the death, the resurrection, the ascension, and the final coming of the Son of God who became man for our sake.

A little over a week ago I was engaged in teaching a Summer Quarter class at the Seminary. We spent thirty class hours working through the three brief epistles of John, giving special attention to the First Epistle. In this beautiful letter everything focuses on Christ, the eternal Word who became flesh for our salvation. “This is love,” writes John, “not that we loved God [putting the spotlight on self], but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”

Certainly, our worship will want to accentuate this same God-for-us-in-Christ action. It’s interesting to note, as the book of Revelation brings out, that even in heaven, when we will be perfect and the benefits of Christ’s atoning sacrifice will no longer have to be applied to us, the chief object of our worship will still be the Lamb sitting upon the throne (an eternal reminder of what God has done for us in the life, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus).

In the German language, some of you will know, worship is referred to as *Gottesdienst*, service of God. When we think of *Gottesdienst*, God’s service to us must always come first and only then our service to God. That’s the reason for the use of the Church Year, isn’t it? It helps to assure that Christ will be in the center of our worship, that our worship will be Christocentric—Christ for **us** before we talk about **us** for Christ. That means repetition, a lot of repetition, year after year as we review that which many of us, with Timothy of old, have learned from infancy. But it is not vain repetition. As Brunner reminds us, “The congregation really ‘knows’ all that is necessary for its salvation... But the congregation needs to be reminded of what it knows” (143). It is as John wrote in his First Epistle: “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God [i.e., who already have all that it takes for life with God] so that you may know that you have eternal life [i.e., so that you might grow in your assurance of that which you already possess].”

The *opinio legis*, the idea we’re born with that if we’re going to get right with God and stay right with God, it is dependent at least in part on what we do, is always striving to regain its hold on us, leading us to uncertainty and fear about our standing with God both now and in the world to come. We need to hear and to hear and to hear again what God in Christ has done on our behalf

Some of the weaker times in the history of Lutheranism were those times when the message of God’s action on mankind’s behalf was overshadowed by the message of man’s response to God’s action—the age of Pietism in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, for example, with its downplaying of the importance of doctrine and emphasis on the Christian’s life of piety; or the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment, with its attempt to understand Christianity by rational means. A rationalistic approach to Christianity eliminates the miraculous—the incarnation, the miracles, including the resurrection—and thus leaves us without a Savior. In its place it offers nothing more than a shallow, moralistic religion that no longer stresses, “God is good. See what he has done for you,” but rather, “You be good. See what you can do for God.”

Worship that is truly Lutheran, in agreement with the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions, will put the spotlight on God’s redemptive actions on behalf of mankind.

### **Two: Worship That Is Lutheran Will Center on the Means of Grace.**

We are sinners, all of us, and will continue to be sinners all our days. Sin separates people from God. Our greatest need, therefore, is the assurance of the forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness is God’s doing, of course, and his Holy Spirit conveys forgiveness through the Means of Grace, that is, through the gospel in Word and Sacrament—and **only** through the Means of Grace. Our Confessions put it this way:

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Brunner (transl. by M. H. Bertram), *Worship in the Name of Jesus* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1968), 85.

We must firmly hold to the conviction that God gives no one his Spirit or grace except through or with the external Word.... Thus we shall be protected from the enthusiasts—that is, from the spiritualists who boast that they possess the Spirit without and before the Word.... Whatever is attributed to the Spirit apart from such Word and sacrament is of the devil.<sup>4</sup>

Think of how Word-permeated our Lutheran worship is. Besides the parts that jump out immediately to mind—the lessons and the sermon—the Word is present and powerful in other places in our worship. It's there, for example, as the pastor as Christ's spokesman speaks the absolution, "I forgive you all your sins," and as he pronounces the blessing, which, as Luther reminds us,

is more than an empty sound of words or some verbal wish in which one person tells and wishes another person good things, as when I say, "May God grant you pious and obedient children."...In Holy Scripture... [benedictions] are more than mere wishes. They state facts and are effective. They continually bestow and bring what the words say.<sup>5</sup>

Then there are the hymns, the psalms, the creed, the songs of the liturgy. In them, as Theodore Harnack put it,

the congregation not only brings petition, praise, and thanks before God, but it also preaches to itself, it proclaims and testifies, it reproves, admonishes, and comforts itself mutually.<sup>6</sup>

What a **treasure** we have in our Lutheran worship, what spiritual power is present every Sunday in the Word proclaimed by pastor to people and by people to people!

