



Compelling Worship

Plenary Address for the
2014 WELS National Conference
on Worship, Music & the Arts

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The Vital Question

Compelling worship. What comes to mind when you think “compelling worship?”

We probably need not spend much time defining “worship.” As Confessional Lutherans, we understand that we tend to use the word “worship” as a synecdoche, a figure of speech used to refer to part of something to represent the whole.¹ Indeed, *part* of the worship service is man “ascribing worth to”² God. However, the most important component of the worship service is when God approaches us through Word and Sacraments and shows us exactly how much we are worth to him.³

Thus, when we use the word “worship” in this discussion, we are simply talking about *everything* that happens when two or three or a thousand come together in Jesus’ name. We all understand and would agree on that. Defining “worship” is relatively easy.

Now define “compelling.” Mr. Webster?

com·pel·ling (kəm-pel’-ing), *adjective*.

1. very interesting : able to capture and hold your attention
2. capable of causing someone to believe or agree
3. strong and forceful : causing you to feel that you must do something

That’s not bad. “Compelling worship,” therefore, can be defined as worship that captures and holds someone’s attention, empowers that person to believe a truth (i.e. *the Truth*), and moves that person to act upon that truth. Isn’t that *exactly* what we want to happen in worship? That definition works well. I think, without consulting Webster, we would have come up with something similar.

However, our task this morning is so much greater than defining “compelling worship.” We want to wrestle with *the* question that is really at the core of this and every triennial worship conference.

To what degree is the responsibility to make worship compelling on us?

This is a vital question. The answer, as you might suspect, is a *very* narrow path between two massive ditches.⁴ Either you walk carefully down “the Lutheran middle” or you slide deep into one of two twisted views of “compelling worship.”

The ditch on the left

On the left side of this path are those who say that the responsibility of making worship compelling falls almost entirely upon us.

For example, C. Peter Wagner writes that to make worship compelling, we must “plug in” to three power sources: “the sound system, the Holy Spirit, and contemporary culture.”⁵ In other words, you

¹ For example, you call the thing on your face “glasses,” but they are made of more than glass. You ask someone for a “helping

² “Worship” comes from an Old English word meaning “worth-ship.” We ascribe worth to God in our praise, our prayers, our offerings, etc.

³ *Christian Worship: Supplement* refers to the order as “Divine Service,” where “divine” is being used objectively and subjectively: God serves us with the Means of Grace and, in turn, we serve him by lifting up prayers, praise, and offerings. This is a wonderful sentiment. That said, good luck getting your people to stop talking about “the worship service.” That phrase is thoroughly engrained in the American vernacular for what happens on Sunday morning! It is not a huge deal. It is a synecdoche.

⁴ Thank you to Prof. Daniel Deutschlander for creating this “two ditch illustration” as a way of explaining the balance for which Lutheran theology strives. It is an illustration that has become part of “WELS-speak,” and it serves us well time and time again.

need to understand what modern people find interesting and tailor worship to their desires and perceived needs.

This leads to the first problem one encounters in this left-side ditch – it causes fragmentation. “When Peter Wagner says we should ‘plug in’ to contemporary culture, which contemporary culture does he mean – white, black, Latin, urban, suburban, boomer, or Gen X contemporary culture?”⁶ If you tell me I need to tailor worship to fit what modern people find interesting, what do I do when I inevitably find that some like Bach, some like Brahms, some like the Beatles, some like Bono, and some (with zero taste or culture) like Bieber? It is a *practical* problem.

In addition, in this left-side ditch there is an even bigger problem – a *spiritual* one.

In the book *Engage: A Guide to Creating Life-Transforming Worship Services*, Nelson Searcy lays out “seven specific elements [that] have the potential to make your service powerful.” They are, “in order of potential impact:”

1. music,
2. message,
3. testimony,
4. recognizable media, i.e. snippets from modern movies, TV programs, or music,
5. original media, i.e. video or audio clips produced by the congregation,
6. drama, and
7. everything else.⁷

No. I did not accidentally invert numbers 1 and 2. The book suggests that something *other* than “the message” (the Word of God) has the greatest impact on people during worship.⁸

Therefore, in this left-side ditch, you can end up with a service that is compelling in the sense that it captures one’s attention and moves one emotionally. However, because the Word of God is considered of secondary importance, the service provides very little spiritual benefit. You have something compelling, *but it is not really worship*.

The ditch on the right

However, I believe that in the WELS, because of our extremely high respect for Scripture, the ditch we are more likely to slide into is the one on the right. On this side are those who say that man has no role to play in making worship compelling. They say that so long as the Law and Gospel are proclaimed, then worship will be compelling *de facto*.

Again, there are two problems with that view – again, one practical and one spiritual. The practical problem is that such a view does not logically match up with our practice.

⁵ C. Peter Wagner, “Another New Wineskin – the New Apostolic Reformation” (*Next*: Jan-Mar 1999) 3.

⁶ Timothy Keller, “Evangelistic Worship” (gospelinlife.com: 2009) 1.

⁷ Nelson Searcy and Jason Hatley, *Engage* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011) 114-115.

⁸ Someone is probably thinking, “Perhaps Searcy was just saying that God’s Word can have great impact when it is sung.” I appreciate your putting the best construction on everything, but that is *not* what was meant. The book gives the example of using the Pointer Sisters’ “We Are Family” to drive home a message about fellowship and community or Aretha Franklin’s “Respect” after a sermon about husbands cherishing their wives.

Let us carry that view – that the only thing that matters in worship is that God’s Word is proclaimed truthfully – to its logical conclusion. If our preaching, presiding, and playing really do not matter, then our pastors should stop preaching sermons. Just read Scripture and trust that the Word works. Why risk that you do not convey God’s Word accurately? If man can do nothing to make worship compelling, then you should not sing hymns. Just chant psalms on a single tone. (Shame on Martin Luther for writing *A Mighty Fortress!* Did he think the words of Psalm 46 were not compelling enough? Clearly Luther was reading too much Searcy!) If man can do nothing to make worship compelling, then our current practice is illogical.

In addition, there is also a spiritual problem lurking in this right-side ditch. Deep within this right-side ditch runs a stream of suspicion. If someone suggests using a new service setting from *Christian Worship Supplement* or having the pastor utilize projection during the sermon or including a children’s message as part of the service, the accusations can begin. “*Why? Don’t you trust God’s Word to work?*” Such suspicion is a spiritual problem. Not only is it needlessly divisive, it prevents “treasures new”⁹ from ever being uncovered.

Therefore, the danger in this right-side ditch is that you worship, but *that worship is not compelling*. In such a service, the Word is not deeply planted in either mind or heart. The Word just sits on the surface, like seed resting on top of the soil, easily scorched by the sun or snatched by the birds.

So, to what degree is the responsibility to make worship compelling on us?

This is a vital question. We know that giving God our best in worship is a stewardship issue. However, is giving God our best also a soteriological issue, something that pertains to the salvation of souls? That question needs a careful answer, one that avoids both ditches.

Ultimately, when one slips into either ditch it boils down to the same problem – an incomplete understanding of how God’s Word works. God has designed his Word to work in *two* ways: psychologically and supernaturally. Those who have slipped into the left-side ditch overemphasize the psychological working of the Word. Those who have slipped into the right-side ditch overemphasize the supernatural working of the Word.¹⁰ In order to walk the narrow Lutheran middle between these two ditches, we need to grasp the two ways that God’s Word works.

