

# Worship the Lord

No. 118, January 2023



## Worship and Outreach *In Salt Lake City*

By Tyler Peil

St. Francis on being a winsome witness: “Preach the gospel at all times. Use words if necessary.”<sup>1</sup>

We know it’s difficult for people to walk into a church for the first time. Many have wounds from another Christian or church. Many have heard that “the church” is at least complicit, if not one of the great offenders, in this world’s evils. “The church” has a history of judges, haters, chauvinists who are intolerant, and holding back progress.

Anyone who walks in the door on Sunday is a miracle and answer to prayer. We’ve got a little over an hour to love them in the very best way we can.

One miracle is Darrel. I know what I want for him. I want this Sunday morning to open the possibility of another story for Darrel, so much bigger than whatever the world has preached. I want his life to be interrupted—he’s going to be in the presence of God and among divine things. I want him to notice that the front entrance and landscaping are nicer and newer than he expected, a good first impression. I want him to be welcomed at the door with a smile and an easy conversation. Then to be handed a worship folder by someone who is obviously glad he’s here. I want him to be taken aback by the beauty and arrangement of the sanctuary, a space different than he’s used to. I want him to wonder about things: what is that for, how many kids does this church have, will I be able to follow along? But not too many questions. I want him to see the pastor reverence the altar and realize he takes this time very seriously but then to hear a warm greeting from him. I want the bulletin to strike him as simple and attractive and the opening hymn to speak clearly and be sung well enough for him to join in. I want him to hear God named, to be a bit shaken by a confessing of sins and then a touch jarred by the absolution. I want him to

wonder about that good news. I want him to sense that this is something the pastor lives for. I want him to recognize he was made for this—to be in communion with God, being filled by the Lord and saying back, “I love you too.”

I want him to not be able to leave without understanding the subject—verb—object combinations that save and define us: Jesus loves you. God forgives you. He has mercy on us. He takes away the sin of the world. He lives and reigns, now and forever. His body is given for you. He shines his face on you and blesses and keeps you. No sacrificing to appease. No bargaining for favor. And what that enlivens us to: we praise and bless and glorify God, proclaiming his death until he comes again.

I want to see Darrel with those people who can talk to anyone, and I want six other people to smile at him. I want Darrel to feel like this is a community where he could belong, and this place could be a home for his soul. In other words, I want Darrel to hear the gospel in words and see it in the love of saints. I want him to come back. Who doesn’t?

Pastoral and practical questions then. What has Darrel really been thinking? Where does this most likely fail? What can I make happen and what will I fight for? Darrel did actually visit us, invited by a friend. He described himself as an atheist, formerly

*Tyler Peil is one of the pastors at Prince of Peace in Salt Lake City, Utah. He serves the Nebraska District as secretary and the WELS Commission on Evangelism as an Everyone Outreach coordinator. He was a member of the new hymnal project’s Scripture Committee.*

a zealous Mormon missionary. I asked him about visiting our congregation. I share his thoughts below.

## Liturgy as Outreach in Salt Lake City

Prince of Peace was planted in Salt Lake City fifty years ago. Today the neighborhood is roughly 50% LDS. Our property is literally adjacent to a Mormon church building. We need a liquor license hanging on the wall in order to have wine at Holy Communion. Many go to churches here that include Jesus' name but have never prayed the Our Father out loud with others.

*Whether they know it or not (and some do), they're looking for freedom.*

I suspect that you know the challenges of speaking the gospel to a Mormon. For example, they use the same words with different meanings. They judge truth by inner witness of the Spirit, a "burning in the bosom." Many American Christians are looking for something similar. More than once a visitor from a non-denominational background has said, "I felt the Spirit here today." They've been taught to look for a sensation in order to know the Spirit is at work—that feeling authenticates a "real worship experience."<sup>2</sup>

Here's Paul, formerly LDS, later in the worship band at a Reformed community church, and now worshipping with us:

*"Years ago we attended one of the services. It was my first time in a liturgical service. I remember being kinda weirded out that everyone was reading out loud in unison. I told Emma, "Seems a little cultish." Ha! The things we've been taught formed in us an expectation that liturgical worship is inferior, that such people must have a dead faith because there aren't shouts of amen, crying, or swaying back and forth with hands raised in an emotional frenzy of enthusiastic piety."*



Mormons and Evangelicals both attack the means of grace. So what's the best way to love these restless souls? They're not visiting for a "spiritual moment" or for moralistic preaching; they've had those things in spades. Whether they know it or not (and some do), they're looking for freedom. You know how soul-stirring it is to watch the gospel find the cracks and work its way in! God be praised.