By the way, is it just my imagination or is it becoming more commonplace in our circles for the pastor to preach four sermons every Sunday, one normal-length and three mini-length? I'm referring to the possibly growing practice of prefacing the lessons for the day with not just a brief sentence or two but a sometimes rather elaborate exposition and even an extended application. Can we not permit the bare Word to speak in the lessons? Brunner puts it this way: "The congregation is entitled to come face to face with the prophetic and apostolic Word of Scripture also directly and without an accompanying exposition" (128). The Word is powerful. It needs only to be heard.

But it's not just the **spoken** Word that's powerful. Our Lutheran Confessions remind us: The Word and the rite [sacrament] have the same effect, as Augustine said so well when he called the sacrament "the visible Word," for the rite is received by the eyes and is a sort of picture of the Word, signifying the same thing as the Word. Therefore, both have the same effect.<sup>7</sup>

The Reformed reformation under the leadership of such as Ulrich Zwingli paid scant attention to the sacraments. In Zurich the Lord's Supper was celebrated on only two Sundays of the year. Infant dedication was substituted for baptism.

The architecture of the later Puritan meeting houses reflected this neglect of the Sacraments. The focal point was the large pulpit strategically placed in the middle of one of the long sides of a rectangular building. The congregation was arranged around on three sides of the pulpit, often with balconies on all three sides to bring people as close as possible to the pulpit. There was no altar. A hinged shelf table below the pulpit was let down on those infrequent occasions when the Lord's Supper was celebrated.<sup>8</sup>

That reminds me of the architect we engaged to design our sanctuary when I was pastor in San Jose, California. He belonged to an Evangelical church in the area. His first proposed sketch of the chancel area had a huge—and I mean huge—pulpit. We could have had not only dialogue but triologue sermons with all three preachers being able to stand comfortably in the same pulpit. Everything else was dwarfed by comparison. Needless to say, he needed a crash course "in Lutheran Word and Sacrament theology before he went back to the drawing board.

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<sup>4</sup> Smalcald Articles, Part III, Article VIII, 3 and 10.

<sup>5</sup> LW 5,140

<sup>6</sup> Quoted by Brunner, 138

<sup>7</sup> Apology, MII, 5,

<sup>8</sup> James White, *Protestant Worship: Traditions in Transition* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 37.

What a blessing we have in the gospel in Word and Sacraments—not the pulpit only, but the pulpit, the altar, and the font. The Sacraments are a very special blessing; for, unlike the Word, which contains both law and gospel, they are 100% gospel, conveying forgiveness and creating and fortifying saving faith.

I wonder if we as a church body appreciate the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper as we should, even though we've come a distance from the Pietistic idea that we shouldn't receive the Sacrament more than four times a year. In the pastoral theology course I teach at the Seminary, each year when we come to the chapter on worship I ask, "What is the high point of the service?" I've taught at the Seminary for twelve years and each of those twelve years I've asked that question of both sections of the Middler Class—24 times in all. Without exception, the answer has been, "The high point of the service is the sermon." When I ask, "Why"?, the answer usually has something to do with the amount of time the pastor has to spend in preparing the sermon. But should one put the sermon above the rest of the lessons for the day? Should one elevate the sermon above the Sacrament? Are they not both high points—Word and Sacrament? By that I'm not implying that one must celebrate the Sacrament every Sunday. But when the Sacrament is observed, is it not on an equal plane with the reading and preaching of the Word?

Lutheran, biblical theology is Means of Grace-centered theology. Worship that is Lutheran, therefore, will center on the Means of Grace.

### **Three: Worship That Is Lutheran Will Reflect Our Ties with the One, Holy, Catholic [Universal], Apostolic Church.**

In *Protestant Worship: Traditions in Transition*, James White speaks of Luther as "a strange combination of both **faithful continuity** and **radical discontinuity** with the past." This is not so strange at all when one realizes what Luther sought to accomplish in the Reformation. Luther's desire, we all know, was not to begin a new church, a new sect somewhere out on the fringes of Christendom. Luther never saw himself as a separatist. His desire was to bring reform into the church, Lutherans, writes Carl Schalk, "see themselves in continuity with the church of the preceding centuries... Their reform was essentially an affirmation of the tradition, an affirmation which rejected only that which was contrary to their understanding of the gospel."<sup>9</sup> Luther himself said, "We take the middle course.... We are neither papists nor Karlstadtian, but [we are] free and Christian."<sup>10</sup> Unlike the followers of the Pope, Luther did not hold without question to everything the church of his day stood for. But unlike Karlstadt and the other radical reformers, Luther wasn't ready to throw out everything connect with the past. It wasn't easy to keep to that middle road. But Luther was determined to do just that to preserve the one, holy, catholic, apostolic nature of the church that in time came to bear his name.