⁹ Matthew 13:52.

¹⁰ People fall into both of these ditches for reasons both pious and impious. If you feel that you have slid into one or the other, it is healthy to examine your heart. For example, if you find that you are constantly fretting about how to make worship more interesting and “relevant,” you have slipped into the left-side ditch. It might be for a pious reason, e.g. you have a burning passion for the lost. It also might be for an impious reason: you desire to have “success” in the eyes of the world; you desire to be perceived as “trendy.” Likewise, if you find yourself wincing whenever someone suggests attempting something new in worship, you have slipped into the right-side ditch. It may well be for a pious reason: you have a deep respect for efficacy of God’s Word and don’t ever want to undermine that. It might also be that you are just overly nostalgic, one of those who has trouble focusing during worship if you do not get to sit in “your” pew. Therefore, if you feel you have slipped into one of the ditches, examine your heart. Is the reason for the slip pious or impious? Either way, the remedy is the same. If your reasons are pious, you should meditate upon Scripture with the ultimate goal being greater enlightenment. If your reasons are impious, you should meditate upon the Scripture with the ultimate goal being repentance and its fruit.

THE WORKING OF GOD'S WORD

*Sanctify them by your truth. Your Word is truth.*¹¹

The Word works psychologically

Scripture is truth, a series of facts conveyed to us through language. Therefore, “In so far as God’s Word is indeed word, or speech, its power works psychologically.”¹²

What do we mean when we say the Word works psychologically? Simply that the way we perceive Scripture is really no different than the way we perceive what we read in the newspaper or hear on the radio or skim on the Internet. We process the information through our faculties. That information affects our intellect, our will, and our emotions.¹³

Scripture describes itself as working psychologically. St. Paul writes, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.”¹⁴ Paul strings together four words,¹⁵ all of which “[proceed] in a manner appropriate to the intellectual nature of man.”

Jesus himself taught that because the Word works psychologically, it does not do you any good unless you understand it. “When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart.”¹⁶

If you understand that the Word first works psychologically, you realize that the first obstacle¹⁷ to compelling worship is that that one does not understand what the Word says. The Word could be proclaimed in a variety of ways in worship, but if the meaning is not perceived it does no spiritual good.

The Word works supernaturally

It is not enough to simply understand what God’s Word says. In fact, it is when the Word of God is correctly perceived that you have the second and *biggest* obstacle to compelling worship. What the

¹¹ John 17:17.

¹² Adolf Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics IV* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2009) 22. The word translated “psychologically” is *moralisch*. *Moralisch* is actually broader in meaning than “psychologically.” When *moralisch* is used theologically, it refers to something that appeals to the natural knowledge of God, touching on our emotions, will, and intellect. But “psychologically” is probably as close as an English translation can get.

¹³ Seventeenth-century Lutheran theologian Johann Hulsemann writes, “*The Word of God has this in common with ordinary human words*: just as a man’s word is an expression or indication of what is in his mind, by means of which he indicates to another man the thoughts of his mind, either to seek those things which he desires or to share those things which he has, so the Word of God is an indication of God’s will, by which God makes known to us what he wants us to believe and do.” *De auxiliis gratie III, IV*, cited in *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics IV*, page 14 (emphasis mine).

¹⁴ 2 Timothy 3:15, 16.

¹⁵ πρὸς διδασκαλίαν, πρὸς ἐλεγμόν, πρὸς ἐπανάρθωσιν, πρὸς παιδείαν.

¹⁶ Matthew 13:19.

¹⁷ I am not using “first” in a strictly chronological sense. See footnote 40 for more explanation.

Word says is offensive both to our human reason and our sinful nature. Therefore, while the Word of God works psychologically, it must work *more* than psychologically.¹⁸

For example, Scripture tells me that a man named Jesus was born in Bethlehem, grew up to become a great spiritual leader, upset many with his teaching, and was eventually betrayed and killed. I grasp that psychologically. If that were all Scripture said about Jesus, then all I would need to assent to Scripture is human reason. I would compare Scripture to historical evidence and intellectually conclude, “This is most certainly true.” However, that is *not* all that Scripture tells me about Jesus.

Scripture tells me that Jesus is God and man in one person, with the two natures so inseparable that what he does as one he does as the other. I still grasp that psychologically. However, precisely because I understand what is being said, my reason is reeling. Scripture says: 1) Jesus is God, 2) God cannot die, and 3) Jesus died. My reason says, “This most certainly *can’t* be true!”

Scripture does not just affront my reason; it brutalizes me emotionally. For it tells me that the reason Jesus was crucified is because I am totally corrupt. It tells me that before I had a brain to think a sinful thought, I was under God’s wrath simply because of who my parents were. Again, psychologically, I grasp what is being said. Intellectually, I understand: 1) because of me, another man suffered and died, and 2) there is something wrong with my parents. I *understand* what is being said. I also *hate* what is being said.

Yes, the Word works psychologically, touching our intellect, will, and emotions. On all three fronts it rubs us raw! Therefore, for us to grasp the Word *more* than intellectually – for us to assent to it and treasure it – it needs to work more than psychologically. There *must* be a supernatural working of the Word too. And there is.

St. Paul explains, “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, *because they are spiritually discerned.*”¹⁹

Prof. Adolf Hoenecke summarizes:

If Scripture as God’s Word... works psychologically so that man understands its arguments, appreciates them, even inclines to them with spirit and will, and submits himself to them, this only happens because the Spirit has a more than merely psychological power, *a supernatural power*, nothing other than the power of God himself. . . .²⁰

The Spirit and Word are bound together inseparably and always work together in one inseparable act... The workings of the Spirit are always the workings of Scripture too.²¹
(Emphasis mine)

¹⁸ “The psychological effective power of speech presupposes that the hearer can fully understand its basis and proofs, pass judgment on their validity, appropriate the presentation, and go along with its suggestions. If this presupposition does not apply, then we cannot speak of a merely psychological working.” – Hoenecke 16.

¹⁹ 1 Corinthians 2:14.

²⁰ Hoenecke 16,17.

²¹ Hoenecke 21.

Or, in St. Paul's own words, "Our gospel came to you not simply with words (only psychologically), but also with power, with the Holy Spirit..." (supernaturally).²²

A logical, eloquent argument can persuade me to do many things. However, eloquence and wisdom cannot compel me to believe and cherish truths that run contrary to my reason and my sinful nature. They cannot create faith. That takes something more – the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit, which fills the Word through and through.

GOD HONORS THE CHURCH BY GIVING HER A ROLE IN HIS SAVING WORK

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"²³

"God doesn't need any of us."

You have undoubtedly heard that said, and maybe said it yourself. Ultimately, that is true. It seems to be a bit "right-ditch-ish," however. How does that attitude jibe with what St. Paul writes in Romans 10? Humility is a virtue. Ignoring God-given responsibility is a vice.

The reality is that God has chosen to "need" us, not in an absolute sense, but in the sense that he gives us a very important role in his saving work. It is not because he absolutely needs us. He just loves us so much that he wants more than our salvation. He wants our lives here on earth to have purpose and meaning and beauty. So God honors his Church by giving her a role in his saving work.

