

Passing the Torch

Keynote Address for the 2011 WELS National Worship
Conference

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“Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith” (Hebrews 13:7).

JESUS!

The torch has always been passed. Abraham passed the patriarchal torch to his son Isaac. The prophetic torch would be cast along with Elijah’s mantle o’er Elisha. The scepter of kingship would be handed from David to Solomon. Our Lord himself would disciple twelve men – teaching them the fine art of fishing for men. The torch has always been passed which is why we can confidently sing: “Our lips shall tell them to our sons / And they again to theirs / That generations yet unborn / May teach them to their heirs” (CW 512 v. 3).

The general theme of this year’s conference is “Passing the Torch to the Next Generation.” Why? It was noted by several participants at the 2008 conference that newer, younger faces were beginning to play prominent roles in this conference and the worship life of our synod. This isn’t to say that the previous generation is old. No, the previous generation of the WELS “worship bench” has been aging like a fine wine – increasing in depth and complexity. Now a new generation is slowly emerging from the previous generation’s worship efforts. They are new, yet not few!

Dousing the Torch¹

Nature and Nurture

“Earlier in this century someone claimed that we work at our play and play at our work. Today the confusion has deepened: we worship our work, work at our play, and play at our worship.” (Gordon 146)

NATURE

There is much, sadly, about my four years at Northwestern College in Watertown, WI that I simply don’t remember. My professors were trying to pass the torch. I wasn’t so much interested in receiving a torch as I was in surviving until spring break. I do remember, however, Prof. Sellnow teaching us something in *Introduction to Psychology* about the debate between nature and nurture. To what degree are we genetically “pre-programmed” to be who we are? (Nature) To what degree do we become who we are because we take

¹ I am writing with a loose definition of *torch*. “Passing the torch” is intended to be a broad metaphor for the process of handing on the Gospel, worship traditions, musical/artistic craft, and the mantle of leadership to the next generation.

on the look and feel of our surroundings? (Nurture) That whole discussion seemed so very cerebral. And then I got married... And then we had children...

I find it fascinating that as my son is finding his adult voice, it is beginning to sound a whole lot like my Canadian/Michigan English – complete with hooty o’s and u’s and awful grammar. The nuances of Michigan English have become a part of him via nurture. As for nature, we just found out that my wife has the BRCA gene embedded in her DNA. For her, breast cancer – if it comes – will not be the result of smoking two packs a day. (She doesn’t!) It will be the result of her having a genetic mutation that my dear mother-in-law is also afflicted with. (Nature) But now my point: *whether we are talking our nature or our nurture, the torch is in serious trouble!*

In truth, the BRCA gene is just the tip of the iceberg to what really happened in Eden. Who are we really *by nature*? We are sinners. Enemies of God! Looking out for number one at an age when we didn’t know the difference between a one or a two. (Mine!) We praise the perverted and silence the sacred. We try to nice-ify all this. The awful toddler is just “tired.” The idol factory known as the human heart is just suffering from “misplaced priorities.” The reality, however, refuses to be nicified. We are corrupted to the core by sin. It is such an ingrained element in our nature that we would never recognize original sin for what it is – unless God had revealed it to us in Scripture. We are, by birth, Exhibit A of what Spengler sings: “All mankind fell in Adam’s fall; One common sin infects us all. From one to all the curse descends, And over all God’s wrath impends” (CW 378 v. 1). God had promised death to Adam and Eve as a result of their infatuation with forbidden fruit. The dying continues without rest or ritardando down to this very day. The *sinful nature must be put off if the torch is to be passed on.*

NURTURE

If the problem of our sinful nature were not bad enough, there is the matter of our *nurture* that threatens to douse the torch in our day and age. The next generation is nursing on a teat of contemporaneity. T. David Gordon, a media ecologist, in his fascinating book *Why Johnny Can’t Sing Hymns*, defines contemporaneity as a value system “that prefers what is new to what is old. Contemporaneity views the past as passé, and tends to regard it either with benign disinterest or with outright contempt.” (Gordon 103) The roots of contemporaneity are several.

Rapid advances in technology are a favorite fuel of contemporaneity. “Technological change contributes to contemporaneity by making generations without certain technologies appear primitive.” (Gordon 104). Old is out of date. New and cutting edge is where it’s at. As a teen, I laughed at my mother when she called my CD a “record player.” She undoubtedly did the same to Grandma Lee, when mom purchased her first portable record player back when Elvis was king.²

² The internet and our gadgets that help us live on it are potentially having unintended side effects: “This ghettoizing of adolescence, which now extends for many into their early thirties, is due to many cultural factors, especially the various electronic-communications technologies and social-networking Web sites that have the effect of connecting adolescents to adolescents while disconnecting them from adults. This trend has been observed by thoughtful cultural analysts such as Maggie Jackson and Mark Bauerlien, the former of whom is concerned that it may lead to the next dark age, and the latter of whom suggests that it has produced ‘the dumbest generation.’ The adults who created the plethora of electronic technologies and Web-based communication did not foresee that adolescents would use these media as an additional way to succumb to peer anxiety” (Gordon 160).

Perhaps even more than technology, *consumerism* is the real tap-root of our contemporary culture. “Most people become convinced that what is newer is better, even though there is little evidence to substantiate the claim” (Gordon 106). Henry Ford did more than manufacture the Model-T. He also learned to *manufacture discontent*. What is new must be perceived as better, otherwise Ford would have soon run out of car-buying customers. We are taught via thousands of daily advertisements to buy. We believe that what we own says something about who we are as people.³ “When is a car no longer just a car?” the commercial asks. But the commercial lie is everywhere. We line up to buy the new, even with money we don’t have. We pay good money to cart the old off to landfills.