Nowhere does the one, holy, catholic, apostolic nature of the Lutheran church shine forth more clearly than in its worship. In his two major orders of worship, the *Formula Missae* (the Latin service) and the *Deutsche Messe* (the German service), Luther, intent on avoiding a sectarian spirit, sought to retain as much as possible the historic practices of the church. We will want to do no less today. Brunner writes:

[On the one hand] elements of form cannot become authoritative for us simply by virtue of an ancient tradition. [On the other hand] the tradition of the fathers which has passed the test may reasonably expect our respectful treatment.... [Only the Enthusiasts (who set themselves apart from the church universal)] disregard and ignore tradition. They have no fathers or brothers, but are given to the delusion that the people of God on earth had their inception with them (230).

We do have fathers and brothers, as the book of Hebrews reminds us in its "Heroes of Faith" chapter, those who have gone before us, who have traveled the path on which we are now traveling. We have teachers of the past, whose faith and life instructs us, as again Hebrews teaches us. It would be the height of arrogance simply to throw out the past. Respect for tradition, the collective experience of the church at worship in all its years, demonstrates the continuity of Lutheranism with all of Christendom.

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<sup>9</sup> Carl Schalk, "The Pastor and the Church Musician," Church Music Pamphlet Series, Carl Schalk, ed. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1984),

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<sup>10</sup> LW 40,130

We should also note that worship which is Lutheran will not only gratefully use what is good from the **past** in all of Christendom. It will likewise utilize what is good from the present, thus reflecting our ties with the one, holy, catholic, apostolic church today also. The recognition that also among the heterodox (i.e., those who possess some, but not all, of God's truth) there are believers underlies the eclectic nature of our new hymnal. Its three-year cycle of readings was developed largely by the Roman Catholic Church. Many (the vast majority, in fact) of the hymns come from sources other than WELS Lutherans, many from other than Lutherans, for that matter. The key, as it was at the time of Luther, is to pick what is good and in harmony with the Scriptures and to discard the rest.

Worship that is Lutheran will reflect our ties with the one, holy, catholic, apostolic church, both past and present. We are not a sect, but with our use of the historic liturgy of the church stand together with believers of all time in our worship of our God.

#### **Four: Worship That Is Lutheran Will Make No Rules Where God Himself Has Not Made Them.**

Some refer to Article VII of the Augsburg Confession, "It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that ceremonies, instituted by men, should be observed uniformly in all places," and maintain that the form of Lutheran worship is an adiaphoron. To a degree, of course, that is true. Nowhere do the Scriptures dictate to New Testament Christians how they must worship. New Testament Christians are not given the same kind of detailed instructions for worship that governed God's people under the Old Covenant. As the sainted seminary professor August Pieper has clearly brought out, "There are no ceremonial laws for New Testament Christians."

Yet that statement in Article VII of the Augsburg Confession is not understood aright if it is made to say that we are free to do whatever we want to do. That is brought out in the sentence immediately preceding the one I just quoted: "It is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word." Then follows the statement: "It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that ceremonies, instituted by men, should be observed uniformly in all places." In other words, there is a limit, a biblical and confessional limit, to our freedom: how we worship must be in line with, must reflect, a "pure understanding" of the gospel in Word and Sacrament.

The gospel sets us free, yes, but it also establishes certain parameters for our worship forms. Our freedom is no wider than the gospel is wide; but it is as wide as the gospel. Within these proper parameters we dare make no rules. Brunner reminds us:

Worship between that wide span between the absolutely forbidden and the absolutely commanded remains a matter of the believer's liberty. That is the reason why no division in Christendom dare arise over the questions of form of worship within this wide area (225).