The Church fulfills her role by joyfully participating in the psychological working of the Word

It is in the realm of the psychological working of the Word that man has a role to play. St. Peter tells us, "[Paul's] letters contain some things that are hard to understand."²⁴ Notice that Peter does *not* say "some things that are hard to believe." That is certainly true too. However, Peter is referring to something simpler than believing the spiritual truths that Paul shares – correctly grasping the meaning of what Paul writes. That *in itself* can be difficult. So God's plan to reveal his salvation did not just include Word and Sacraments. His plan included the Church. He lets us explain and apply Scripture to others. God "needs" us to do this!

²² 1 Thessalonians 1:5.

²³ Romans 10:14,15.

²⁴ 2 Peter 3:16 – δυσνόητά: "hard to understand."

How many times in Scripture do you find an account of someone reading God’s Word and coming to faith purely from their self-study? Can that happen? Sure. Is that normally how things work? No.

More typical is where Philip comes upon the Ethiopian eunuch. The eunuch is studying the Word of God, specifically, “The Suffering Servant” portion of Isaiah – which is as clear and beautiful of Gospel as you find in the Old Testament. However, it is doing the eunuch little good. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked. ‘How can I,’ [the eunuch] said, ‘unless someone explains it to me?’ So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.”²⁵ Philip joins him and, beginning with that passage, “told him the good news about Jesus.”²⁶ Philip helped the eunuch understand, participating in the psychological working of the Word. As Philip made the Gospel clear to the eunuch, the Holy Spirit unleashed his supernatural power, allowing the eunuch to believe something that defies reason, that the one who “was led like a sheep to the slaughter”²⁷ was actually the Almighty Son of God, given into death for the sins of the world. Clearly the eunuch found the message compelling, for as soon as they come upon water, he insists on being baptized.

The role man plays in the psychological working of the Word is big enough that that Scripture places qualifications on public ministry that relate to a man’s ability to teach and explain and apply the Word. Paul tells Timothy, “The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men *who will also be qualified to teach* others.”²⁸ If the Word worked *entirely* supernaturally, such qualifications would be unnecessary. However, it is precisely because the Word works psychologically that the ministry of the Church is so vital, and that one be especially qualified if he is going to engage in public ministry.

Martin Luther understood the importance of the Church's participation in the psychological working of the Word. On more than one occasion, Luther commented that listening to good preaching was more beneficial than simply reading the Bible: “Reading it is not as profitable as hearing it, for the live voice teaches, exhorts, defends, and resists the spirit of error. Satan does not care a hoot for the written Word of God, but he flees at the speaking of the Word.”²⁹

God not only desires that the Church participate in the psychological working of the spoken Word, but of the sung Word also. “Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.”³⁰ God does not want his children to grasp the Gospel in the hand of faith loosely; for if held too easily, a demonic wind could come and blow it away. Our loving Father wants us to hold onto his life-giving, life-sustaining Word *tightly*. Therefore, the Creator enabled part of created order³¹ – the

²⁵ Acts 8:30,31.

²⁶ Acts 8:35.

²⁷ Acts 8:32.

²⁸ 2 Timothy 2:2 – οἵτινες ἱκανοὶ ἔσονται καὶ ἐτέρους διδάξαι. *See also* 2 Timothy 2:15 (“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth (ὀρθοτομοῦντα τὸν λόγον τῆς ἀληθείας)); and 2 Timothy 2:24 (“And the Lord’s servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach (διδασκτικόν), not resentful.”). You will also find the same concept in the Old Testament. Consider Malachi 2:7 which says, “The lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge.”

²⁹ LW, 18, p. 401. You will find this concept throughout the Lutheran Confessions as well. “This call of God, which is made *through the preaching of the Word*, we should not regard as jugglery, but know that thereby God reveals his will, that in those whom he thus calls he will work through the Word, that they may be enlightened, converted, and saved.” *Formula of Concord: Thorough Declaration* found in *Concordia Triglotta* 1079.

³⁰ Colossians 3:16.

science of sounds and tones – the thing that we call “music” – to be able to participate in the psychological working of the Word in a way that makes it compelling.³²

We heard what Luther had to say about preaching. He held music in almost as high of regard:

We know that music is hateful and intolerable to devils. I firmly believe, nor am ashamed to assert, that next to theology no art is equal to music; for it is the only one, except theology, which is able to give a quiet and happy mind. This is manifestly proved by the fact that the devil, the author of depressing care and distressing disturbances, almost flees from the sound of music as he does from the word of theology.³³

Those of you who attended Lutheran elementary schools can undoubtedly remember what seemed like a huge chore at the time, Bible memory work. Which was easier to memorize – Bible passages or hymn verses? Hymn verses, of course. The fact that there was rhyme and rhythm – that there was a tune wrapped around those words – it had a *psychological* benefit. Years later, I bet you remember more of the hymn verses than you do Bible passages.³⁴ That is proof that music has helped the message of Christ dwell within you richly.

The Word works psychologically, and the normal way for that to happen is when the Church proclaims God’s Word with joy in a wide variety of ways.

- ☞ The pastor spends many hours wrestling with the text. He carefully crafts a sermon that enables his people to see things they would not have otherwise seen, to understand things they would not have otherwise understood.
- ☞ The musician exhausts his fingers practicing. He does not want his music to distract from the Word in the slightest way. Rather, he wants his music to drive the Word deeply into the mind and heart of those who sing along.
- ☞ The artist takes Scriptural truths and conveys them through beautiful images. Those truths, which before touched one mainly on an intellectual level, now also touch someone on an emotional level.

In cooperating with the psychological working of the Word of God man *does* help to make worship compelling. As the Church does that, the Word then also works supernaturally. Things happen that can *only* be attributed to the power of God: enlightenment, conversion, and salvation.

³² Ultimately *all* of the created order proclaims and illustrates spiritual truth. Psalm 19:1 tells us, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.” Consider St. Augustine, who in his *City of God* writes that God designed water to have cleansing ability precisely because God knew he was going to institute baptism. Think of how often you wash things on a daily basis: hands, dishes, baby’s face, hair, car, baby’s face again, etc. God’s intent that you would have constant reminders of the greater cleaning you received at the font. Thus, it is not that “washing” is a real thing and baptism is a symbolic thing. Baptism is the “real” thing, and all other types of washing are symbolic, a little in-the-home “rite” that symbolizes something greater, just as Scripture says. “This water symbolizes baptism that now saves you.” God’s created order *was designed* to help us learn and remember spiritual truth.

³³ What Luther Says 983.

³⁴ That is fine. Ultimately, what benefits our faith is *the message* of Scripture, not the exact words. In the theological discipline called dogmatics, we distinguish between the *forma* and the *materia* of Scripture. The *materia* is the words, sentences, paragraphs, etc. The *forma* is the message. The *forma* is ultimately what saves you. One can be saved without having heard John 3:16 word-for-word. But no one will ever be saved without hearing the message of the Gospel. Therefore, if a sermon or a hymn proclaims the Gospel, it can be called “God’s Word.”

The Church fulfills her role properly trusting the supernatural working of the Word

When it comes to what happens in worship, walking the narrow Lutheran way requires us not only to participate in the psychological working of the Word, but also to properly trust the supernatural working of the Word. You trust the Word to work *only* according to its proper use.