Finally, there is a *media origin* to contemporaneity. Gordon notes that newspapers used to be published every other week, because newsworthy events happen rather infrequently. Over the years, however, news became more and more a product to be consumed. Advertising time is purchased. But in order to fill the time that advertising has purchased – and to keep people tuned in for the advertising – news began to be manufactured. Witness the birth of the “celebrity.”⁴

Who does the average American care more about? Abraham Lincoln or Casey Anthony? What is the average American, practically speaking, more interested in: technology or the truth? Are we better consumers of things or ideas? Our technology is keeping us in touch, but not making us smarter. Our news is keeping us in the know, but is not making us wiser. Contemporaneity celebrates the present – and only the present.⁵ Contemporaneity does not understand the past let alone think that the past has any significant lessons to teach. Henry Ford coined the creed for contemporaneity: “History is bunk.”

Gordon sums up the culture that nurtures all of us: “Johnny cannot shed his cultural skin, the skin of contemporaneity, of triviality, or paedocentrism. He thinks he ‘prefers’ contemporary worship music to other forms, but in reality he prefers contemporaneity as a trout prefers water; it is the only environment he knows” (173).

The culture of contemporaneity ensures that any torch predating Justin Bieber is a torch that will be viewed as out of touch with the next generation. Our culture of contemporaneity also clouds the judgment of the *previous* generation. Is this truly a torch worth passing on? Or is this torch trivial or trash? Our “up-close” viewpoint makes that tough to determine at times.

³ If you asked the German refugees at St. Matthew’s in Benton Harbor, MI, they would probably say that what you don’t have says a lot more about Stalin’s Red Army than about you as a person.

⁴ A celebrity is “...an individual who is celebrated not for doing anything particularly noteworthy, but merely for being celebrated. Such people, Boorstin argued, are not worthy of the public’s attention, but are created or manufactured by those who need more news. After all, genuinely significant individuals, whose actions might be worthy of the public’s attention, just don’t come along frequently enough to satisfy the demands of commerce, so we invent another category of people whose actions we call the public’s attention to” (Gordon 111).

⁵ Witness Rebecca Black’s “Friday” on YouTube this week. Watch and weep!

We seek to pass the torch! Yet the torch is dimmed and doused by our nature and nurture. “From hearts depraved, to evil prone, Flow thoughts and deeds of sin alone; God’s image lost, the darkened soul; Nor seeks nor finds its heav’nly goal.” (CW 378 v.3) Lord, have mercy upon us.

THE STAKES ARE HIGH

The stakes are high when it comes to passing the torch!⁶ Retaining the Gospel in our midst is at stake. We have it now. Will our children? Our children’s children? It is true: the Church will never perish. What is uncertain is if WELS will make the cut until Christ comes again. You have perhaps heard it said that the Gospel is but one generation from being lost in any given place. Christianity is on a definite decline in America. Will the light of truth be finally extinguished in our land?⁷ Meanwhile in places like Africa and Asia, the Gospel is on the grow. Praise God! But after praising God, get busy with the torch in your hands! Why? That torch has been passed to you at the steep cost of Christ’s blood, the martyrs’ death, and the fathers’ sacrifice.⁸

If the torch is doused, then it is time to find some matches – and quick!

Lighting the Torch

Lutherans and Their Traditions

“Some luck lies in not getting what you thought you wanted but getting what you have, which once you have it you may be smart enough to see is what you would have wanted had you known.” – Garrison Keillor

OF TORCHES AND TRADITIONS

When we speak of *passing torches*, we are really talking about the matter of tradition. When our ears hear the word “tradition,” we usually – and incorrectly – think of *traditionalism*. Traditionalism is a perverted twisting

⁶ With the Gospel having come to light again, Luther warned: “This seems to me to be a real masterpiece of the devil’s art. He sees that in our time he cannot do what he would like to do; therefore, he intends to have his own way with our offspring. Before our very eyes he is preparing them so that they will learn nothing and know nothing. Then when we are dead, he will have before him a naked, bare, defenseless people with whom he can do as he pleases” (Luther, *Sermon on Keeping Children in School*, 217).

⁷ Germany and Scandinavia, the cradle of the Lutheran faith, might as well be the Sahara when it comes to confessional Lutheranism.

⁸ “For we have the gospel and the preaching office only by the blood and sweat of our Lord. He won them by his anguished, bloody sweat. He earned them by his blood and cross, and gave them to us. We have them without any cost to ourselves, having done nothing and given nothing for them. Ah, God! How bitter it was for him! Yet how kindly and gladly he did it! How greatly the dear apostles and all the saints suffered that these things might come to us! How many have been put to death for them in our own time” (Luther 255)!

of tradition that bases one's relationship with God upon the right traditions, correctly performed, by the right people. Pharisees and popes of various and sundry stripes have excelled at traditionalism over the years. Traditionalism will always incur the wrath of the One who desires mercy, not sacrifice!

If the specter of traditionalism isn't potent enough to derail our discussion, the modern American mind – addicted as it is to contemporaneity – chokes on the concept of tradition. At least since the summer of '69, any real talk of tradition is treated with contempt.⁹ In reality, however, interfacing with tradition is part of being human. Unless you are Adam and Eve, you have received something from the generation before you. You will pass something on to the generation that follows you.