We must be careful at a conference such as this, designed to encourage excellence in worship, that we do not give the impression that there is only one right way to worship God. That's legalism. It robs us of our freedom in the gospel. There's a variation on that theme, and that is to display the attitude of, as Richard Nixon's vice president, Spiro Agnew put it, an "*effete intellectual snob*," which in effect says: There may be other ways to worship God, but only those in the know (such as we) really know how to do it right.

Times and places and circumstances may well dictate the need for, or at least the value of, variety in our worship forms. The critical thing, of course, is that God's actions in Christ, communicated through the powerful Word and Sacrament, remain central to whatever we do.

We mentioned earlier Luther's two major services. The Latin service, the *Formula Missae*, was designed for use particularly in "monasteries and cathedrals." The German service, the *Deutsche Messe*, was intended for use especially in smaller towns and country parishes.<sup>11</sup> Do we have analogous situations today? I think so. We have country congregations. We have city congregations. We have congregations worshipping in

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<sup>11</sup> Carl Schalk, "Sketches of Lutheran Worship," Chapter 11, *A Handbook of Church Music*, edited by Carl Halter and Carl Schalk (St. Louis: Concordia, 1978). 60

stately cathedrals. We have congregations worshipping in storefronts or office parks. We have congregations that are 150 years old, composed largely of families that have been Lutherans for many generations. We have new missions that consist almost totally of those with no Lutheran (often no Christian) background. We have largely mono-cultural congregations. We have multi-cultural congregations. We have congregations that are almost exclusively white. We have congregations where many, at times the majority, of the members are black.

Does one size fit all? It is really gratifying to me to see the efforts the Hymnal Committee expended to produce a hymnal that is quite broad in scope, with four orders of worship that can be used on Sunday mornings (and with many opportunities for variety within these services) and hymns to fit almost everyone's taste. For the most part, it seems as though the worship needs of all our congregations should be taken care of with what we find between the covers of *Christian Worship*.

Yet, we must watch out that we do not make rules where God himself has not made them. If a congregation in its particular situation is convinced that it should establish worship forms other than those found in *Christian Worship*, we dare not consider that a breach of orthodoxy, as long as the worship remains within the Scripture-based parameters of our confessional statement: "It is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word."

For those who desire to make wholesale changes in worship forms, however, Luther's word of warning is very much in place. He speaks of

the fickle. . . spirits who rush in like unclean swine. . . and who delight only in novelty and tire of it as quickly, when it has worn off. Such people are a nuisance even in other affairs, but in spiritual matters they are absolutely unbearable.<sup>12</sup>

Luther was never one to pull his punches!

Let's not be quick to blame supposedly outdated worship forms for what's troubling us, a decline in church attendance, our failure to attract and hold newcomers, etc.. Some of you will remember that it wasn't so long ago, back in the 60s, that many were convinced churches were going to die unless they changed their worship forms. So, in many a church the guitar became the instrument of choice and "folksy-type" songs the preferred music. Where is the guitar mass today?

There is value in continuity from week to week and from year to year, in doing in our worship what Luther advocated about teaching the catechism. Teachers, he wrote, should "adopt one form, adhere to it, and use it repeatedly year after year."<sup>13</sup> What better way to impress precious truths upon the heart? This applies to our worship also. A constant flitting about can confuse rather than edify. So, let's not be quick to change.

There is also value in continuity from congregation to congregation. I mentioned before that I've made several trips to India on behalf of the Synod's Board for World Missions. One pastor with whom we have been working quite closely for the past several years, Kaki Devabhushanam, is a third-generation Lutheran. Pastor Devabhushanam conducts his services in Telegu, which I do not understand. Yet, I am able to follow his services fairly well since he uses the historic Lutheran liturgy. The only difference, besides the fact that it is in Telegu, is that he chants more portions of the service than we normally do. Liturgy, of course, does not unite. Because our liturgy happens to be similar to that of the Episcopalians, for example, it does not mean that we therefore are united in doctrine. But a common liturgy, drawn from a common ancient tradition, does serve to accentuate doctrinal unity between churches when that unity does exist.

So, again, let's not be quick to change, But at the same time let's be quick to acknowledge that worship that is Lutheran will make no rules where God has not made them.

### **Five: Worship That Is Lutheran Sees Music and the Other Arts As Blessings of God for His People to Enjoy.**

One of the many differences between the Reformation in Geneva and Zurich under Calvin and Zwingli and the Reformation in Wittenberg under Luther was in their attitude toward music and the other arts. In Zurich,

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<sup>12</sup> LW 53,19.