Consider what God tells us through Isaiah. “[My word] will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”³⁵

“My word ... *will* accomplish ...” – not “can,” certainly not “might” – it “*will*.” Every single time the Word of God is shared, it accomplishes God’s purpose.

“...what *I* desire...” – not what we desire – what *God* desires.

What this means is that God’s Word *only* has the supernatural power to do what God wants his Word to do. So, what is it that God wants his Word to do? “God wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people.”³⁶

The proper use of the Word is to impart knowledge of our salvation (the psychological working of the Word), to enable us to believe what God’s Word says about Christ and joyfully assent to it (the supernatural working of the Word). To trust in the supernatural power of God’s Word to do something *other* than that is not really trust at all. It is superstition.

For example, as the plague swept through Europe in the 14th century, it was not uncommon for priests to visit the sick, offer up prayers, and then lay a parchment containing some Scripture upon the chest of the ill. It was thought that would somehow bring blessing and health. That belief was *not* faith that God’s Word works supernaturally. It was a superstitious belief that God’s Word works magically. God’s Word certainly does *not* work that way.

Now, God *could* have his Word accomplish anything he wanted. After all, the Word is “the power of God”.³⁷ If God wanted, he could make it so that if you read the Word of God to someone ill, his or her cancer would disappear. God could have given his Word the supernatural power to make it stop raining or to enable you to lose weight. But God chose to limit the supernatural power of his Word so that it is only “the power of God *for salvation*” and not “the power of God for six-pack abs.” (I felt more ridiculous writing the word “only” than I did the words “six-pack abs” there.)

We are deep within the right-hand ditch when we trust the supernatural power of God’s Word to accomplish something other than its proper use – creating and sustaining faith.

How might that happen in worship?

A pastor might *not* labor that hard at his sermon for whatever reason (busy week, sinful laziness, etc.) and so the flow of his sermon is illogical. There is Law in it. There are Gospel nuggets. However, the thoughts are so jumbled that they are extremely difficult to follow. In addition, the entire thing contains cliché, general truths that could apply to any text. If that pastor says to himself, “Well, I preached the

³⁵ Isaiah 55:10,11 – There is a parallelism at the end of verse 11. עֲשֵׂה אֶת־אֲשֶׁר הִפְצֵתִי וְהַצְלִיחַ אֲשֶׁר שְׁלַחְתִּי – “It shall accomplish that which I desire and it shall succeed in that for which I sent it.” “It shall accomplish” and “It shall succeed” are parallel thoughts. So are “what I desire” and “that for which I sent it.” God sent his Word because he had a desire that needed to be satisfied.

³⁶ 1 Timothy 2:4-6.

³⁷ Romans 1:16.

Gospel. That's all that matters," he doesn't demonstrate humble faith. He demonstrates superstition. The proper use of the supernatural working of the Word is certainly *not* to make that which is illogical, logical or that which is cliché and dull, compelling.³⁸

The musician doesn't practice that hard. Notes are missed, or if they are all hit, it is because the hymn is played at a glacial pace. However, this is dismissed, because "the Word is still being sung." Yes. But is it being paid any attention? If the music makes it difficult to sing, causing me to lose focus on the text, then the music has turned that hymn into the equivalent of the parchment upon the plague victim's chest. There's contact, but it does no good.

When these things happen, when God's people share the Word in a way that is hard to comprehend – in a manner that is *less* than compelling – it doesn't make the Word less effective. You cannot make the Word less powerful anymore than you can make God less than almighty! But poor communication *does* make the Word less likely to be received. An example: take all the vitamins and nutrients you need to survive. I could offer those to you in a variety of ways. I could cook you three delicious, well-balanced meals every day.³⁹ Or I could give you three large, bitter pills. Both methods are equally effective! *Both* have the ability to maintain your health. But *one* method is probably going to be better received than the other.⁴⁰ Let us not turn our preaching or presiding or playing into "bitter pills."

When we preach a clunker of a sermon or bomb the playing of a hymn, there *is* comfort in Scripture. However, I do not think that the comfort should come from the fact that God's Word works supernaturally. The comfort comes from the doctrine of election. That doctrine tells me that ultimately, if someone goes to heaven, it is because of a gracious choice God made before the beginning of time, not because my preaching or playing was so compelling. The doctrine of election also comforts me when I realize my poor participation in the psychological working of the Word is due to sinful laziness. It comforts me with the reminder that *my* salvation does not depend on me being a compelling preacher either. I rejoice in the forgiveness that is older than the stars, and I strive harder tomorrow.

So... back to the question.

To what degree is the responsibility to make worship compelling on us?

The answer, the one that walks that narrow Lutheran middle, is that it is "on us" to present the Word of God in a way that participates in the psychological working of the Word. For that is the way God designed his saving activity to be carried out – his Means unleashed through his Church. Therefore, we

³⁸ A case study: Pentecost. Consider the "compelling worship" of Pentecost. How did 3000 people come to know Christ on that day? Obviously, there was a lot of supernatural work taking place. There was sound, only the sound, of a tornado ripping through the house. There was fire (or what appeared to be fire) that appeared above the disciple and then divided into flames that rested upon all. This is supernatural. So it is fascinating that the Holy Spirit chose to let the Word work psychologically. Think about it – as long as the Holy Spirit is performing a plethora of miracles, he could have made it so that as the apostles preached in Aramaic, foreigners heard a language they did not understand but came to faith anyway. The Spirit could have circumvented the normal rules of human communication, the first of which is that if you do not understand something, it does you no good. Instead, the Holy Spirit's miracle was to gift the disciples so that the Word could be perceived in an ordinary, natural way. The Word worked psychologically and, as it did, it also worked supernaturally. Three thousand people believed the impossible truth that the apostles proclaimed.