Traditions are found not only in museums, but also in malls. Traditions are catalogued by historians, yet provide order to life in the present. Tradition is not a static concept. "In actual fact the Latin *traditio* - from which we get our English word "tradition" - is an *active* word, an *active* concept, it is an *act*, the *act* of 'the handing over of something from the past to the future. It is, at the same time, the ballast providing the necessary stability and continuity as Christians move from any present to the future'" (Schalk 93).¹⁰

LEVELS OF TRADITION

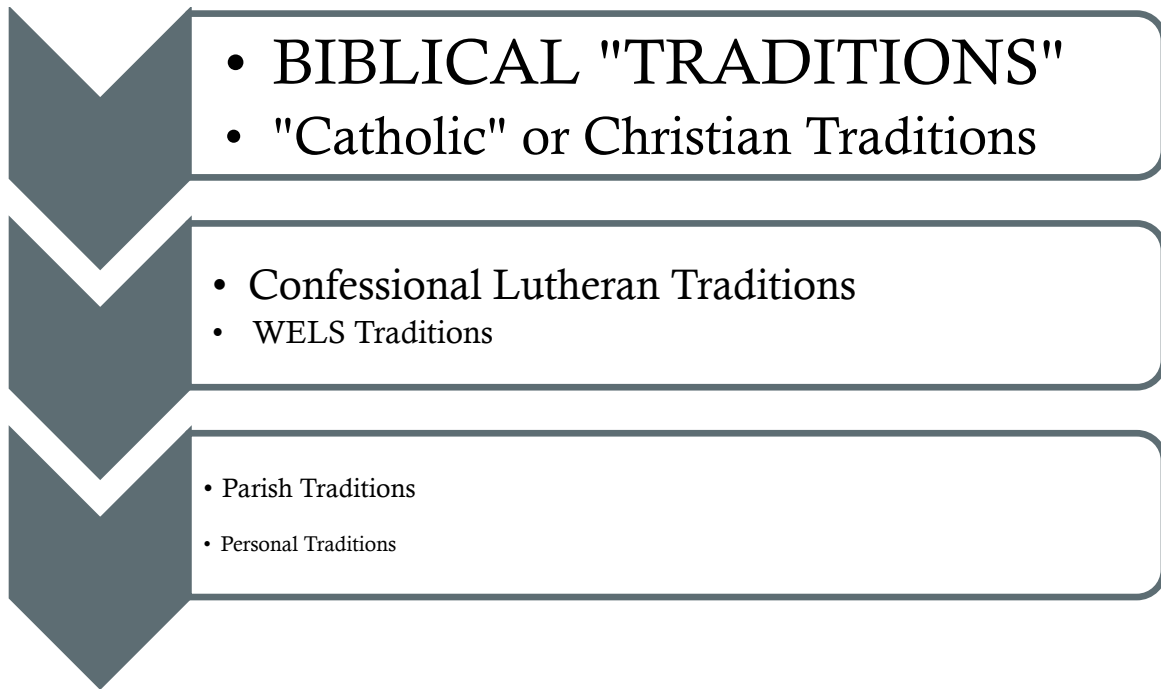
Traditions pepper our daily lives. Every morning, I have a shaving tradition. Hand-towel on the left. Razor on the right. I have a morning coffee tradition that leads to my mid-day heart palpitation tradition. We sit down to dinner and the children squawk if someone is in *their* seat. I've been to every one of our synod's worship conferences. That's just my end of July triennial tradition. All of these things, whether by passive observation or by active mentoring, have become part of my life.

You didn't gather here this morning to hear about a day in the life of Aaron Christie. You are here to celebrate a wonderful day in the life of the Church. And since with the Lord a day is as a thousand years, we have some work to do! As we look over the last couple thousand years, what should we celebrate, be educated on, and then inculcate in the next generation? With so many traditions at our ecclesiastical fingertips, which of the traditions should we pass on? Which of the traditions should we take a pass on? To pick or to pan, that is the question...

⁹ "Tradition seems to be a bad word for some. It suggests sameness, repetitiveness, everything contrary to what some adults seem to want: newness, freshness, always something different. Psychologists are close to the truth when they say that all of us - children and adults alike - need structure, boundaries, parameters within which we live and work, and worship" (Schalk, *First Person Singular*, 79-80).

¹⁰ Tradition as a "handing over" is precisely the concept we find in the Greek New Testament (παράδοσις). Paul received the Words of Institution from the Lord and then passed them on to the Corinthians (1 Co 11:23). Paul received the message of Christ, crucified and risen again, and then passed it on as a message of first importance (1 Co 15:3). Jude writes for the believers to "contend for the faith that was once for all *entrusted* to the saints" (Jud 1:3). The same word is used of Judas "handing Jesus over" in the garden and Pilate handing Christ over to be crucified. Like money, tradition is neither inherently good nor bad. "The Scriptures... assume that cultures, families, and individuals will "hand over" or "deliver" ideas, values, and customs to one another, and the question is merely whether a *specific* tradition is a good thing or a bad thing" (Gordon 121).

Timothy Maschke, in his book *Gathered Guests: A Guide to Worship in the Lutheran Church*, gives us an overview of tradition.¹¹ You could summarize his discussion (pp. 38-43) with the following chart:



Biblical Traditions are those things that the Spirit has revealed to us through his apostles and prophets. For God to reveal them to us is for God to hand them over to us. As confessional Lutherans, we take our “Scripture alone” seriously. It is therefore unthinkable to cease assembling together in the name of Jesus as the Scriptures command. He commissions his Church to baptize until he comes again. He gives his body and blood as a supper on earth until we feast with him in heaven. Because all of God’s people are a “royal priesthood,” they have a primary role to play in public worship. Because God is pleased to give some to be pastors, called ministers of the Gospel have a primary role to play in worship. These truth-filled “traditions” have all made the biblical cut. They are all lamps to our feet and lights for our path.

Catholic or Christian Traditions are those things which have accompanied the Bride of Christ as she has traveled through time and space. Christ instituted the sacraments. It seemed wise to the Church to celebrate the sacraments within the context of public worship. There is no command from Christ to follow a particular order of service, yet the Church in her wisdom chose the synagogue service as her service of the Word. Jesus would have his people “acknowledge” him before men. The Church carefully composed creeds to help Christ’s people do exactly that.

