

Worship the Lord

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Worship and Outreach

By Jonathan Bauer

"This hymnal won't just benefit your congregation's worship. It will also benefit your congregation's outreach." Without the ability to go back in time and scan every piece of publicity produced, I would imagine a claim like that was seldom made in advance of the 1993 publication of *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal*. At the time, the latest iteration of the megachurch movement was just starting to pick up steam. Churches like Rick Warren's Saddleback and Bill Hybels' Willow Creek were still in their infancy. Andy Stanley's Northpoint had not yet been founded. Rick Warren's *Purpose Driven Church* and Sally Morgenthaler's *Worship Evangelism*, both influential in the "worship as evangelism" movement, had not yet been published.

As our church body prepares to publish its next hymnal, I'm confident I'm not the first one to say this nor will I be the last: This hymnal won't just benefit your congregation's worship. It will also benefit your congregation's outreach.

What I mean by that, however, might surprise you. The primary benefit this hymnal provides to a congregation's outreach efforts has nothing to do with the time during which the hymnal is actually in use. It has nothing to do with what happens in that sacred space we call a sanctuary and that sacred hour we call a service. The primary way this worship resource will also benefit a congregation's outreach has very little to do with worship, and that's probably how it has to be. Let me explain.

From "Seekers" to "Nones"

There was a time when, due to various factors both spiritual and societal, a considerable portion of our country's population could be described as "looking for a church." They likely identified as religious, even Christian. They did not attend services regularly and/or had not committed to a specific church home, but they would be willing to do both assuming they found the right church. They have often been referred to as "seekers."

To whatever degree and during whatever period of time that was true, most would agree that it is no longer true today. James Emery White has thoroughly chronicled the rise of the religiously unaffiliated, a group often referred to as "nones."¹ In 2020, "nones" comprise almost a quarter (22.8%) of the population according to the Pew Research Center.

Many of these religiously unaffiliated Americans are now raising members of Generation Z. Generation Z, also referred to as iGen, consists of people born between 1995 and 2010. As you might imagine, a generation raised by people who are increasingly religiously unaffiliated will be likely to have no strong connection to religion themselves. Jean Twenge points out that, while about a quarter of the overall population is religiously unaffiliated, a full third of young adults (ages 18-24) fell into that category already in 2015.²

A "none" is the opposite of a "seeker." It's not that they don't believe in God. It's not that they are hostile to religion. They simply have no strong feelings about either. In a May 2003 article in *The Atlantic*, Jonathan Rauch made famous a term to describe this mindset: apatheism. He wrote, "Apatheism—a disinclination to care all that much about one's own religion, and an even stronger disinclination to care about other people's."

As one might imagine, the decline of "seekers" and the rise of "nones," has had an impact on the way Christian churches view the connection between worship and outreach. In a world full

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of “seekers,” worship and outreach work together in services that are “seeker-friendly.” James K. A. Smith summarizes such an approach this way: “If the church was going to feel welcoming, it needed to feel familiar, accessible, and ‘cool,’ characterized by the sorts of professional experiences people associated with consumer transactions together with the thrilling enjoyment of a concert. The seeker-sensitive church would *feel* like the mall, the concert, and Starbucks all rolled into one—because those are places that people *like*, where they feel comfortable.”³

Jared Wilson calls these attractional churches. He points out the increasing naivete of such an approach in today’s world: “As cultural Christianity fades, so does the potential customer base for attractional churches.” Wilson predicts that the attractional church will “slowly grow further out of touch with the surrounding culture” by “assuming its neighborhoods are looking for church, *but different*; religion, *but relevant*; Christianity, *but cool*....”⁴

As a result of this cultural shift, our weekly services will likely bring us into contact with fewer and fewer people for the first time. Whether that service is publicized as “casual, relevant, and engaging” or “rooted, reverent, and transcendent” will make little difference to an atheist. Rather than designing our gatherings to bring people in, more and more we will need to disperse from those gatherings and seek people out. Pastors and laypeople will need to invest in relationships with the people around them, build trust by demonstrating genuine love and concern, and look for opportunities to share the gospel.

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That’s the primary reason I say what I’m saying: This hymnal won’t just benefit your congregation’s worship. It will also benefit your congregation’s outreach. The tools and resources provided don’t just allow congregations to do more in worship. They allow



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congregations to do it with less time and effort. They facilitate and streamline many of the time-consuming mechanics of worship planning and preparation. They allow pastors to get out of their offices to spend more time engaging people with the gospel and equipping their members to do the same.

In a world of “nones” rather than “seekers,” that’s inevitably where more and more gospel conversations will have to take place. In the end, that’s probably a good thing. When we are faithfully reaching out with the gospel the way our world needs us to, we won’t feel the burden of trying to design our worship to do outreach for us. As Wilson observes, “You don’t have to treat the worship services like a coffee shop conversation if you’re actually engaged in coffee shop conversations with unbelievers.”⁵

What If They Actually Show Up?