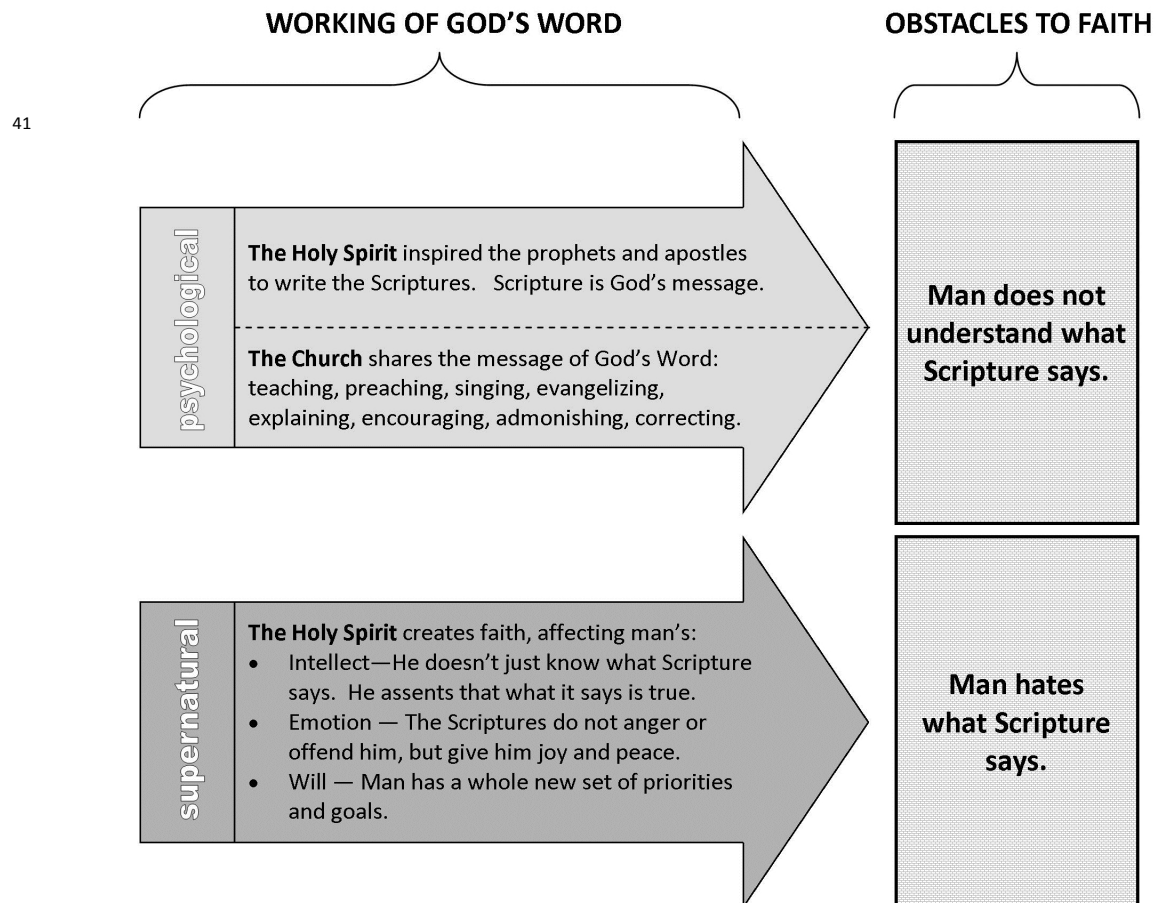
³⁹ A favorite quote of mine that is similar to this train of thought: "The transmission of information certainly doesn't need to be dull. Rather, it can be exciting and interesting. Preaching must not become Bible butchers, chopping out great chunks of scriptural meat and throwing it raw and bloody to their congregations as if they were feeding tigers. There is nothing wrong with the meat. There is nothing wrong with the butchering process. But the preachers must also learn to become cooks as well as butchers. They must learn to serve the meat well cooked, warm, well seasoned, garnished, with appetizer and desert, by candlelight." – Thomas Franzmann. "Where Are You Going, Preacher?" (Mequon: WLS Essay File, 1977). 8.

⁴⁰ This is another of the vast collection of theological illustrations contained in Professor Daniel Deutschlander's head.

proclaim the Word of God in ways that are logical and beautiful and winsome and profound. That is indeed “on us.”

And *nothing* more.

Everything beyond that – conversation, salvation, sanctification – is the work of the supernatural power of God’s Word, which is simply the power of the Holy Spirit.



⁴¹ Someone may ask, “Why aren’t those arrows sequential? *First* the Word works psychologically. Then, when people understand what the Word is saying, it works supernaturally?” That would be saying more than Scripture does. Where does the psychological end and the supernatural begin? Scripture doesn’t say. Scripture only says it works both ways. I know that as I speak the Word of God the Holy Spirit is at work. How he works... This is beyond me. “The wind blows where it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). And so, the arrows are “stacked” simply to show God’s Word always works *both* ways according to his will.

A good example of this is infant baptism. What can an infant intellectually apprehend? I have trouble getting my 7th grade confirmands to understand what “in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit” means! How can a 10 day old understand such things? That is not my concern. I properly participate in the working of God’s Word in such a case simply by speaking the words Jesus told me to speak in the Great Commission. I leave the rest up to the Holy Spirit. And yet, when I baptize an adult, now I will also explain what happens in baptism. My participating in the working of the Word increases. But ultimately, I *still* trust the only reason baptism does that adult any good is because it has *supernatural* power, the working of the Holy Spirit through water and Word.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

There are numerous applications we can make. Making them all is the purpose of this conference, and not this one address. However, our study together suggests a few overarching themes that, if you remember, might serve you well as you head to your presentations.

Remember that for worship to be compelling you need:

- ☞ *Compelling content*: what we talk about in worship
- ☞ *Compelling customs*: the rites and rituals of our worship
- ☞ *Compelling chorus*: the songs and music used in worship
- ☞ *Compelling community*: God's people gathered for worship

Compelling content

In his letter to this conference, President Mark Schroeder hits the nail on the head when he writes, "It is the Gospel alone that makes our worship compelling." He certainly *isn't* denying that man participates in the psychological working of the Word. He is saying that "what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering."⁴² The supernatural power of the Word – both for creating faith and for sanctifying us – is found only in the Gospel.

There are those who would say that the best way to get people to come and listen to preaching is to "get practical." So there is a six-week sermon series on marriage. Next comes a four-week series on how to handle stress. After that, there is a three-week series on how to be a Christian in the business world.⁴³ I worry that an over-emphasis on this approach to worship content begins a slide into the left-hand ditch.

Timothy Keller, a pastor who has started multiple churches in downtown New York, writes frequently about the difference between irreligious people, religious people, and people who are compelled by the Gospel.

- Irreligious people want what they want: sexual gratification, greater wealth, etc. They attempt to get what they want by ignoring God and his Law.
- Religious people want what they want: a perfect marriage, better-behaved teens, etc. They attempt to get what they want by following God and his Law.

Thus, in Keller's way of thinking, a lot of church-going folks are no different than the secular crowd. *They want what they want.* They just try and get what they want differently, by "doing religion" in an effort to obligate God to them.

⁴² Romans 8:3.

⁴³ These are not made up. As I write these address, they are sermon series going on in churches within five miles of mine.

The Gospel-oriented person? The one who, through the supernatural working of the Gospel, has come to see that God's love is always pure and his will is always wise? That person does not even *think* about what he desires, but only about what God desires because the only thing the Gospel-oriented person wants out of life is God himself.

*My goal is God Himself, not joy, nor peace,
Nor even blessing, but Himself, my God;
'This His to lead me there – not mine, but His –
At any cost, dear Lord, by any road.'*⁴⁴

Does a six-week series on marriage seek "God Himself," or seek "joy, peace and blessing?" If the content of worship focuses heavily on the Christian life (with a dash of Christ thrown in, of course) does such worship produce Gospel-driven saints, or "religious people" in Keller's sense of the word?⁴⁵ Wrestling with that question might safeguard against our slipping into the left-side ditch.

There is also a safety net to help ensure that the content of our worship be *truly* compelling. It is the Church Year. Now I can confound Law and Gospel preaching the pericope just as easily as I can with a free-text sermon series. However, the flow of the Church Year makes it a bit more difficult to let our people down. The Church Year compels us to walk through the life of Christ over the course of about seven-months. In the non-festival half of the year, the focus is really *still* on Christ's life, but the emphasis shifts ever so slightly from his life *for* me to his life *in* me. Given what is at stake – eternal souls – I appreciate that safety net.

I also appreciate the benefit of sermon series. In our church that is all we use. However, the sermon series is almost always drawn from the pericope, and it *always* follows the themes and flow of the Church Year. I do indeed believe that grouping texts into series can aid in the psychological working of the Word, helping people to see that Sundays are not meant to stand on their own. So my encouragement is *not*, "Don't use sermon series." My encouragement is that, as you do, make absolutely certain your content is compelling.⁴⁶ If you can do that *without* retaining the Church Year, you are more gifted than I.