Confessional Lutheran Traditions are those things that we have inherited from Martin Luther and the other Lutheran fathers. We understand the Means of Grace dogmatically and therefore stress them practically in

¹¹ His discussion has been useful for teaching a good Lutheran – no, biblical – concept of tradition to my members.

public worship. We celebrate the Festivals of the Lutheran Reformation and the Presentation of the Augsburg Confession. (These are, strangely, absent from the Roman Catholic calendar.) Interestingly enough, a distinctively “Lutheran” tradition holds that “Catholic” isn’t bad. Over 80% of Luther’s hymns are not “Bar Tunes.” They are *Gregorian* tunes! Our Lutheran fathers quoted the church fathers as quickly as we quote the Catechism. A living connection to the “one holy Christian and apostolic Church” is everywhere evident in our Lutheran Confessions.

WELS Traditions belong to us. Black Geneva gowns, as a symbol of Wittenberg’s orthodoxy, was certainly inbred in me growing up in northern Michigan. (That torch was quickly doused when my bishop told me on call day to buy a white alb before I reported for vicar year that fall!) Kidding aside, our efforts at preserving and strengthening our fellowship has enabled us to adopt a common hymnal in 98% of our parishes and to make this National Conference the largest Lutheran worship conference in the western hemisphere. This is simply shocking since ELCA and LCMS are larger than us by the millions. We WELS types tend to stick together,¹² but we also embrace a certain “rugged individualism.” Trinity, Waukesha is not Trinity, Watertown nor need it be.

Which brings us to *parish traditions*. Children’s Christmas service is *always* on Christmas Eve. Children’s Christmas service is never on Christmas Eve. One parish, literally, “lifts high the cross” in processions. Another opts to lift the cross high only metaphorically. One church recites the “traditional” version of the Lord’s Prayer. Another church recites the “contemporary” version of the Lord’s Prayer – and in so doing has made the contemporary version a tradition.

Finally, we come to *personal traditions*. “I’m an early service kind of guy.” “We always attend late service.” “That’s my pew!” “I LOVE that hymn.” “That hymn was sure a groaner.”

You noticed, I hope, the font sizes and pecking order in the diagram. They are not accidental. Because we love the Lord above all things, his Word trumps everything else. Because we love our neighbor as ourselves, we are mindful of our many neighbors throughout time and space and denominational orderings. Because we want to follow Scripture, we seek to remember our leaders not just in the abstract, but concretely as we take their traditions into account as we order our present and pass torches on to the next generation. The point? It is simply biblical, as well as common sense, to acknowledge that the Lord’s institution of Holy Communion is far more important than my personal preference for a particular pew. The Apostle’s Creed has more gravitas as the Church’s confession than one that was written by the youth group at last summer’s youth rally. Our WELS way of doing things is often quite fine, but we ought to be more inclined to look to the older Lutheran fathers first.

So let’s get practical. What should I pass on to my Karl, Peter, and Anna? What should I pass on to the children in my church? You to the students in your school? The children in your choir? The enterprising young organist you are teaching? The art student whose hand you guide? What torch will we pass on?

Begin by passing this on: our opinions and preferences count for precious little, yet the sinful nature wants nothing more than to flip the entire diagram upside down! That I can use my commercial preferences to opt

¹² Admit it: who doesn’t love to see another “Come to the WELS” bumper sticker!

for Culvers instead of Burger King, doesn't mean that my commercial preferences apply to what hymns we sing.¹³ A biblical view of tradition douses our caffeinated consumerism. The Scriptures encourage us to live for a while, learn a lot, love the Lord above all things, and put your neighbor first always. THEN let me know what your preferences are...

My personal preferences, opinions, or traditions count for very little. But the Gospel counts for everything! What have we accomplished if we teach Johnny a whole note, but leave no lasting imprint of the Lamb who took away the sin of the whole world? What is gained if we teach a child to sing in tune but leave the new song of faith unsung? What good is it for us to know the content in our worship books but not be counted in the Book of Life? Biblical traditions – yes, the Gospel itself – is what makes us Christian. We seek to make every thought, word, and deed – and therefore every tradition – captive to Christ.

And if we truly, always, totally put the Gospel first, then I have a feeling that many other issues will be clarified and eventually fall into place. What worship form shall we use? If the Gospel is first, then the Gospel will find its own forms. It's been doing that in the Church for 2,000 years already. What song should we sing and what sound should we use? If the Gospel is first, then the Gospel will find its way into song just as certainly as it has found its way into people's hearts. As for sounds, this is most certainly true: the Holy Ghost is no monotone! If the Gospel is first, then those torches that promote the Gospel will be passed and eagerly grasped. The torches that take away from the Gospel will eventually be doused – and not a day too soon!

So what do I want my sons and daughter and my members to know? I want them to know Christ and the power of his resurrection. I want them to know that they are part of something that crosses centuries and continents and that they look beautiful – absolutely beautiful – *as* Jesus' bride. I want them to know their Lutheran history – that they have nothing to apologize for and everything to be grateful for as sons and daughters of the Lutheran Reformation. I want them to know that they are no ugly step-sister of the Synodical Conference of blessed memory, but members of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod whose confession is clear, whose commitment to Scripture is solid, and whose best days are yet before her. I want them to thank God for the privilege of being affiliated with four Christian congregations in their lives (St. Matthew's Benton Harbor, MI; St. John's, Newburg, WI; Faith, Antioch, IL and Trinity, Waukesha, WI). Each has been a blessing to them in their own special way. Finally, I want them to know that they too have their traditions and their own place in the body of believers. May God grant them to do better with their children than I have done for them.