But what happens when someone actually shows up? We might be tempted to think that worship that follows a historic, liturgical structure will feel increasingly foreign in a world that continues to drift from any discernible Christian moorings. That might be true, but that might not be an entirely bad thing.

As we become more aware of some of the effects of “life as we know it” in our modern, technology-driven world, many of the effects we are starting to observe are quite disturbing. On the one hand, our technology allows us to interact with people all over the world in staggering numbers. However, those virtual interactions are poor substitutes for the full, rich relationships God created us to enjoy. Our connections increase exponentially, but true intimacy is a scarce commodity. Loneliness and isolation are on the rise. Cal Newport makes this comparison: “Much in the same way that the ‘innovation’ of highly processed foods in the mid-twentieth century led to a global health crisis, the unintended side effects of digital communication tools—a sort of social fast food—are proving to be similarly worrisome.”⁶

In addition to connecting us to a staggering number of people, technology connects us to a staggering amount of information. As a result, however, the task of separating what is important from what is trivial, much less what is true from what is false, becomes staggeringly difficult. A single platform, YouTube, hosts both the pastor’s sermon from last Sunday *and* the “Charlie Bit My Finger” video (and the latter, not the former, briefly held the title of being YouTube’s most-watched video of all time). A single platform, Facebook or Twitter, delivers sourced, verified news from trusted media outlets *and* every conspiracy theory under the sun. A single pipeline, my email inbox, delivers announcements from my church and my children’s school *and* scam requests from Nigerian princes

who need my bank account information. Alan Noble points out the effect that the information age can have on our ability to identify what is important: “Our frenetic and flattened culture is not conducive to wrestling with thick ideas, ideas with depth, complexity, and personal implications.”⁷

Finally, our device-driven world may be the greatest reflection and reinforcement of a post-Enlightenment, “brains on a stick,” view of humanity. Smith describes that view this way: “We view our bodies as (at best!) extraneous, temporary vehicles for trucking around our souls or ‘minds,’ which are where all the real action takes place.”⁸ We often operate as if every problem is caused by ignorance and solved by information. Content is king, and our devices deliver it in virtually limitless supply. The more time we spend with our screens and inside our own heads, the more detached we are from God’s physical creation around us.

It shouldn’t surprise us that these same problems can find their way into worship if it is designed to mirror “life as we know it.” The same forces that so easily isolate members of the human race even as they are superficially connected are quite good at atomizing the body of Christ. Noble argues: “Part of the challenge of contemporary services is that our focus is directed to the stage rather than to one another. Volume levels rarely allow us to hear ourselves clearly, and certainly not our neighbors. The result is that we experience worship much like we experience a concert. It becomes an individual, emotional, and spiritual exercise wherein I try my best to think about the words and praise God. But even though I am surrounded by the saints, I remain comfortably in my own head.”⁹

The same technologies that deliver limitless information, entertainment, and advertising to us can easily be used to deliver content to worshipers. When the same media and platforms that deliver the trivial and the untrue are also used to deliver the gospel, however, the difference between these things is flattened. Noble observes, “We’ve tried to communicate the gospel with cultural tools that are used to promote preferences, not transcendent, exclusive truths. We see [these trends] at work in high-production church services that feel more like a concert and a TED Talk than a sacred event.”¹⁰

It should not come as a surprise that the same young people who are most inundated by the content delivered by our devices are the most disinterested when similar media are used to deliver the gospel. Wilson observes, “From Gen Y on down, generally speaking, those interested in local expressions of Christian community are less and less interested in programmatic, consumeristic approaches to spirituality. This is somewhat counterintuitive, because younger generations tend to be the ones most readily embracing technology and innovation. But the issue is not the use of technology or innovating new ideas; it is the lack of authenticity they sense in an overproduced spirituality. They tend to respond negatively to pop-song covers, movie-clip illustrations, and cheeky sermon series titles.”¹¹

Finally, when the same forms and media that pump endless information into our heads are utilized in worship, the same “brains on



a stick” view of humanity reinforced by so much of life can also be reinforced by our worship. Worship can give the impression that every *spiritual* problem is caused by ignorance and every *spiritual* solution is information. Noble argues: “Our church services (especially in evangelicalism) involve less liturgy, less focus on bodily participation, and greater emphasis on disengaged reason.... We have made communion with God a thing that happens inside our heads, not with our whole selves, including our bodies.”¹² The pandemic of 2020 has been a revealing experience in this regard. As churches were forced to close their doors and go exclusively online for a time, it became evident how many people concluded that a service delivered in their home through a screen was in no way inferior to one experienced in person with other Christians—and how many churches seem to have concluded the same thing.