Compelling customs

I think we have all heard someone say, "*The liturgy is dated. It does not resonate with people anymore. We can't reach the lost worshipping the way we do.*"

⁴⁴ Verse 1 of the hymn written by Frances Brook.

⁴⁵ For a fuller exploration of these three types of people and the need for Gospel-centric worship, I would encourage you to read Pastor Keller's white paper, "The Centrality of the Gospel." I include a link to it in the bibliography.

⁴⁶ WELS Commission on Worship has produced an updated version of *Planning Christian Worship* that is available for free on WELS Connect. It does a wonderful job at identifying logical textual "groupings" within the pericope, i.e. pericopic sermon series. I would humbly suggest it would be a worthy endeavor of the WELS hymnal committee to include even more of that. For example, take Year B and have three different sets of sermon series for the Sundays after Pentecost. Provide series titles, themes for each Sunday in that series, and even promotional material – both for the Sunday and for the overall series - a congregation could use on its website. I would use material like that in a heartbeat.

I would actually partially agree. I believe that often the liturgy fails to resonate with people, not just prospects, but also life-long believers. They do not find our customs compelling. What I would question, however, is if the problem is with the liturgy being dated, or if the problem is that we have conducted the liturgy from deep within the right-hand ditch.

Have we always done a good job in participating in the psychological working of the Word proclaimed in the liturgy? Have we explained the liturgy, adorned it, presided over it with passion? Or have we just let it become rote ramblings and then “trusted” that the supernatural working of the Word will somehow circumvent bad (confusing, boring, etc.) liturgical communication? As I said earlier, such “trust” is superstition, not faith.

Pastor Jonathan Schroeder has spoken at previous worship conferences about how in order for liturgical worship to be compelling, it needs to be “rooted and relevant.”⁴⁷

Rooted and relevant

Rooted – I’m not sure that abandoning the Western Rite is a very thoughtful response to postmodern rootlessness. The younger generation has been marketed to death and they know it! They know there is no real difference between the iPhone5 and the iPhone6, that the changes made in that device are neither *authentic* nor *substantial*. They know it is all just marketing, an attempt to manipulate them into thinking they need the new. Rooted worship demonstrates that we are not trying to sell you something or to manipulate you by catering to perceived needs. No! We want to meet your *real* needs – *authentic* needs – needs that happen to be quite “dated,” as old as Eden itself. Rooted worship demonstrates that when believers gather, something *substantial* happens. It *must* be substantial. For Christians have been doing what they do in a similar fashion for a long time.

Relevant – While liturgical worship demonstrates a rootedness, that is not reason enough to retain it. Liturgical worship must also be *relevant*. In other words, people need to see that it applies to real life. When it comes to our liturgical rites and rituals, that only happens if people understand the rationale for them.

Consider the congregational response after the Gospel. The church sings or speaks, “Praise be to you, O Christ.” In my work with the Commission on Congregational Counseling, I have had opportunity to observe a lot of worship services. It strikes me how that phrase sounds similar in almost every WELS church: like Charlie Brown’s teacher after taking too much Xanax – almost incomprehensible, with zero enthusiasm. Why? People know that ritual is rooted, but I suspect that ritual is not relevant to them. And these are life-long WELSers! They say the words simply because that is what they have always said. Might they speak those words differently if they understood they were actually speaking *to* someone? “Where two or three gather in my name (i.e. around the Word), there am I with them.”⁴⁸ However, it is likely that the only way they would make that connection is if someone would explain it to them. That would be participating in the psychological working of the Word.

Never mind prospects, how many of our WELS members know why the pastor makes the sign of the cross and invokes the name of the Trinity as he begins worship? How many know what “alleluia” means? Hosanna? Amen? How many know that the *Gloria in Excelsis* and *Sanctus* are both composed, in part, by the angels? How many know what a paschal candle is or what it symbolizes? How many

⁴⁷ You can find a video of Pastor Schroeder’s presentation on “Compelling Worship” on WELS Streams. It should be required that everyone involved in planning worship at your congregation watch it. Pastor Schroeder takes the principles we have discussed this morning and applies them in great detail to all aspects of the liturgy. He gives great examples of how liturgical worship, done well, blesses both the found and the lost. Watch it!

⁴⁸ Matthew 18:20.

know why the pastor wears a robe? If they don't know the reason behind that ritual, then there is a danger that instead of your worship being perceived as rooted, it will be perceived as weird as any man in a dress.⁴⁹

The word works *psychologically*, my friends! Those rites and rituals, which *all have Scriptural* rationale, are only beneficial if they are explained and understood. Otherwise, they are just seeds quickly snatched. As you go through your workshops, be *constantly* asking the question: "*How can we better explain what we do in worship?*" It will serve both your members and guests well.

Demonstrating unity while allowing for individuality

There are other compelling aspects of the Western Rite. It simultaneously unites us and allows for individuality. I am guessing both your church and mine sang the *Gloria in Excelsis* at the most recent Service of the Sacrament. That unites us not only with each other, but also with Christians of the last 1600 years, which is how long that canticle has been in use. In my church, we sang the *Gloria* using piano, woodwinds, and light percussion. What about you? Did you use the organ or guitars? Psalm 150 would suggest that type of individuality from church to church does not matter too much.

Individuality can be healthy. On occasion, I hear people suggesting that we would have even greater synodical unity if we took a McDonalds approach to worship. A Big Mac tastes exactly the same in Milwaukee as it does in Charleston. So should WELS worship be like that, the same everywhere? I think that would be spiritually unhealthy. It denies the numerous Bible passages⁵⁰ that point to the fact that when the Holy Spirit takes up dwelling within us, it does not strip of our individuality. Paul does not write like John. John does not write like Isaiah. Isaiah does not write like Moses. Yet all "spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."⁵¹ There is perfect unity in *what* they say, because the Holy Spirit inspired all of them. Yet, there is individuality in *how* they say it. Should it be any different for WELS worship?

⁴⁹ The history of Corinth helps us, I think. Paul writes to them: "So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and inquirers or unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind? But if an unbeliever or an inquirer comes in while everyone is prophesying, they are convicted of sin and are brought under judgment by all, as the secrets of their hearts are laid bare. So they will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, 'God is really among you!'" (1 Corinthians 14:23-25).

Glossalia ("tongues") always proclaimed the Word of God, but in a way that would not be perceived or understood by "inquirers or unbelievers." In fact, it made worship off-putting to the degree that "inquirers" thought Christians were crazy. So Paul raises a concern. Since the way the Word is being proclaimed – through tongues – is not understood by "inquirers or unbelievers" it will be of no value to them. Paul encourages the Corinthians to conduct worship in a way that edifies believer and unbeliever alike – through prophecy, used in the broad sense of the word, almost as a synonym for "preaching". Conducting worship in that manner, the unbeliever grasps what is said, which is the psychological working of the Word. The supernatural power of the Word is unleashed. The inquirer actually learns things about himself he did not know. "The secrets of their hearts are laid bare." More importantly, he learns things about his God that he did not know.