And I want them to know their half notes and whole notes too... All of this, but in this order. And if in that order, then the torch will burn brightly, as brightly as that great day when Spirit-kindled fire settled on apostolic heads and sons and daughters prophesied. This is not a dream. Through the Gospel, it is all yours!

¹³ At a workshop at Concordia, River Forest, an attendee flatly said "I didn't like that hymn." Marva Dawn's quick quip back at the person? "So, we're not worshipping YOU are we?"

Passing the Torch

The Hands That Help Us

“Perhaps the most significant forward step we could take today is the restoration of the idea that the church musician is, first and foremost, a ‘hander-on’ of the tradition. Where pastors, church musicians, and congregations come to understand this, worship and its music has the opportunity to deepen and enrich congregational life in ways we can hardly imagine.” – Carl Schalk

OF PEOPLE

The torch is burning brightly in our midst. How will we pass it on? What are the various hands that can help us? Pinch yourselves and you will have just discovered a primary passer of torches.¹⁴ In order for us to be an effective passer of torches, we must first be an examiner of torches. Why? Those who refuse to learn the lessons of history might or might not be doomed to repeat them. I do know, however, that those who refuse to learn the lessons of history cannot teach them!¹⁵

Schalk has done us a fine service in looking over the history of the Lutheran church and her musicians. He notes five key torch-passing elements in Lutheranism’s early musical giants:

- 1) “One of the characteristics of these church musicians was that *all were highly trained in the art and craft of music*” (Schalk, *Learning from the Past*, 2).

If we are serious about passing on the torch, perhaps the place to begin would be finding a teacher ourselves. We can only give what we have got! Schalk rightly notes that the great Lutheran musicians of old were not only musically trained, but also theologically trained. What have we read lately to deepen our understanding of Lutheran theology and worship?¹⁶ We are *Lutheran* worship leaders. Let us learn deeply so that we may teach the devil to death!

¹⁴ “Perhaps the most significant forward step we could take today is the restoration of the idea that the church musician is, first and foremost, a “hander-on” of the tradition. Where pastors, church musicians, and congregations come to understand this, worship and its music has the opportunity to deepen and enrich congregational life in ways we can hardly imagine” (Schalk, *Learning from the Past*, 12).

¹⁵ “To posit the thesis that church musicians and pastors can learn something from the past experience of the church concerning its music and worship necessitates two things: first, the assumption that there is indeed something to be learned from the church’s history and practice; second, that we are willing to hear and learn what the past can teach us. In the present climate, neither of those two statements is self-evident” (Schalk, *Learning from the Past*, 1). It is not self-evident in the church at large. Let us roll up our sleeves and make it self-evident in WELS!

¹⁶ The laity among us will be enriched by an annual read of *Luther’s Large Catechism* and the *Augsburg Confession* just as pastors are enriched by an annual reading of the Scriptures and the entire *Book of Concord*.

Notice, too, that there is a stewardship concern in Schalk's observation. *Training.... Art... Craft...* Because we are serious about what the Scriptures teach about stewardship, we will be careful that nothing but our absolute best sounds from balconies and pulpits around our synod. (Unless we are bringing our best and only our best, we have no right to jammer about pews that are less than packed.) Yes, I understand that there are one, two, and five talent musicians. The dear Lutheran grandmother who has manned the organ bench for 25 years and stretches herself to get a Manz prelude in her fingers does a far nobler job than one who butchers Bach, but could have done much better. We practice and model artistic and musical excellence, not to add to the pure Word, but because we have the pure Word!

Pass it on: we strive for a life-long pursuit of learning and excellence.

- 2) "Another characteristic of these early Lutheran musicians is that all were musicians who *found the historic liturgy and the worship of God's people to be the most natural and appropriate context for the greater part of their music*" (Schalk 4).

When I was a child, I not only thought like a child, I also sang "Glory be to God on High" the exact same way every Sunday for at least 22 years. I knew the *Gloria in Excelsis* by heart. I did not know, however, what an amazing array of liturgical music was written to the glory of God over the years! Again, the Holy Ghost is no monotone. I am thankful that Tutor Paul Prange took me to Watertown and Milwaukee for a weekend my senior year at MLS. I heard Prof. Zabell's Vesper Choir sing at the NWC Chapel. I had never heard sounds like that before in the Wisconsin Synod. We then attended St. Marcus in Milwaukee for Sunday service. Pastor Mark Jeske directed a choir and string quartet from his harpsichord bench. What did they sing? It's still with me 23 years later: Bach's great motet "Komm, Jesu, komm."

The sounds of that weekend were enough for me to put away my Oberlin or NU Evanston ambitions and opt instead for the Holy Ministry. Why shouldn't I? The greatest musicians of all time were at their best when they were composing for the church at worship. Bach did not compose his cantata cycles in a vacuum. He composed them to proclaim the specific themes of the Lutheran liturgical year.

We confessional Lutherans know that our music is not the main event. The Gospel is. We appreciate the fact that music and the arts proclaim the Gospel to our ears and eyes. For us, music remains less, so that Christ may be more. The *liturgical context* of our music making helps keep the showman and woman in check. If you want to perform, find a resort or restaurant that will hire you. If you want to proclaim, then practice your art in the assembly of the righteous!¹⁷

Pass it on: Lutherans proclaim the Gospel in worship with their music and their art.

- 3) "A third characteristic of the musicians of early Lutheranism is that *they were, with few exceptions, involved in the secular musical life of their day*" (Schalk 6).

¹⁷ I cannot tell you the joy it gives me to proclaim the Gospel from the pulpit and then run upstairs and proclaim the same Gospel from the choir podium or the organ bench.

