



## Confessional Perspectives on Worship

### A Pastor Teaches His Flock

By Phil Hirsch

I love to teach.

I have loved teaching two of my kids how to paint well enough that they have learned that a person can actually get paid to paint someone else's house. There is a lot to teach in passing on this skill—weather and its effect, proper equipment and its preparation and maintenance, proper use of the proper equipment, use of an excellent product compared to an inferior product, proper interaction with the person whose thing is getting painted. And more. At the core of teaching painting is something that actually makes a difference for someone else.

I have loved to teach my kids about painting because they have already seen some value in it. Their desire to be taught about something that mattered to them has made it fun for me.

I also love to teach as a servant of the Word of God. Confessional Lutheran pastors love to teach because what people believe matters greatly.

There is so much to teach the people of our times and places. It is no secret that the present generation has so much more information at their fingertips, but they are less conversant with the basic Bible stories than their grandparents' generation. There is a great need to teach the simplest of Bible stories so that hearers in the assembly are not listening to a foreign language.

There is also a place to take months to work through the thought of Paul as he refuted the nascent Gnosticism that was nagging the Colossians—word by word, thought by thought.

It's valuable to help God's people work through the bigger themes of the Scriptures—righteousness, love, covenant faithfulness, anointed servants of the LORD pointing to the Anointed and Suffering Servant, humans struggling against God and against each other—using all of the Old Testament and all of the New Testament.

It's important to show the practical nature of biblical teaching for the soon-to-be married, for those who have been married for decades, for those who are going to be responsible for another human being

or two or three or seven. It's fun to help a college student, challenged in new ways, to see the reason for the hope he continues to have.

It's fun to pass on one of the rarest of Biblical teachings—the captivity of the human will. Perhaps only the unconditional gospel of Jesus Christ itself is more un-taught than this pivotal, jugular issue, precisely because these two doctrines are two sides of the same coin.

We think about what our people need. We pay attention to the issues affecting them. One could say that we are continually doing a demographic study of one's place and space. What's going on? Are the adults gainfully employed? Are they engaged in their community? Are they following like sheep the high priests of the national or regional or local culture? Are they in nuclear families that are healthy? Are they in dysfunctional extended families? Do their children look them in the eye? Do their children know that they are loved and feel safe and secure in a happy Christian home?

Among the questions I explore concerning those I serve are some that impact them every time they assemble for worship: How well do they understand worship? How deep is their sacramental piety? Do they know why we deliver the goods of the gospel every Sunday? Can they articulate to friends the strengths of Lutheran worship?

How does one teach confessional perspectives on worship within the parish? This *Worship the Lord* series is one possibility. Whether a congregation is facing worship tensions or not, a Board of Elders, Worship Committee, or Church Council can profit from discussing the themes of this series in a devotional/educational context. Preventive educational medicine might even prevent future tensions while it also helps participants to find greater joy and understanding in their worship life. Past issues are all available online, just a link

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away in an email reminder for the upcoming meeting. Encourage participants to read in advance and bring a marked up copy along with questions and comments. Highlight a section of scripture that relates to each issue or theme.

Some previous *Worship the Lord* series may be useful in various settings. Is your congregation planning to build a new church or to remodel your current chancel? Eleven articles beginning in March 2006 featured architectural challenges and solutions in WELS churches. While your situation will not be identical to any of these, the basic principles and insights in the articles can serve almost any situation.

The series “Worship Words to Wrestle With” (12 articles beginning in May 2009) offers helpful analysis of issues that frequently surface in worship discussions. Confessional Lutheran brothers share ideas that help us to be a confessional Lutheran synod.

How does one teach confessional perspectives on worship to a larger audience, in a Bible class setting? Here are three sample possibilities. 1) Connect citations from the Confessions related to the *Hauptartikel*—the chief article, the doctrine of justification through faith in Christ—to

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our priorities and choices in worship. 2) Teach a catechetical review of Baptism relying on Luther’s powerful, colorful language in the Large Catechism. Luther said we should “use” baptism. When assaulted by spiritual struggles, he taught us to retort, “But I am baptized.” Is that kind of thinking deeply embedded in the piety of the people we serve? 3) Study guides are available for “Cleansed and Fed—the Sacramental Life,” a 2011 synod convention essay by *CW* chairman Jon Zabell. See *Worship the Lord* #62 at [connect.wels.net/worship](http://connect.wels.net/worship).

See also on Connect two teaching resources from the 2008 national worship conference archives. Worship Education and Exploration Month (WEEM), by AZ-CA District Worship Coordinator Johnold Strey, offers a plan to coordinate eight Bible classes, one to four sermons, and four special services. Another three-week Bible class series by AZ-CA District President Jon Buchholz is also posted.