This text speaks to those in the left-hand ditch, to those who think that conducting worship service in a way that is new or flashy is what makes worship compelling. (Speaking in tongues was newer and flashier than prophecy.) No. Compelling worship requires compelling content, and it requires that content to be understood. However, this text also speaks to those in the right-hand ditch who say that if prospects don't understand our liturgical worship it should not concern us because, "worship is for the believer." Is that Paul's view here? No! He expects *and wants* "inquirers and unbelievers" in worship, so that they might hear the Word of God. What does Paul say to you if you don't feel the same? "Brothers and sisters, stop thinking like children" (1 Corinthians 14:20).

⁵⁰ See 2 Corinthians 1:22; Ephesians 2:2; 2 Timothy 1:14; 1 John 4:13. (Thank you to my brother, Pastor James Hein, for the e-mail exchange we had about the merits of allowing for individuality.)

⁵¹ 2 Peter 1:21.

If all WELS churches worshiped exactly alike, it would not only stifle creativity, which can be a vibrant expression of faith,⁵² but it also would *hurt* synodical unity. The way we worship in Charleston edifies our people, but it might not edify yours. If you think it is anything *other* than the Word of God planted deeply within our hearts that creates unity, the problem is not that you are in the left ditch or right ditch. The problem is that you are not of the same spirit as those who are truly Confessional Lutheran.

The Western Rite is so helpful. Intellectually it lets us “delight in the richest of fare.”⁵³ Emotionally, it helps me *feel* connected to individuals I love as brothers and sisters, even though they were in heaven a millennia before I was born. When we all use it, it demonstrates a unity that is substantial, based on the Word. Yet as the Western Rite does all that, it also allows for variety and individuality and creativity. What else on earth accomplishes so much, so well? It is what makes the Western Rite so *compelling*.

Compelling chorus

Certainly, Christians will sing. Scripture says that. But how? Scripture and the Confessions say little about instrumentation – style of music. Thus, we are rightfully careful in what we say. While cautious, we still recognize there are left-ditch and right-ditch issues here. If when choosing hymns you care more about the style than you do the theological content, you are deep inside the left-side ditch, holding hands with Nelson Searcy. If you think that the only thing that makes a hymn “compelling” is the text, you are napping in the right-hand ditch, denying that music can get in the way of one perceiving that text.

When it comes to music and the psychological working of the Word, to walk the narrow Lutheran middle I encourage you to consider the three “B’s”.

1. Does the style of music have too heavy of baggage?

Does a certain style of music easily bring to mind an activity *other* than worship? If it does, then that style would potentially get in the way of the Word being proclaimed within that song or hymn. Does a certain style of music produce a mood that does not capture the mood of the text (e.g. something light and bouncy while singing a song of confession or something brooding while responding to the message of our salvation)? Then you are creating a cognitive dissonance that will make it more difficult for the message to be perceived.

I am certain you can set the *Nunc Dimittis* to “gangsta” rap or the *Kyrie* to heavy metal. You have the Christian freedom to do so. However, is that wise? Whether or not you like either of those styles of music, they *will* cause your heart rate to spike. That physiological effect will likely trigger an emotional reaction. Such music can make you feel aggressive.⁵⁴ (There is a reason beyond taste that a football team plays *Muse* and not Mozart when getting ready to take the field.) Does such emotion fit a text that proclaims, “Lord, now let your servant depart in peace according to your Word?”

We walk the narrow Lutheran middle when we ask if the style of music we are using comes with baggage.

⁵² If you would like to read more about the relationship between creativity and faith, I would encourage you to read “The Wonderful in Luther’s Poetry” by J.P. Koehler. It is contained in volume 3 of *The Wauwatosa Theology* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997).

⁵³ Isaiah 55:2.

⁵⁴ For a thorough study on how music affects emotion through physiological manipulation, I recommend reading *Music and Emotion: Theory and Research*, edited by P.N. Juslin and J.A. Sloboda (Oxford: New York, 2001).

2. Does the music place too heavy a **burden** on the people?

“Sing to God, you kingdoms of the earth, sing praise to the Lord.”⁵⁵ I humbly suggest that the *primary* way the musician gives God his or her best is by helping other Christians give God their best in song. Not that many people feel comfortable singing anywhere other than in the shower. *Very few* feel confident enough to sing *a capella*. So we lead singing with music. It makes singing easier. Since the act of singing is made easier, the mind is less taxed and better able to focus on the text, which is what provides the spiritual benefit. This does not happen if we make singing into a burden.⁵⁶

There are two ways we make singing a burden. The first is when we choose music that is too challenging.⁵⁷ Pastors, during the course of our college and seminary training, we have sung even the most difficult hymns multiple times. So you can dance around your office, humming Jaroslav Vajda’s “Then the Glory” without much effort. However, if you have your congregation sing that without *thorough* training, it is Charlie Brown’s teacher again, this time on meth. Little glory to God is given and little spiritual benefit is received. “*How can you say that, Hein? The Word is proclaimed in that song!*” Right-ditch thinking. Yes, the Word is proclaimed but the Word will not be perceived, because you have already placed a heavy burden on the psychology of the people in asking them to sing that tune without adequate training.⁵⁸

The second way we make singing into a burden is when we undergird it with musical performance that is of inadequate quality. This is often a painful discussion, I know, but it is one that must be had! You have a musician who struggles – wrong notes, jerky tempo. “*Yes, but she’s using her gifts to glorify God. Isn’t that all that matters?*” That is also right ditch thinking. Because we participate in the psychological working of the Word, it *also* matters that the music is of a quality that does not distract. As C.S. Lewis says, “All things that edify glorify, but not all things that glorify edify.”⁵⁹

The doctrine of vocation helps here. It tells me that the service I render inside God’s house is not more glorious than the service I render outside. So, there is no rush to push new musicians into the sanctuary before they are ready. As my youngest son learns to play violin, he gives just as much glory to God as he rehearses in his bedroom, struggling to sharpen the raw talent God gave him, than if he played for an offertory.

We walk the narrow Lutheran middle when we realize that if our hymns and songs are too hard to sing, distracting from the text, they do little spiritual good.

3. Is our music **beneficial** in allowing the Word to “*dwell in you richly?*”

As much as possible, I want people to remember what they sing in worship. I want them to internalize the sung Word. How?

⁵⁵ Psalm 68:32.

⁵⁶ I am not talking about “the burden” of singing a tune that isn’t your favorite. That is left-ditch thinking.

⁵⁷ When the CCC is working with a congregation, one of the things we do is get as many members as possible to assess strengths and weaknesses of all aspects of the congregation’s ministry. A “weakness” that people cite as much as any other: “our hymns are too hard to sing.” That might be true. However, it also might simply be that the hymn needs to be taught. If a hymn is being done for the first time, if a hymn is more challenging, why not have a soloist or small group sing the first couple of verses?

⁵⁸ I humbly suggest pastors not be the only ones involved in choosing hymns. The most recent issue of *Worship the Lord* has some wonderful suggestions.

⁵⁹ Bryan Gerlach, “Our Lutheran Heritage in Worship” (www.wlssays.net, 1987) 9.

One way you do that is through repetition. I find a lot of churches are afraid of that. Why? Sing “In Christ Alone” five times a year, minimum. Sing “A Mighty Fortress” at least three times: Reformation, First Sunday in Lent, and the Festival of St. Michael and All Angels. There are a total 788 hymns in *Christian Worship* and *Christian Worship Supplement*. Pick 200 of them – ones that have both great content and that the people like to sing – and make those 200 comprise eighty percent of your local hymnody.⁶⁰

Another way music can be beneficial in helping people remember the Word is if you expand upon the chanted parts of the liturgy, making them more melodic at times.

