



More Worship Words to Wrestle With

Proclamation

By Jacob Behnken

Can you remember a time when school cancellations were read aloud on the radio station? Truth be told, they probably still are; it's just that few of us rely on the radio station anymore. Nowadays, everyone just checks their smartphone for an always up-to-date listing of the latest cancellations. Back in the day, however, students actually had to listen through the entire list of school closings, hoping that the name of their school would be announced. And, if you got distracted and missed it, you had no choice but to wait a few minutes for the next reading of the list. "Did I hear my school's name, or was that just wishful thinking?"

Smartphones are definitely more convenient, but I must admit to a special kind of joy that came from anticipating the news spoken out loud. Not only did hearing good news over the airwaves bring a smile to my face, but there was something else too. If you were the first one to hear it, then you got to run and tell everyone else in the house. "No school today!" Not only was it fun to hear the news; it was fun to tell it too.

As we think about the Word of God and especially as we learn how to preach it, one of the words that comes to our minds is proclamation. The Word of God is for proclamation. As the words painted above the threshold of the Seminary chapel tell us, our work is to proclaim the gospel. Scripture is not merely a book full of information, a spiritual how-to manual of sorts. It is not merely a textbook with lessons to teach and to learn, though it certainly is useful for teaching and a delight to learn. In addition to all that and more, God's Word is something to be proclaimed. It is the almighty God's announcement of salvation sealed and accomplished in Christ Jesus, our Savior.

Those who have the privilege of speaking that Word are doing more than simply conveying information. As Paul teaches, public ministers of the Word actually get to serve as ambassadors of God

Most High (2 Cor 5:20) and proclaim to his people and all the world the good news of what he has accomplished for them in Christ. The good news is a proclamation!

Again and again, the Lord teaches us to recognize the great honor—and the great responsibility—that comes with this charge of proclaiming his Word. We might think, for example, of the Lord assigning Ezekiel to be the watchman of Israel. "Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. When I say to the wicked, 'O wicked man, you will surely die,' and you do not speak out to dissuade him from his ways, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the wicked man to turn from his ways and he does not do so, he will die for his sin, but you will have saved yourself" (Ezek 33:7-9). Or perhaps we remember Paul's teaching to the Corinthians that it is necessary that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful (1 Cor 4:1). Or maybe from time to time it leaves us in awe to think of Jesus' reminder that what we proclaim with our mouths here on this earth is valid even in heaven itself (Matt 18:18). Yes, what an awesome privilege God has given us to proclaim his Word. So central is this work to pastoral ministry that oftentimes the "pastor" is simply the "preacher." It's why Paul can sum up his encouragement to young Timothy with the simple, "Preach the Word" (2 Tim 4:2).

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It's also why we hear that encouragement repeated in our Rite of Ordination, as we take up that work for the first time as an ordained pastor.

No doubt, proclamation has a special application to the art of homiletics and to preachers; though preachers proclaim God's Word in many of their ministerial duties, it is particularly in the sermon that they have the privilege of regularly and publicly proclaiming good tidings to the flock entrusted to them.

Giving thought to public worship, however, leads us to recognize that it is not only the sermon that proclaims the gospel. In his classic work, *Worship in the Name of Jesus*, Peter Brunner explained, "The congregation's Spirit-effected response to the gift of salvation, conveyed in Word and Sacrament, is itself Word. Also where this response involves a physical gesture, this gesture is not mute, but vital through the words accompanying it. This responding, confessing, thanking, and glorifying word of the congregation will always recall the great and saving deeds of God's might; it will acknowledge, laud, and glorify them prayerfully, and in this manner also proclaim and present them to others. It is precisely the priestly service of the congregation that thus becomes a proclamation of the wonderful deeds of God."¹ Yes, all of public worship is proclamation, work carried out not only by the preacher but by the people as well.

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It is here that we can recognize the treasure that is Lutheran worship as our forefathers in the faith have passed it down to us. Not only in sermon but in ordinary and proper, in liturgy and hymn, in art and architecture, in confession and creed, historic Lutheran worship is dripping with proclamation of the sweet gospel. While one could fill volumes answering "What does this mean?" consider two points: 1) the importance of the choices we make in respect to the content of public worship and 2) the importance of emphasizing the essential function God's people carry out in public worship.



The Content of Proclamation: God's Gospel

It could probably go without saying, but if it is clear that God's Word is to be proclaimed in public worship and, likewise, that the proclamation of the Word means more than the pastor's sermon, then the words we put into our people's mouths to proclaim week after week matter. Recognizing that is nothing new. About hymns Johannes Brenz (d. 1570) wrote, "In accordance with the example given by the Apostle Paul (Eph 5:19), the singing of hymns has been understood and regarded as a form of preaching, a proclamation of the word of God."² The song of the people is a sermon too.