The liturgy of our divine service is a strong witness; it's noticeably different than LDS or Evangelical worship, distinctly Christian and Christ-centered. If you've come from legalism, Lutheran worship is an escape from the treadmill, for your joy. Everything commanded is done. Enjoy your forgiveness! If you're used to a service inherited from revivalism where the climax is commitment or decision or testimony, Lutheran worship shocks you with a different telos: it's all gift! Jesus is here *for you*, not potentially, but really, already. If you have no worship background, you experience the gospel, historical connection, transcendence, and community—each of which could be an article unto itself.<sup>3</sup>

Jon Bauer concluded an insightful article in this publication with these lines that are so worth repeating: *More than anything else, liturgical Lutheran worship is designed to proclaim the gospel. Our rites tell the basic gospel story weekly. [...] Our heritage of hymns aim gospel truths and gospel events squarely at people's hearts by setting them to poetry and music. Lutheran worship brims with the gospel.*<sup>4</sup> Lutheran worship preaches the gospel at all times, using words.

*Lutheran worship is an escape from the treadmill.*

Paul again, who thought our worship "a little cultish" at first:

*As the Lord has drawn us in, some of the things that rubbed us the wrong way or that we were weirded out by have become the most precious. A big one is the confession absolution. I was really thrown off by this at first. But as we've grown in understanding, it's become so beautifully comforting. Another topic is the primary direction in worship—from God to us. The main thing isn't what we do. No, we come in need of being served. We come empty and Christ fills us through the word and sacrament. It's so different from what we've known, upside down. So rich and full and right.*<sup>5</sup>

## Belonging

Consider some thoughts on two things that are rather universal and work toward what I want for Darrel. These things are part of putting flesh on Christ's love and preaching the gospel, with and without words: belonging and being real.

Somewhere I heard James K.A. Smith say that in seeking to reach out you may be answering questions that people aren't asking.<sup>6</sup> For example, you speak about the significance life has in Christ,

*Ask if they ever feel alone, unloved, or anxious.*

but unbelievers may believe they already have a life of significance and meaning. Maybe they're involved in a political ideology or social cause; they're making a difference. They're not looking for more significance. But ask if they ever feel alone, unloved, or anxious. While not our most unique and important gifts as Lutherans, a sense of belonging and being real seem to resonate with the actual life questions of the guests we're trying to love.<sup>7</sup>

It's hard for someone to visit worship for the first time. We all know this, but it bears emphasizing: a culture of hospitality is love. It is Christlike. It is the gospel preached without words, and it must be part of our culture if we don't want to hinder our outreach.

I promised the real Darrel's thoughts. He shared this with me about his first visit:

*The liturgy is certainly something I wasn't familiar with, but it was easy enough for me to feel comfortable with it.*

*For confession and absolution, I stood out of respect, but I did not participate. I felt as a non-believer at the time it would have been disingenuous. But I remember this being in large part the first e-mail I wrote to you because I felt it very bold to forgive sins in God's name.*

*I most remember how everyone went out of their way to make me feel welcome, even though at the time I had no intention of joining.*

But he came back. He felt welcomed—even though a bit jarred by the absolution. He had no intention of joining, but the Lord had other intentions. Darrel became part of our liturgical life together first, then a few rounds of BIC. He was baptized and confirmed two years ago and now serves the Lord here in a number of ways.<sup>8</sup> He wrote:

*The liturgy is awesome because it isn't what I can do for God; it's about what he does for me.*

Hooked by the gospel, Darrel belongs to our Lord and to us.

*"It's so different from what we've known, upside down."*

## Being real

Many visitors come skeptical. Younger people, especially, can smell hypocrisy a mile away. It's important for us to be real, to be authentic.<sup>9</sup> Mitch and Alyssa migrated out of Mormonism and are in BIC with my associate. They came to us after they had vetted us by watching online services. Unsure of the liturgical service, they still ended up visiting, they said, because the preaching is about



Christ and what he has done. They added, "It's obvious you mean it." It's one of the greatest compliments I've ever had as a preacher. It's as the pastor's wife always says: "preach from your heart."

*Younger people can smell hypocrisy a mile away.*

It's a reminder that the office of the ministry is not incidental to worship or outreach, but integral. The Lord has chosen this earthen vessel with his particular gifts and personality to deliver God's gifts. Those reading this have, like me, failed in more ways than we can know. There's no excuse for laziness. But lest we despair, the Lord picks us and lets us participate in his gathering. And love covers over a multitude of sins. One of the harshest criticisms I ever heard of ministry was from another pastor's wife: "You preachers are good at preaching it. You've gotta work on believing it's for you too." The pastor must love the worship, convinced and confident that the Spirit is alive and present and touching lives. Take in the gifts, preacher. Be taken by the gospel.<sup>10</sup>

I'm not making suggestions in what follows. I just want to give you a sense of Sunday morning at Prince of Peace.