I have no time for those who would like to freeze the church's music at a particular day or age. The art of music has been changing - yes, evolving - over the centuries. One of the ways that music in the church developed was that the composers of good church music also tended to be good students of all music. Bach, for instance, studied the Italian and French composers, especially in his early years. His musical synthesis brought together the best that the best had to offer.¹⁸ It is also true: "This involvement of these musicians in the secular musical life of their communities is a direct reflection of Luther's view that all of music, sacred and secular, is God's good gift for the enjoyment and enrichment of God's people" (Schalk 7).

I see the doctrine of vocation coming into play here. If God has given me the vocation of music making, I serve him just as well by faithfully playing at the resort as I do at church. This refreshing theological fact might possibly provide some clarity to the worship conversations that revolve around style. Example: I have a very good friend who is an amazing shred guitarist. Does that mean that Randy should play shred guitar in church? Or does it mean that he should find a different venue for his shred guitar skills? Besides: what do you think would be better for the Great Commission? More shred guitar artists playing in church? Or more Christian shred guitarists playing in night clubs? I'll bet you a pair of earplugs it's the latter...

Pass it on: Because Lutheran worship leaders are in the world, they are students of art and culture. Because Lutheran worship leaders are not of this world, they are careful as they apply their learning in the church at worship.

- 4) A fourth characteristic of these early Lutheran church musicians was... that *they all wrestled with the challenges and opportunities presented by a new musical style*" (Schalk 8).

Nota bene: they *wrestled* with new musical styles and then *adapted* the new musical styles to current trends. The Lutheran torch bearers of the past were careful not to abandon the old style to exclusively engage in the new. Bach learned both from the opera and the ballet. He never, however, composed a ballet for church. He did use some elements of the French overture style to open his cantata "Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland" BWV 61 (Savior of the Nations Come).¹⁹ The composers of Versailles would have thought it beneath them to travel to unenlightened Leipzig. Through Bach, however, their best was blended with the church's best - fusing something new, something that has endured long after Versailles' ballets have fallen into oblivion.

What are you engaging in for a musical stretch? I eat Buxtehude for breakfast and Bach for brunch. That's why I needed to purchase a book on playing Gospel piano. Last month I sat in with our praise band and played a service. Purchase some of the modern European composers that have been recently published by Concordia. "God Himself Is Present" in bossa nova style? I don't know if it's ready for WELS prime time. I do know it stretched me as a musician. And musicians need to be stretched! If we don't stretch ourselves, we think that we feel comfortable. In reality, we probably sound boring.

¹⁸ Perhaps it was easier to do back then. The line between secular and sacred was not as wide in 1711 as it is in 2011. The gap between an Italian concerto and a German church cantata is not nearly as wide as the gap between Lady Gaga and Marty Haugen.

¹⁹ Using a French-style overture for a cantata that opened the church year in Advent was a stroke of genius. This stroke of genius, by the way, demonstrated Bach's commitment to making music in the context of the church's liturgy and calendar.

Pass it on: be a musician or an artist who develops along with your art form. Make the best of several different styles your very own.²⁰

5) “*All of these early Lutheran musicians were influential, in one way or another, as teachers. Some of their teaching consisted of formal instruction; other was of a more informal nature*” (Schalk 10).

Each one of us is here to learn and experience excellence in worship. Each one of us is also a teacher when we return home. Some of our teaching happens actively. Many of you teach lessons, attend practices, set up recitals and plan curriculums. Blessed are the basic music skills teachers! Most teaching, I maintain, happens passively as other people watch us do our thing. They sense our joy. They see our dedication. They watch us as we put the Gospel to work.

Who are the faces behind the torches that were passed to you? The face of a Brenner who confirmed my mother and then me 22 years later? The face of a Deutschlander who opened up to me a deeper, profounder vein of Lutheranism? The face of a Tiefel who rescued me from an ash heap of legalism? Who are the faces that you thank God for? And then know for certain, that others will thank God for your face, the lessons you teach, and the torches you pass.

Pass it on: the Lord would use YOU to train the next generation in the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord. And how to sing without gum in your mouth!

POEMS

The torch is lovingly passed to the next generation by people who care deeply about what they have received. The torch is also passed *via the texts* that have been handed down to us. The holy Scriptures, of course, top the list. I will leave the *Holy Scriptures* this morning to the pulpits and classrooms of our synod. Our *Lutheran Confessions*, especially the Small Catechism, are also on the list right under the Scriptures. I will leave our various confessions for private study. The *hymnal* is also toward the top of the list. It is this body of Christian poems, hymnody, that I would like to showcase today as another helping hand in passing the torch.

Can you imagine an “O Come, All Ye Faithful-less” Christmas? How glad would my heart be without “Awake, My Heart, with Gladness” on Easter morning? It simply amazes me how deeply the church’s hymns have touched me in so many different ways on so many different days.²¹

What we sing as a body of believers says something about what we believe. In turn, what we sing shapes us. Allow two examples from Lutheran history. Brown notes, for instance, that Lucas Lossius’ 1553 *Psalmodia Sacra*, containing numerous Latin hymns from the patristic and medieval periods. Why would Germans need Latin hymns that date from the late Roman Empire? Isn’t that too Catholic? No, they are Catholic in

²⁰ To the non-musicians among us, what goes for the sounds from the balcony also applies to the proclamation from our pulpits and the lessons from our lectern.

²¹ Nothing was quite like receiving my first call on call day and then standing up to a *Te Deum* with your classmates and 1,000 others at *fff* dynamic levels!

the best sense of the word. Lutherans from the 1500's were eager to show that they were no sect. Their choice of hymnody reflected their belief in the holy Christian Church and their part in it (Brown 60).