<sup>13</sup> Preface to the Small Catechism, 7-8.

for example, there was no music in services for 75 years, from 1523-98. In 1527, the Zurich council gave orders for the destruction of all pipe organs. No new pipe organs were built there until 1874.<sup>14</sup> All images were removed from the churches. What Karlstadt hoped would happen in Wittenberg did come to pass in Geneva and Zurich.

“It was Luther alone,” writes Carl Schalk, “among the sixteenth-century reformers who calmly embraced music [and, we might add, all of the arts] as God’s good gift to men and enlisted it as an important part of the life of the worshipping community.”<sup>15</sup> Luther recognized that the God of Redemption is also the God of Creation, that, as Paul wrote to Timothy, “Everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the Word of God [that created it] and prayer [that recognizes it as God’s gift to be used for God’s glory].”

Music, says Luther, is a “noble, wholesome, and joyful creation.”<sup>16</sup> “I always loved music,” he said. “Whoever has skill in this art is of a good temperament, fitted for all things. We must teach music in schools; a schoolmaster ought to have skill in music, or I would not regard him, neither should we ordain young men as preachers unless they have been well exercised in music.”<sup>17</sup>

Speaking of the arts in general, Luther maintained:

I am not of the opinion that because of the gospel all arts should be rejected violently and vanish, as is desired by the heterodox, but I desire that all arts, particularly music, be employed in the service of him who has given and created them.<sup>18</sup>

Music and the arts aren’t inherently evil, by their very nature a “tool of the devil,” as John Calvin supposed they might be. But they do need to be used properly, as is brought out very well by Robin Leaver, in a little pamphlet, “The Theological Character of Music in Worship.”<sup>19</sup> As I share with you a few excerpts from the pamphlet, keep in mind that what he says here about music in **specific** applies also to all the arts in **general**:

Church music is essentially functional [Le., not an independent end unto itself] and is therefore intimately connected to the theological framework within which the Christian worship, witness, and work operate (5).

The ideas of “pure” music, music for its own sake ... whether classical or pop ... are modern concepts which are totally alien in biblical thinking (7).

Cut off from its theological roots, music in worship takes on the nature of music to entertain the congregation, mood music to create the atmosphere,... an “aural lubricant” to smooth the transition from one part to the next. But the opposite is also true. Theology without the music of faith becomes dry, soulless, and brittle (9).

Carl Schalk puts it this way in the pamphlet, “The Pastor and the Church Musician” “Good church music ... is a **uniting force** when it helps the Christian community focus attention where it belongs: on Christ and what he has done for us. Music is a **dividing force** when it becomes entertainment or when its focus is on lesser or peripheral concerns” (7)—as, for example, music used in the revival meeting to manipulate emotions and thus prepare people to come forward at the altar call.

Walter Buszin reminds us in *The Musical Heritage of the Church*:

If Christian theology is regarded by Christian theologians as a *theologica crucis* [a theology of the cross], then church musicians ought to join the ranks of Christian theologians and regard church music not only as *ars musica* [musical art] but more specifically as *musica crucis* [music of the cross]. . . . The life and work of Jesus Christ is the great theme not only for the theologians, the preachers and teachers, but also for the

<sup>14</sup> James White, *Protestant Worship: Traditions in Transition*, 62.

<sup>15</sup> Carl Schalk, “The Pastor and the Church Musician,” 5-6.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in *A Handbook of Church Music*, 15.

<sup>17</sup> Erlangen LXII, 308f (quoted by Walter Buszin in *Luther on Music*, Pamphlet No. 3 of the Lutheran Society for Worship, Music, and the Arts [St. Paul: North Central Publishing Co., 1958]), 8.

<sup>18</sup> St. Louis Ed. XXII, 1536-38 (quoted by Walter Buszin in *Luther on Music*, 10).