How does one teach confessional perspectives on worship in a way that reaches the largest audience in the parish? Our synod’s Commission on Worship has done a great thing as they have modeled how to use the worship folder in a teaching manner without unduly interrupting the flow of the assembly’s time together.<sup>1</sup> Notes that communicate, that teach, can be most helpful. But every now and then a verbal comment (teaching!) is beneficial—for example, about the Trinitarian invocation one Sunday and the Nicene Creed another. “Worship education” comments in the sermon, both appropriation and application, often flow naturally from the text.

For ideas check out a resource prepared by Pastor Wade Johnston in Saginaw, MI. He uses the Western rite to teach two things—the Christian faith and the whys and wherefores of worship. See [www.christsaginaw.com/webdocs/Liturgical%20Catechesis.pdf](http://www.christsaginaw.com/webdocs/Liturgical%20Catechesis.pdf). The result of such catechesis is that doctrine and worship reinforce each other every Sunday.

I wonder if we can learn something here from the Orthodox. I once read that a visitor to their assembly is greeted warmly and encouraged to come back for six months or so before any formal catechesis starts. One needs to imbibe the culture of the assembly before a quickie instruction class, the Orthodox seem to be saying. Our Lutheran worship heritage is also rich and deep. There is so much to “teach” that it seems wise to ask a typical church shopper to stop and think about all that is going on that is completely counter to the prevailing culture of our time and place.<sup>2</sup> The point is: there is much, much more going on in worship than meets the eye. Please don’t be offended if you don’t “get it” the first few times around. Know that you are welcome here while you begin to learn the language and culture of this assembly that is dedicated to the crucified and living Christ.

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Effective worship teaching occurs not only in a curriculum that is taught but also in one that is caught. “Teaching” Lutheran worship, therefore, often happens simply by *just doing it*.<sup>3</sup> Here follow some encouragements for this kind of teaching.

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*Do the text* for your hearers in the assembly you are privileged to serve. This means putting into practice all the isagogical, exegetical, and homiletical skills you can muster, proclaiming the Incarnate Word at the center of that inspired word. This delivers the goods, *Christus pro nobis*. And it happens all over in worship, not only in the sermon.

*Do the rite*—one that the rest of the Church would recognize and could consider for their use. Such rites do not exhibit the preacher's need to get stroked and then meet that need. They do not exhibit the assembly's need to express themselves and then meet that need. Rather, our rites exhibit the assembly's need to receive the goods, and our rites richly meet that need.

*Do worship that serves a diversity of people:* cross-generational, for old and young alike; cross-regional, if you serve people from various parts of the country; cross-cultural, if you serve people from across the globe and across economic divides; and especially cross-anthropological, if you serve people who think about being human in ways far different than you do as a Lutheran. And, of course, this is always the case! Who else on the planet knows and teaches that the human will is captive and does not need stroking, but needs to die in order to live.

*Do catechize*, even in worship, to reinforce the catechism's fundamental truths. Let the unconditional gospel ring out in the assembly's songs and prayers, lessons and sermons. Let the gospel ring out so clearly from an Old Testament text that it offends a Jew. (It must—Christ Jesus is at the center!) Let the *Christus pro nobis* gospel ring out so clearly that it startles a visiting Bible banger. (It must—his theology has a legalistic bent.) Let the Incarnate Word be delivered so clearly that any free-willers present say, "It can't be so simple. Don't we have to...?"

*Do teach*, but don't let explanations of worship's history or rationale overshadow a profoundly simple and remarkably rare reality: delivering the goods of the gospel.

The more our godless, incessantly searching world chases the winds and the more a Christ-less Christianity gathers to encourage or coach each other's free wills to ever higher levels of spirituality, the deeper the problem gets. When such a bound-up soul finds himself in your assembly, let him sense that your worship is different. Let all of your "teaching" options help him to discover *why* it feels different. Let worship's delivery system and structure serve its purpose: to proclaim and distribute Christ Alone to the joy and edifying of the people he loves.



## More worship teaching resources

Here follow excerpts from some excellent essays on worship. Pastors may gain insights from these for their teaching or preaching. A Board of Elders, Worship Committee, or Church Council could benefit from studying longer portions. Church musicians new(er) to a Lutheran church will grow from reading these and discussing them with their pastors.



## WELS National Worship Conference July 22-25, 2014 / Kenosha, WI

Registration begins in March: [www.wels.net/2014worshipconference](http://www.wels.net/2014worshipconference)

One of the 60 presentations echoes ideas in this issue: "BIC Teaches Doctrine and Worship," by Pastor Michael Zarlung. Here's the description.