We have a paschal candle, hymnals, and vested acolytes. Some people have coffee mugs in the pews. I often use humor in a sermon to connect with God's people. I wear a clerical collar. A modern ensemble sometimes leads the singing. We carry a crucifix in procession for select services. Our average age in worship is 35. We celebrate the Sacrament every Sunday. We invite anyone to come forward and receive a blessing if they're not a member. We can go weeks in a row without a visitor but also had a service once with at least one Muslim family, one Mormon family, several Hindu families, plus Pentecostal and Evangelical families (all part of our school ministry).

I expect that much of the above has neither drawn people in nor pushed them away. I'm grateful to be at a season in life where I'm not interested in criticizing my brothers in ministry. I'm well

aware of my weaknesses and share my story knowing that some details might not seem useful for you. What I can say is that this is me honestly trying to serve these people in the best way I can. I hope that our practices make people ask a good question: why do we do that? If they don't ask, I find ways to explore the question anyway. One member said this about being real: "If our service is too far 'high church' or too far 'casual entertainment,' most people are probably going miss the message." Different may be good; inauthentic isn't.

One more joy of the liturgy is that bodies move. In contrast to worship as a cerebral exercise, a Bible study, or a concert hall, liturgy is multiple modes of participation: sitting, standing, folding hands, coming forward, eating, singing, speaking. These, too, are worship. God chose to redeem us through the incarnation of Christ. He is incarnate to redeem not only my thinking but also the hands I fold and the backside that sits in the pew. Salvation is not an idea 'out there'—it is Christ, really here among us and in us, his body. A couple in their early 80s were recently confirmed, and the woman hugged me on the way out of church. She said, "You told us we're the body of Christ, and I think that calls for a hug." More profound than she realizes. In any case, liturgy encourages bodily worship.

Joel Oesch wrote: "As the Age of Excarnation continues to hypnotize us with shiny new toys and grand promises of pixel-induced bliss, the Christian confession can offer a narrative on human identity that actually addresses the whole person. Our neighbors are not simply minds. They are much more than complicated computers that produce outputs."<sup>11</sup>

There's much here to sort through philosophically and theologically. But this seems easy enough: liturgical worship is in touch with who we really are as the human beings God designed, body and soul. It's purposefully a rather formal way of worship, but it's real things, real people, real presence for people who are bombarded with virtual "realities." It is a habit that forms us, consciously or unconsciously or both.

## Loving them in the best way

I know what I want for a visitor. I can't do the whole list. I wish I were more consistent. I complain about some things and I still do them. I pray it's something like golf—one good shot might be enough to bring you back. Can I make sure something on that list of what I want for Darrel happens? Obviously.

Do I have any tips for you? I'll share with you what mentors have been saying to me for decades. Make liturgy live. Enjoy it. Jesus is there! If worship has become dull, consider your sacristy prayers. Do the old exercise of sitting in the sanctuary on Saturday night and imagining the struggles of the people who will be there in the morning. Have accessible worship folders, comfortable singing, and strong preaching.

"Preach the gospel. Use words if necessary." One of the best intersections of outreach and worship is a Sunday morning where we do both.

<sup>1</sup> If St. Francis actually said it.

<sup>2</sup> Lutheran pastors know about the spirit of the enthusiasts, but I didn't see the worship connection so clearly before reading Bryan Wolfmuehler's *Has American Christianity Failed?*

<sup>3</sup> Of course, it takes time to grab all of that, as most good things do. I've seen it sometimes play out this way: confusion, boredom, curiosity, appreciation.

<sup>4</sup> *Worship the Lord* #106, January 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Paul and his wife Emma were confirmed in the Lutheran faith this year, and their three boys were baptized into Christ.

<sup>6</sup> Most of his presentations and writing are insightful for a pastor trying to reach this culture with Christ. He's a Christian philosopher who clearly puts his finger on the zeitgeist.

<sup>7</sup> These don't supersede the richest gifts: full strength gospel, Scripture alone, Christ at the center, sacraments, honesty, history as the holy, apostolic Church, pastoral care, etc.

<sup>8</sup> I'm not making an absolute statement here, but I've noticed that most often those who are first part of worship regularly and have been loved and found friends here (they belong) are less likely to trail off after confirmation. It's okay if BIC isn't immediate; formation in faith and discipleship is more than handing over data, even if that data is the Word of God. Liturgy forms a rhythm of life in Christ—Jesus words, baptismal life, repentance, absolution, prayer, vocation, etc.

<sup>9</sup> Jon Bauer referenced this in the article mentioned in endnote 4. Check out Barna polls as well.

<sup>10</sup> I'm afraid some Sundays I've exuded all the joy of a flight attendant rushing through the safety demonstration for the third time today. It's definitely possible to see liturgy as something to be used instead of something alive by its content. Lord, have mercy.

<sup>11</sup> "Embodied Living in the Age of Excarnation" at [www.cuw.edu](http://www.cuw.edu).