What they sang in the village of Joachimsthal,²² in turn, shaped what they believed. Brown relates a fascinating hymn that the town's children would sing for the annual procession to drive the pope out of town:

Now far away the Pope we chase
From Christ's church and God's holy place,
Wherein he wickely has ruled
And many of salvation fooled.

Away with you, perdition's son!
You scarlet whore of Babylon!
The blasphemmer and Antichrist,
All full of foul deceit and lies.

The Roman idol must give place;
The one true Pope we now embrace:
He is the Son of God, the Christ,
The Rock on whom his Church is placed (Brown 74).

Obviously, "Now Far Away the Pope We Chase" did not make the cut in *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal*. A polemical hymn such as this grates on modern American ears and sensibilities. But before you write this hymn off as a breast thumping example of Lutheran bravado, ask yourself how Lutheranism was able to continue on in Joachimsthal for an entire generation after the last Lutheran pastor was driven from the town. Why is it that literally half the city would leave their homes and livelihoods and immigrate to Saxony rather than convert to Catholicism under force? Why? Because Lutheran doctrine *that the people sang in hymns* at home endured long after the Lutheran pulpits had been silenced at church (Brown 30).²³

Because hymnody at its best sings and teaches the Gospel, Schalk sees the use of hymnody as a *pastoral* not a *pragmatic* decision: "To say, for example, that the choice of hymns in worship is simply '...a matter of taste' is ultimately to avoid taking responsibility for the spiritual, musical, and moral development of ourselves and our children" (Schalk, *First Person Singular*, 12).

²² Joachimsthal is located in the modern-day Czech Republic.

²³ Brown's *Singing the Gospel: Lutheran Hymns and the Success of the Reformation* is a must read for anyone wanting a good feel for church, school, and home life in Lutheranism's early years. It is also a powerful case study for the hymn's importance for anyone who thinks that the church's music is only about an opportunity for us to "praise God." "In Roman Catholic and Calvinist thought alike, religious song was primarily a human activity intended to satisfy a debt of worship, whether due to the saints or to God himself - a point not to be obscured by the strict Calvinist insistence on Biblical texts for their congregational singing. Whereas Lutherans regarded their hymns as a form of preaching or proclamation, for Calvin the sung psalms were categorized as congregational prayer. For Lutherans, the hymns were a form of God's Word, through which God himself was active to strengthen and comfort his people in faith, not only through the mediation of the public ministers of the church, but also among the laity as they sang in the churches or in their own homes" (Brown 24).

In spite of all that we know about the benefits of a gospel-proclaiming, teaching hymnody, all is not well with the hymn these days. (Recall everything said above about our culture of contemporaneity!) Is the hymn a matter of truth? Or just musical taste? Does it really matter what we sing? Can't we sing just about anything that we want to just as long as the lyrics don't contain any false doctrine?²⁴

It is comforting to me to know that the church has always struggled with the role of the hymn in worship and in life.²⁵ Luther understood the hymn's importance. So did his enemies. Lutheranism's strident Catholic adversaries had to recognize that Luther had put his finger on something profoundly powerful – a *teaching hymnody*. Bishop Nausea Blancicampianus wrote Pope Paul III in preparation for the Council of Trent. Something had to be done about Lutheran hymns: “Who can say how many persons have easily been drawn away already from the true religion by these same chants, to which they have already become accustomed for twenty years or more” (Music 42)? Whether the bishop would have written the same about CCLI's top five, I will leave to the judgment of history. (And I'm serious about that.) But history has already judged this in the affirmative: Christ-centered, Lutheran hymnody helped ensure both the survival and success of the Lutheran Reformation. You have been given a bright torch or truth between the two covers of your hymnals. Will we pass it on? If not, then what?²⁶

I beg you! Don't spin this into a “traditional” music is good and “contemporary” music is bad direction. The issue is not the “style” of the music. The issue at hand is the TEXTS that the music carries. There are plenty of bad texts from of old that have gone the way of the Dodo. There are many good texts that are being written in our day and age – witness the *Christian Worship: Supplement*. Worrying about musical style *first* takes our eye off the ball.²⁷

²⁴ “This unbiblical posture, that worship song is merely a matter of amusement or entertainment, and therefore merely a matter of personal preference or taste, does not arise because people desire to resist the teaching of the Holy Scriptures. Rather, it arises from a culture that has come to be characterized, as Neil Postman argued, by amusement. In such a culture, in which we are surrounded by amusement, and in which music is perhaps the primary form of amusement, it is not surprising that even Bible-believing people have unwittingly adopted such an anti-biblical stance. They simply aren't aware of the conflict between the teaching of the Bible and the values of our culture on this point” (Gordon 32).

²⁵ Luther once preached: “I see your idleness, how you fail to learn those sacred songs sung every day and how for nearly two years now you have had no interest whatsoever in those enduring songs of the schoolboys, but rather pay much more attention to popular ditties. Would that you fathers might strive to train those under your care! For such songs are a sort of Bible for the uncultivated, and even for the learned. See how the pious are set on fire through these songs” (Herl 15)! For Luther, music is no “mood setting mechanism.” Instead, words and music proclaim the gospel and confess the faith.

²⁶ Schalk's word to the wise: “What is needed today is a musical expression that is not wedded to the popular commercial culture but a musical expression which reflects a greater reality, a larger and more inclusive vision of the church. For the ever-present danger is that when the church becomes captive to the culture it loses its voice, the Gospel itself is turned out, and we find ourselves on the road to producing results aligned with a particular, and unbiblical, view of success” (Schalk, *Learning from the Past*, 13).

²⁷ There is a general trend that theologians and musicians can discover together: shallow texts tend to go together well with shallow music. Deep texts tend to shed shallow music. “The lyrics of a hymn might say, ‘Holy, holy, holy,’ but the music might say, ‘Ho-hum, ho-hum, ho-hum.’ In such a case, the meta-message competes with and contradicts the message” (Gordon 68).