I have always heard the benefits of chanting described as thus:

1. Chanting puts the focus on the words more than the music.
2. Chanting has a rich history in the church, and thus connects us to the believers who came before us.

Both are undeniably true. Here is what else is undeniably true. As a child, I never – not once – chanted to myself at home. I would sing hymns to myself, but the Word of God that had been proclaimed in chant (the psalms, the *Venite*, etc.)? Never!⁶¹ So, we have never chanted the *Venite* at my congregation. We sing it all the time: the Marty Haugen version found in *Christian Worship Supplement’s* “Morning Praise.” My people sing it loudly, and they *don’t* just sing it at church.⁶² Likewise, many of the psalms we do are not chanted, but melodic arrangements.

I am by no means saying that chanting is not edifying. If your people find it edifying, I am not encouraging you to walk away from it. I am asking if you might consider *supplementing* it because the narrow Lutheran middle asks if the music we use is beneficial in helping people remember the text.

Beautiful... benevolent... brotherly...

Someone will probably say, “With all these B-words, how can you not include *beautiful*?” Because beauty is largely subjective.⁶³ Again, which is more beautiful, Bach or Bieber? (Well, that is more a matter of objective fact. But you get the point.)

⁶⁰ This goes for choirs too! Your choir nailed a beautiful piece this Easter. Why *wouldn’t* you include it next Easter, if not on Easter Sunday, then on one of the other Sundays of Easter?

⁶¹ I would bet my last penny there are a number of people here saying, “What? I chanted the *Venite* at home all the time.” OK, fine. You did and I did not. Please realize who is the more typical one in this situation and who is not.

⁶² At Beautiful Savior in Summerville, for the vast majority (over 80%) of our members, we are the first WELS church to which they have belonged. It is remarkable how many of those who *are* life-long WELS members will comment to me about how their children sing canticles and psalms at home... and how they (the parents) didn’t do that growing up. One mother had to “scold” her 4-year-old for singing the *Te Deum* to loudly as baby brother was sleeping.

⁶³ This is NOT to say that beauty is unimportant! I think we downplay beauty too much at times. For example, when we choose a hymn, we *always* ask, “Is the text solid?” Do we ever ask, “Is the tune beautiful?” *Shouldn’t* we ask that? Man was made in the image of God. The residue of that image, even in fallen man, is that through our intellect and emotional capacities we can appreciate beauty the way other living things of creation cannot. (Whiskers is probably not moved by your Monet print.) Man *yearns* for beauty, simply as part of God’s design. However, so many different things shape our view of what is beautiful – culture, heritage, peer influence, time. So, there is a challenge in finding something that *everyone* agrees is beautiful. However, note that I say beauty is *largely* subjective. There is an aspect of beauty – quality – that is more objective. Even with Justin Bieber, I can tell that the quality of his music *is better* than my 17-year-old neighbor ham-handedly strumming away at his guitar in his garage. Thus, while we will never agree completely on what is beautiful, let us always strive for the highest quality in our music. For I will appreciate and respect the quality of music, even if the style is not entirely my cup of tea. This is perhaps the only feasible solution to the “fragmentation” problem I mentioned earlier. And recent studies have suggested that prospects recognize quality. An extensive study of the Millennial generation, for example, found that Millennials do not care

I will offer this encouragement. For those of you who are involved in choosing music for worship, it is not enough to remember the principles above. You must also be *benevolent* and *brotherly*.

Be *benevolent*. When choosing music, do you pick primarily what you like? Then you should not be the one choosing music, because your attitude is far from Christ's. Consider the interests of others.

Be *brotherly*. Discuss these things with your brothers and sisters in Christ. Consider the advice of your spiritual brothers who have come before you, i.e., the Christian tradition. Seek the counsel of brothers in the ministry when trying something new, whether it is considering the text of some new song or the appropriateness of some style of music. If you do that, if you engage the collective wisdom of the body of Christ, not only will your approach to worship edify your people to the greatest possible degree, it will encourage synodical unity, even if you do not or would not conduct worship exactly as your brother does.

Compelling community

Worship, in a sense, is a personal thing. I cannot worship *for* you. However, worship is also an incredibly communal thing. I can worship *with* you. In fact, I *want* to. Why?

The Gospel creates community. It is one of the answers you can give to those who say, "What is it that makes Christianity unique?"

How many cultures have embraced Islam? You find Islam in the Middle East and parts of Africa but you do not find Europeans or North and South Americans converting to Islam in large droves.

Where does Buddhism have a foothold? You will find it in China, the nations that border the Andaman Sea (Vietnam, Laos), and the southwest part of Russia to a degree but in North America it is not so common. (You can find it in Richard Gere's home and a few other places.)

Christianity has penetrated every culture at some point in world history. It is marvelous to see how the Gospel has and continues to flow from place to place, a tide of grace. You see it reflected in our Christian heritage and culture. Consider again the Western Rite, which developed over centuries. Some of it comes from Gaul, other parts from Africa, and still others from what today is Turkey.

How does the Gospel possibly do this, unite people who are so different, so diverse? The answer is simple. The power of God is unleashed through the supernatural working of the Word, and God has the power to do whatever he wants. What does he want? "A great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb."⁶⁴

It is as simple as this. When the Holy Spirit created faith in your heart through the Gospel, he made Jesus your brother. He made God your Father. If God is your Father and God is my Father, then are we not kin?

What would you do for your blood relatives? Your brother is hospitalized after an automobile accident. What do you do? Your elderly mother is going through some financial difficulty. What do you do? You would spring into action. You would show great love! You would do all those things for those to whom

that much about style of music. They care about depth of preaching. They care about *quality* of music. "You will hear Millennials speak less and less about worship style. Their focus is on theologically rich music, authenticity, and quality that reflects adequate preparation in time and prayer." - Thom Ranier, "What Worship Style Attracts the Millennials" (thomranier.com, April 2014).

⁶⁴ Revelation 7:9.

you are bonded through parental blood, a bond that *only* lasts in this life. Why then would you not do the same and more for those to whom you are bonded through Christ's blood, a bond that lasts unto eternity?

If in your congregation people do not bother getting to know one another, if the Benediction is spoken and most run for the parking lot, if guests are greeted with no more than a polite "good morning," then no matter how good the preaching or how lovely the music, your worship might be less than compelling. The Gospel is perhaps being proclaimed, but it is not being well perceived. For the Gospel binds us in love to more than Christ. It binds us to each other in loving community. That is compelling!

Right now, look to the person on your right. Now look to the person on your left. (Do the same at your church when you get home). Realize, *they* are your family, in some cases more so than those with whom you share DNA. *Treat them as such!* How do you know that these people are really your kin? You yearn to live in the same house, that of your Father. You long to eat the same food, that given to you by your Brother.

You worship together.

The power of worship becomes visible to all the world when that kinship is authentically expressed through acts of love.

"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."⁶⁵

God bless your studies, my brothers and sisters.

In his name.

Amen.

⁶⁵ John 13:35.

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- Cover art from *Clip Art for Year B* by Steve Erspammer.