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Robin Leaver likewise writes, "Theologically understood, music in worship is akin to the preaching ministry in its liturgical setting. It is to proclaim the word of God to the people of God. Sometimes this is done through the single voice of the cantor or minister, sometimes through the combined voice of choir or instruments, and sometimes through instrumental music alone. And then there is that unique proclamation of the whole people of God when they join their voices in one, in psalmody and hymnody, as they proclaim their response of faith to God and give witness of that faith to each other. All the Church's great composers have understood the proclamatory nature of their art, that through it the eternal sound of God's grace focused in Jesus Christ is made known and shared with his redeemed people."³

Recognizing this purpose of music in public worship calls for the utmost care in selecting the hymns that we sing and the music that we play. Of course, we want to praise the Lord with joyful songs in our worship, but more than that, we recognize that the highest praise we can give is when we proclaim, with specificity, who he is and what he has done.⁴ The Lutheran hymn writer Carl Schalk (d. 2021) observed, "God is praised when the gospel is rightly proclaimed; and, conversely, the proclamation of the gospel is the way that God is rightly praised. There is no artificial division between songs that 'proclaim' and others that 'praise': unless 'praise songs' proclaim the good news of the gospel, they are not, in any Christian sense, praise songs at all."⁵ Yes, we choose all worship content carefully because it serves to proclaim the gospel and the doctrines of God's Word. As they do that, they serve to summarize and solidify the truths of God's Word for his people.⁶

The best of Christian hymnody has always done this. No doubt, our minds rush to the contributions of the church fathers or to the Reformers. As we survey the historical hymns of the Lutheran church, we cannot help but acknowledge how the Lord has blessed us with a rich heritage. The gems of historic hymnody have pointed generations of believers to Christ and his cross on their journey heavenward, and we pray that they not only do the same for us, but that through us, God preserves them and passes them down to generations of believers after us.

At the same time, we also know that proclaiming Christ has never been the arena of hymnody from the past alone. As our new hymnal illustrates so well, Lutheranism has always taken the best hymns, both old and new, and incorporated them into its worship life. Consider how many of the modern selections in *Christian Worship* have quickly become beloved ways for God's people to proclaim the gospel beautifully and powerfully. Again, that has always been the hallmark of the best hymnody of every age. Perhaps the most well-known of modern-day hymn writers, Keith Getty observes, "The healthiest congregational environment flourishes when the worship leader/worship songwriter partners with pastors in feeding the congregation well through the songs they sing and the sermons they hear."⁷

Yes, the best hymns of every age proclaim the gospel. Sermon and song are not competing interests, nor do they have only a tangential relationship. Rather, music and song work together with the spoken Word so that in public worship Christ is proclaimed.

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Keeping that in mind suggests several applications for public worship:

- Devote sufficient time and attention to selecting hymns for public worship that work right alongside the readings and sermon for the day—both to teach the particular emphasis of a particular Sunday and, more broadly, to proclaim Christ crucified to everyone who attends.
- Consider also the value of selecting those hymns as far in advance as possible. This enables musicians to plan and practice so that their work on a Sunday morning can really be a well-considered proclamation of the Word (rather than just making sure the notes fall in the right place). But advance planning also allows preachers to consider how the sung proclamation of the Word can complement and enhance the spoken proclamation that day. So often, hymns capture theological truths in particularly effective and winsome ways that, if recognized, can enhance the sermon.
- Don't overlook the value of the Hymn of the Day. These hymns are chosen specifically for their rich content and connection to the day's Gospel. Of course, there is no ecclesiastical law demanding our use of the Hymn of the Day (or any other hymn). Sometimes pastors who know their congregations and circumstances will make another choice for a particular Sunday. At the same time, however, regularly using the Hymn of the Day not only gives musicians an anchor they can count on in their own planning (and means one less hymn selection worship planners have to make), but more importantly, it helps keep the very best of hymnody in regular use across our congregations.