<sup>19</sup> Robin Leaver, “The Theological Character of Music in Worship,” Church Music Pamphlet Series (St. Louis: Concordia, 1989).

musicians of the church” [and, we might add, all practitioners of the arts—painters, poets, sculptors, architects, etc.].<sup>20</sup>

The medium, whatever the form, is not the message. The message is the message. The medium displays the message, supports the message. What does this mean in practice? It means that when we choose our music—choir, organ, instrumental—we will want to make sure it centers on God’s actions in Christ on our behalf. It means, since the message is essential, perhaps printing out the words of the choir selection (copyright holders will give permission in most cases to do so) so that the music doesn’t get in the way of rather than support the message. It means that the solo service music of organ or other instruments be clearly attached to the message, that it, therefore, for the most part be music based on hymns and chorales, so that the congregation might hear the Word as they hear the music. It means that church art and architecture will focus on some aspect of God’s saving actions and that what it symbolizes will be transparent enough that not just the elite few, but the many, can understand it.

Worship that is Lutheran sees music and the other arts as blessings of God for his people to use and enjoy, but always in a servant role, serving the gospel.

### **Six: Worship That Is Lutheran Will Give Nothing But the Best Back to Our Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier.**

This is Christian stewardship, isn’t it? Whatever abilities, whatever resources we possess are the gift of a gracious Lord. It doesn’t really matter if we happen to be the one talent, the two talent, or the five talent Christian or Christian congregation. What does matter is that we don’t bury our gifts and resources but use them, and use them well, for the glory of our Triune God.

I have worshipped quite a number of times with brothers and sisters in India. I’ve worshipped in the open air. I’ve worshipped under sunny skies. I’ve worshipped under starry skies. I’ve worshipped in thatch-roofed, dirt floor huts. I’ve worshipped in very modest chapels. I’ve watched as Pastor Devabhushanam reverently sets up for the communion service, a cot from a nearby hut that serves as a bed by night doubling for a makeshift altar. I’ve watched one of Devabhushanam’s sons assist in robing his father in alb and stole. I’ve watched the people of the village come together for worship, quietly seating themselves on the ground upon woven coconut palm mats—the women dressed in their best, colorful saris, the children clean and sparkling. I’ve listened to the unaccompanied singing of the liturgy and hymns, often a little off-key, at least to my Western ear, but clearly an offering of praise to Jesus Christ. I’ve watched these very poor people come forward and drop their few rupees into the offering box. I’ve knelt in the dirt and received Jesus’ body and blood together with my Indian brothers and sisters. And I have been deeply moved and edified from beginning to end. These Christians were giving nothing but their best to God.

And I was no less edified and moved by our worship this morning—in a much different setting, of course. Clearly, here too we saw an offering of the first fruits, the very best of the talents, skills, and abilities of God’s people, an offering of praise and thanksgiving for what God has done.

Giving God nothing but the best in our worship—this is something we will want to pursue continually, isn’t it? James White writes: “The reason some people are bored with the liturgy is... because what takes place in the liturgy is perceived to be insignificant.<sup>21</sup> This could be their problem, of course, an indicator of a weak or misdirected faith that is looking for what God doesn’t promise. But we also need to ask: “What can I (pastor/musician) do to underscore the significance of what is happening on Sunday morning?”

It is so easy to slip into a rut. A preacher, for example, sometimes becomes so predictable that when he begins a sentence the congregation can complete it for him; for they know, not just what he’s going to say, but the very words he’s going to use. He expresses the same old truths in the same old way instead of dressing up these marvelous truths in a new set of clothes from time to time.

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<sup>20</sup> W.E. Buszin, “Theology and Music as Bearers and Interpreters of the *Verbum Dei*,” *The Musical Heritage of the Church*, vol. 6, pp. 22-23 (quoted by Leaver [op. cit], 11-12).

<sup>21</sup> James White, *Introduction to Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980), 66.



It is easy, likewise, for organists and choir directors to settle for what is predictable, comfortable, and familiar rather than to work at energizing, enhancing, and enlivening worship with wholesome variety. Richard Hillert writes in *A Handbook of Church Music*:

A preoccupation with any one style, of traditional hymns or organ or choral or concerted music, whether baroque or English anthem, or a cappella motets, can inflict a passiveness into worship, relegating the art to the level of the wall-to-wall music that nobody listens to (251-52).

Let's dare to do the best for our God who did do his best for us. As we focus on God's actions in Christ on our behalf, communicated through the powerful Means of Grace, and as we give to God nothing but our best in worship, his name will be hallowed and his kingdom will continue to come in rich measure to all who gather to worship in the name of Jesus. To this may our dear Lord Jesus, in whose name we are gathered, help us!