*Perhaps without realizing it worship guests are first exposed to basic truths of Scripture in worship: original sin, justification, sanctification, etc. They hear the clear voices of Scripture: Bethlehem's angels, God's seraphim, Palm Sunday's crowds. The presenter has created a Bible Information Class that connects basic Bible truths with Lutheran worship. The class is based on this premise: "What we believe influences how we worship, and how we worship reflects what we believe." The presentation provides an overview of the BIC and suggestions for incorporating the approach into other teaching resources.*

Prof. Richard Gurgel, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, offers another topic of special interest to preachers: "Preaching Christ-Centered Sanctification."

## Worship education notes

Some worship education notes for the worship folder, compiled by Jonathan Schroeder (Sharpsburg, GA), are posted under "General Worship" on Connect.



## Worship is an Expression of Unity<sup>4</sup>

We've talked about connecting with the Church of the past. What about connecting with fellow believers today? It's not easy for an individualistic society like ours to think in terms of community.

We're used to personal customization of everything. With a cell phone you can talk to people anywhere you want, any time you want. It's all up to you. But it doesn't stop there. We also customize our ring tones so that the person next to us in the bank line gets to hear "La Cucaracha" when we get an incoming call. It's a challenge for people like us to approach *anything* with a group mentality anymore, much less worship. This was true already in the 1980's when *Christian Worship* was in the works.

Pastor Kurt Eggert wrote:

All too often one hears in our congregations, "My worship is between me and my God!" This is true, of course—no one worships by proxy. But the conception is all too common among us that Sunday worship is a personal and private activity between God and the individual, carried on almost incidentally or even by necessity with others ("The Shaping of the New Hymnal," p.7).

People still tend to think that way today, only now we're also starting to feel the strain this kind of thinking can cause. You can see it in our congregations. One group prefers keeping worship the same. Another group prefers a change. A third group prefers a different kind of change.

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Pastors feel this pressure. We've all had people come to us after church and say, "I didn't like that service." There is an easy way out. Take a survey. Let the majority group decide what worship will be. After all, this is a matter of Christian freedom, right? But if we do worship by survey, what are we teaching our people? We're teaching them that the way we worship together in church is a matter of personal preference. It's not. Worship isn't about what one or another group prefers. Worship is about what the whole congregation needs. A Christian author, Marva Dawn, who writes about worship was once approached after a conference service with the comment: "I didn't like that service." She said, "So what? We're not worshipping you." We need to keep a wary eye open to the natural desire in us and in our members to worship self.

## Theology of the Ordinary<sup>5</sup>

The Ordinary parts of the service became "ordinary," I would suppose, through constant repetition—although we ought not read into ordinary the modern ideas of "boring" or "dull." To the contrary, historically the Ordinary, or prescribed, regular, repeated parts of the service, would have been those most eagerly embraced by the worshiper as those most familiar,—time-worn, to be sure, but comfortable and accessible. They were the best known, and therefore most popular vehicles of the people's worship....

Now something happened somewhere on our way through to the twenty-first century that altered the way we in the West receive information and are shaped by it. Certainly television with its constant bombardment of our senses with images played a major role. One effect of this change is that it has made us a restless people, uneasy with the familiar and bored to tears with the monotony of repeated action.

However, it has struck me in watching the pageantry of graduation or wedding ceremonies or the swearing in of the President of the U.S.A. or Olympic or World Cup ceremonies, that in some ways we are Jeckyl-and-Hyde in this matter of boredom with monotony and repeated actions. A large part of us still craves the repetition of the familiar. In many American communities the removal of Elgar's Pomp and Circumstance from the high school graduation ceremony would meet an intense negative reaction. So in fact it is really a love-hate affair with repeated action that we are dealing with in our times. And we need to understand it in that way when we approach worship and its repeated forms if we are going to deal with this phenomenon effectively in the interest of the people of God and their worship.

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- <sup>1</sup> See samples at [connect.wels.net/worship](http://connect.wels.net/worship) at far right: Worship Variety / Service Folders.
- <sup>2</sup> Of course, delays aren't necessary or wise for everyone. We teach people in whatever ways are faithful and loving.
- <sup>3</sup> Is it possible to use a solid Lutheran form in a way that is unfaithful? Let's not do that. The mission isn't accomplished just because I use the right rite.
- <sup>4</sup> From a 2010 essay by C/W chairman, Jon Zabell: "Worship in the WELS: Then and Now." This essay and the next are available on Connect.
- <sup>5</sup> A presentation by Stephen Valleskey at the 2002 WELS national worship conference.