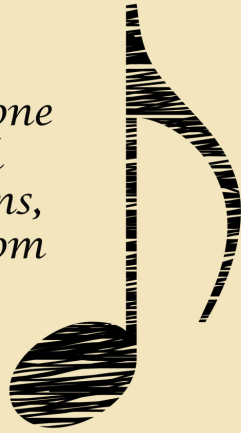


- From time to time, consider introducing unfamiliar hymns (both old and new) to your congregation. Perhaps it requires a bit of extra effort, and perhaps a congregation will need to grow in appreciating them. With a bit of time and practice (and the wisdom of not biting off more than a congregation can chew), learning and using less familiar hymns equips the congregation to sing a new song to the Lord, and, with time, these can become beloved favorites. If some Hymns of the Day are not yet familiar in your congregation, consider a plan to introduce two or three each year.
- Of course, hymns are not the only way the gospel is proclaimed in song in public worship. The psalms have been enriching the worship for millennia. *Christian Worship*, together with the complete *Psalter*, provide a variety of ways to use the psalms in worship.
- Finally, in all this talk of hymns, never overlook the value of the ordinary. Singing the songs of the Western Rite has summarized and solidified the gospel for generation after generation of believers. *Christian Worship* gives congregations the ability to use these songs week in and week out, while still allowing for musical variety. And *Service Builder* provides even more variety, including a wealth of metrical canticles (canticles cast as hymns). Sometimes pastors and worship planners will make other choices for their particular ministry contexts (and that's certainly understandable), but do consider how the textual consistency of the ordinary ensures that the gospel is clearly and beautifully proclaimed week after week in a way that connects us to believers of many generations past.

Yes, in public worship, the gospel is proclaimed. It is proclaimed in Word and sacrament. It is proclaimed as it is spoken and sung. That speaks to the importance of the content of public worship. It also speaks to the importance of the participants in public worship.

Speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit.

Ephesians 5:19



The Participants in Proclamation: God's People

In our age, this latter point deserves nearly as much consideration as the former. Increasingly, it seems that some people allow a consumer mentality to drive their thoughts and decisions about worship. They see worship as an opportunity to be stimulated—spiritually, intellectually, emotionally. They come to receive what's been prepared for them. Of course, that's true in a certain way. "Nothing in our hands we bring," we sinners sing. In worship, we are always the recipients of God's gospel gifts first.

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At the same time, however, there's a danger in thinking of worship as a largely passive experience. There's a danger in worshipers thinking of themselves as consumers of a product. We see that in the notion that music and sermons are valued first and foremost for their ability to appeal in various ways.

Or consider the rise of "virtual worship." Of course, in the difficult days of the pandemic, hearing the Word this way was better than nothing, and virtual worship served as a blessing for many. And yet, we would probably all agree that what may be necessary during dire times is not what is best under usual circumstances. Worship in front of a computer screen just isn't the same as being in the house of God with fellow believers.

Why? Because worship is all about proclamation. As the writer to the Hebrews tells us, we encourage one another as we see the day approaching (Heb 10:25). And how do we encourage one another? No doubt, there are different ways of encouraging, but

the most important way is the building up of our faith through the means of grace.

In public worship, we speak the Word of God to one another (Eph 5:19). We proclaim the gospel to each other. When I am singing a hymn or speaking the Creed or confessing my sins, I am not only speaking to the Lord (though I am certainly doing that) but I am also proclaiming the Word to brothers and sisters who are, in turn, proclaiming that Word to me. Together, we are proclaiming our faith to the world around us.

That's an especially encouraging thought when we consider how often following Christ can feel lonely in this fallen world. Christians don't always enjoy the benefit of being able to mutually share their faith with those around them on a day-to-day basis. That's what makes opportunities for public worship so special. During this precious time of the week, we come together as Christians and encourage one another through our proclamation of God's gifts to us.

What a privilege God gives us as we gather. We get to proclaim the gospel. As God enables us, let's help his people see this vitally important work that they as the body of Christ get to carry out together.

¹ Peter Brunner, *Worship in the Name of Jesus*, trans. M.H. Bertram, CPH 1968, 124.

² Quoted in Oliver Rupprecht, "The Modern Struggle for Standards in Religious Music," *Concordia Journal* v.9, #4, July 1983, 129.

³ Robin Leaver, *The Theological Character of Music in Worship*, CPH 1989, 11.

⁴ Johnold Strey, *Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts*, NPH 2021, 23f.

⁵ Carl Schalk, "Hymnody and Proclamation of the Gospel," in *Not unto Us: A Celebration of the Ministry of Kurt J. Eggert*, NPH 2001, 138.

⁶ See the recently released hymnal project volume *Christian Worship: Foundations*, 15ff, 23ff.

⁷ Emily Brink, "Teaching the Faith, Expanding the Song: An Interview with Irish Hymnwriter Keith Getty," *Reformed Worship* #81, September 2006.

Teach the proclaimers

How can we better teach people about their role as proclaimers? Obviously, a Bible class could address this theme. But that will reach only a minority. So look for ways to reinforce the point also in sermons. One pastor instead of saying "God bless our worship" says "God bless this time as we proclaim God's love to one another."