Instead, I propose that we all regularly engage in a “texts test.” Forget about the music. Rather, deal with new hymns and worship songs *as texts*. Line up “People Need the Lord” in *LAPPY* next to Getty and Towend’s “In Christ Alone.” Let me know which one is better for a church body’s publication and a child of God’s mouth. I’ll bet a CPH choral packet subscription that “In Christ Alone” wins every time. And if it doesn’t, I’ll keep my CPH choral packet because you probably wouldn’t sing what’s in it anyway...

What Does This Mean?

FOR PASTORS

The torch is passed by us or in spite of us. Be an ambassador for the best that the Church has to offer. Set the tone for passing the torch as you set a banquet of the sinner’s justification through faith in Jesus. Be a student of the Scriptures AND a student of the saints who from their labors rest. Why? There is a treasure trove of torches that are waiting to be discovered and passed on to the next generation. Read something on Lutheran history or Lutheran worship every summer. You are the key element in helping them see their connections to the greater traditions of the church, especially their Catholic and Lutheran traditions. If you don’t, the Rick Warren on Walmart’s shelves will pass a torch too – just not the one we are hoping for.²⁸

FOR TEACHERS

Schalk writes “Singing and learning strong, solid hymns is crucial in the developing life of young Christians. Good hymns tell the story of the faith, teach theology, and help to incorporate children into the worshipping community” (Schalk, *First Person Singular*, 18). He writes the truth. The torches that are passed in WELS will, in large part, depend upon your work in the classrooms around our synod. Teach hymnody and reference it often. Show children the connection between classroom and chancel, chapel services and Sunday’s Divine Service. Take your students on “field trips” of the sanctuary. Teach them what they are *seeing* as well as *singing*. Teach their lips, and fingers, and vocal chords to play and sing – no, to proclaim the Gospel of Christ! Finally, teach them what is truly a torch. Don’t spend time on what is trendy.²⁹

²⁸ Actively pass the torch of ministry to the next generation. My pastor pegged me for being a pastor after the school play when I was in the second grade – at a time in life when my father wasn’t even a Lutheran.

²⁹ “Children need to be nurtured in the faith with more than musical Ho-Hos and textual Twinkies. In many places children - and their parents - no longer know the basic core of the church’s hymnody. They simply have never learned - or been taught - it. Instead their teachers opt for “catchy” songs they think children will like and which someone has told them are “more suitable” for children. We shall soon be reaping the harvest of a generation of children whose concept of the church’s song has been shaped by the musical equivalent of Twinkies and Ding Dongs” (Schalk, *First Person*, 81).

Why do we spend weeks teaching Christmas songs and recitations that will never be sung or said again once the children’s service is over baffles me. Read Schalk’s wonderful book *First Person Singular* before school begins. It is a winsome yet profound little read that will undoubtedly tweak the torches you are handing on.

FOR LAYPEOPLE

What is the best devotional book on the shelves of Northwestern Publishing House? The hymnal. What is the best book of doctrine on your shelf? The catechism. Want a bite of the Bread of Life? Open the Scriptures. Many of our Lutheran great-grandmas and great-grandpas left family behind in the Old World. These three books, they brought with them. Get to know them all over again, not only cerebrally but in your gut! I challenge you to pray through the hymnbook in a year.³⁰ Use the Catechism to meditate. Search the Scriptures. As you do, the Gospel will have its way with you.

And then you will be a primary passer of torches yourselves. Learn the difference between catholic and Roman Catholic. Appreciate the fact that not every Evangelical is all that evangelical. Support efforts at enriching worship in your parish and then in your synod. Support the next generation with your time and especially your treasure. How many churches have refused to pay twelve bucks a week for a student's lessons only to pay dearly for years because they don't have musicians. Become a patron of the arts – a provider for torch passers.³¹

Amen!

And so the torch is passed. This conference will be filled with the sounds of newly commissioned composers. This conference will be splashed with the colors and creations of new artists. A Tiefel is directing the festival choir, but a much younger, a much... well another Tiefel. New generations of Balges, and Zabella, etc. are carrying on the family tradition. Others, like Melchizedek of old – without genealogy, at least in WELS – are energetically taking their torches and putting them to work for the glory of God and the salvation of man. Children who played Gameboy during orchestra practices in 2005 are now playing in the orchestra in 2011. High school students from around our country will edify you and then amaze you with their passion for proclaiming the cross in song. A children's choir will comfort you – the Gospel torch is going to the next generation! And the next generation is glad to have it.

But this is only a conference. This conference is – on steroids – what we all need to be about on the home front. This is your ministry, your church, your brothers and sisters in Christ. We are the recipients of the blood and sweat and blessings of the generations that have gone before us. We are the conduits for these blessings to flow and go to the next generation. You have sin, so douse it in the remembrance of your baptisms. You have a Savior, who is the Light of the world and the light of your life. You have received a torch of truth freely. Spend yourself totally as you pass it on!

³⁰ Begin in November with hymn #1 the first Sunday of Advent.

³¹ I completed a Master of Church Music at Concordia, Mequon. Half of graduate school was paid for by my childless Polish-Catholic uncle. After he passed away, the other half was paid for by a dear member at my parish in Antioch, IL. "Pastor, you make sure I get the bills, not the treasurer..." In so doing, he gave me the tools to help pass the torch on to the next generation.

So now and till we die Sound we your praises high
And joyful sing;
Infants and all the throng Who to your Church belong
Unite to swell the song
To Christ, our King. (CW 515 v. 5)

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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The 5th Sunday after Pentecost 2011

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