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Rather than engaging people with the gospel using forms that mirror what people already find comfortable and familiar, perhaps the real opportunity presented by modern life is to highlight and excel at the features of historic, liturgical worship that offer people respite from what is comfortable and familiar. At its best, liturgical Lutheran worship is a truly communal exercise where the proclamation of the gospel is carried out not just by the experts or professionals up front but by the person sitting to my left and to my right. At its best, liturgical Lutheran worship conveys the fact that something important is going on during the hour between invocation and benediction. It delivers the palpable gravity the gospel deserves. First time guests may walk out our doors using a variety of words to describe a liturgical Lutheran service. “Trite” is not likely to be one of them. At its best, liturgical Lutheran worship takes disembodied minds and reorients them to the

physical world God created, redeemed, and will one day glorify. It engages their senses and involves their bodies. It aims not just to fill their heads but to move their hearts with the flesh-and-blood saving acts of the Son of Man and the bathing-and-feasting sacred acts he instituted. Rather than trying to fill up the outward shell of “life as we know it” with the gospel, Lutheran liturgical worship delivers the gospel within a shell that can give people a taste of “life as it was meant to be.”

In other words, “strange” and “foreign” might actually be valuable features of Lutheran worship rather than flaws. Talking specifically about reaching today’s youth, Smith observes, “These strange historic rites of the church catholic serve to reenchant the world for those immersed in our secular, disenchanting age.... The very similarity we wanted in order to keep young people entertained is precisely what makes them suspicious that there’s nothing really *transcendent* going on here.”¹³

Historic, liturgical worship will not do a congregation’s outreach for it. In a world full of more “nones” and fewer “seekers,” no worship style will. However, a Lutheran congregation can be confident that Christ-centered, liturgical worship will support, not stunt, outreach efforts aimed at taking the gospel to the people of its community rather than waiting for them to come to it.

One Thing’s Still Needed

In the meantime, the realization that our worship can’t do our outreach for us will enable us to keep our eyes squarely on the bullseye we are aiming for in worship, namely, to let the gospel have center stage. If more and more people are living without the gospel, more and more people are living with the consequences of life without the gospel. More and more people are looking not just for a little help to improve some facet of their lives. They are looking for something that can adequately serve as the foundation for their lives. They are in search of an identity and a sense of worth. They are looking for unconditional approval and belonging. They are in desperate need of a solution for their guilt and shame. They need what the Bible calls righteousness. Even secular anthropologists are noting how much this search drives human behavior. Jonathan Haidt writes, “An obsession with righteousness (leading inevitably to self-righteousness) is the normal human condition. It is a feature of our design, not a bug or error that crept into minds that would otherwise be objective and rational.”¹⁴

The gospel is not just what someone needs in order to go to heaven some day. The gospel is what someone needs in order to get through each day. “It is the chief article for a reason. Not only is this the chief article on which the Church stands or falls..., but this is also the chief article on which individuals stand or fall. Restless hearts and anxious minds find peace in justification. Frenetic lives of self-justification have rest in the salvation of Jesus Christ.”¹⁵

The gospel is the one thing people need most both for heaven and earth. It is the one thing needed by both the first-time worship guest and the lifelong Christian. And more than anything else, liturgical Lutheran worship is designed to proclaim the gospel. Our rites tell the basic gospel story weekly. Our calendar of readings puts tissue on that gospel skeleton by repeating the works and words of Jesus annually. Our heritage of hymns aims gospel truths and gospel events squarely at people’s hearts by setting them to poetry and music. Lutheran worship brims with the gospel. Lutheran worship is above all else Christian worship. It was Christian worship in 1993. It will remain Christian worship in 2021 and beyond.

¹ See James Emery White, *The Rise of the Nones* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014).

² Jean Twenge, *iGen* (New York: Atria, 2017), p. 121.

³ James K.A. Smith, *You Are What You Love* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2015), p. 103.

⁴ Jared Wilson, *The Gospel-Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), p. 34.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 95-96

⁶ Cal Newport, *Digital Minimalism* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2019), p. 136.

⁷ Alan Noble, *Disruptive Witness* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2018), p. 24.

⁸ Smith, *You Are What You Love*, p. 3

⁹ Noble, *Disruptive Witness*, pp. 137-138.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

¹¹ Wilson, *The Gospel-Driven Church*, p. 30.

¹² Noble, *Disruptive Witness*, p. 130

¹³ Smith, *You Are What You Love*, p. 148.

¹⁴ Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind* (New York: Pantheon, 2012), xii.

¹⁵ Gene Edward Veith and A. Trevor Sutton, *Authentic Christianity* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2017), p. 98.

More on Worship and Outreach

An interview at christianworship.com (under the link For Worshipers) offers additional thoughts on worship and outreach. The interview is moderated by Eric Roecker, WELS Director for Evangelism, and features Jon Bauer, Caleb Bassett, and Jon Schroeder. The interview and this article—along with other interviews, articles, and videos—can be recommended for advance viewing and reading for a leadership group or open forum that discusses the new hymnal.