



Confessional Perspectives on Worship

Bring out Treasures New and Old

By Jonathan E. Schroeder

One Sunday evening, my wife and I went to a dinner party at our friends' house. They served a shrimp and grits recipe we had enjoyed with them many times before. They baked a peach crisp in a cast iron pot we had given them years earlier. They offered a Spanish red we hadn't had, and dessert was a new dish served with the words, "I couldn't wait for you to try this!"

As the night went on and my friends kept bringing out wonderful things, both new and old, I thought of Matthew 13:52 and its application to our role as worship planners.

"Therefore every teacher of the Law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old."

As worship leaders, God asks us to set out a feast of the Gospel for God's worshipping guests. We draw from a storeroom filled with two thousand years of treasures old: the forms, songs, and rites of Christians who came before us. We also pick from the bounty of new artists, poets and authors who are daily adding new treasures to the storeroom. The great joy and challenge of Lutheran worship planning is choosing which treasures to set on the table each week.

The Confessors Treasured Tradition and Innovation

The Lutheran Church is not blindly traditional nor breathlessly innovative, but like our Confessional forefathers, it views tradition and innovation as our privilege, and it treasures both the old and the new.

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Balancing worship tradition and innovation has long been the heritage of the Lutheran Church, because the privilege stems from the freedom of the Gospel. In the Old Testament, God had prescribed

exactly how the people of Israel should worship him. Everything was handed down and protected by law. The New Testament Church, however, is free to worship Jesus in myriad forms, rites, and practices that fall in the middle ground between what is permitted and what is forbidden in worship.¹

As the Church worshiped in the freedom of the Gospel, treasures new and old were handed down from one generation of Christians to the next. By the time Luther entered the scene, liturgical worship represented centuries of traditions and innovations from across the globe and throughout the history of the Church.

While the Lutheran Church released worship planners from the *hoc age* of Roman practice, Martin Luther and our confessional fathers never intended to make a radical departure from the tradition of the Church. Luther wrote: "to be sure, I abolish no ceremonies except those that contradict the gospel. Everything else, I retain unaltered in our church."²

Confessional Lutherans did not abandon 1500 years of worship tradition; they treasured it. They retained the form, but changed the focus, moving it squarely to the focus of both Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions: justification by grace through faith.

Though they treasured tradition, the Lutheran Church never adopted a required or approved rite as other denominations did. Luther felt

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that a commonality in worship forms would be beneficial for the good of the common people,³ but the Confessors did not maintain that every church must worship using the same forms. They claimed the freedom to innovate in worship, too.

Luther treasured that privilege of the Church to innovate in worship: he introduced orders of service in the vernacular and both wrote and encouraged others to write new hymns and songs well fit for the German culture of 1500s.



After Luther had written his new orders, friends and colleagues encouraged him to call a special council (“worship police”?) who would enforce uniformity. Luther objected. The Church is free, and he would not let them rob the Church of her freedom. He felt that each evangelical center could either devise its own liturgy or borrow from others.⁴

The Confessional perspective on worship tradition and innovation was that they treasured both as means to share the Gospel. A review of the basic confessional texts⁵ shows the Confessors removed the Church’s outward form of worship from the question of salvation, but kept it firmly in the area of wisdom and love.

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Our confessions clearly state that not all ceremonies are to be removed, but we retain those beneficial to the gospel. All legalism is unequivocally rejected. The authority of the Church to change its rites is underscored. But liberty in worship forms does not mean a libertine use of worship forms.

For the Lutheran Church today, remembering our confessional forefathers means treasuring both the old and the new, both worship tradition and innovation—because both are the privilege and responsibility of the church.

Which is the greater challenge for us today? Rarely is the WELS

characterized as being on the cutting edge of anything—least of all worship. When *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* was introduced, 95% of our church body adopted it.⁶ We could sooner be accused of acting like lemmings than mavericks in the realm of worship. We have always had a healthy respect for the way our forefathers worshiped.

Perhaps our greater challenge lies in innovation—treasures new. Innovation keeps the Church’s voice varied, fresh, and applicable to our time. It is our privilege, but Christian love means that any innovation needs to be carried out in wisdom and love. The questions, “How does this communicate the Gospel? How does this affect the people in the pew? How does this affect the neighboring churches?” should be asked by worship innovators on a regular basis.

Brothers have an obligation beyond themselves, beyond their congregations.

The Confessors always defended the Church’s right to innovate. However, the confessors also noted that brothers have an obligation beyond themselves, beyond their congregations. Talk about potential worship innovations at circuit meetings. Since the days of Augustine of Hippo, the Christian church has asked brothers to approve of each other’s rites.⁷ Consider how your worship practices impact neighboring congregations—not out of obligation, but out of love.

Tradition and Innovation today

“I like traditional worship.” What does that mean? Does that mean liturgical, hymn-based, organ-accompanied worship? Actually, for most WELSers, that statement simply means that they like worship the way it was done at the church where they grew up.

Often the difference between tradition and innovation is simply a matter of perspective. For a mission church, nothing is traditional, if you use the definition that most do: “This is the way we’ve always done it.” For a Lutheran congregation with God-fearing folk who have used the same two services for a generation, anything—anything!—is an innovation, no matter what part of the tradition of the Church it came from.

Tradition in worship practices can be thought of as a set of three circles: the largest being the whole scope of the tradition of the Holy Christian Church. Inside of that tradition, a smaller circle could represent the tradition of a denomination, and one smaller yet as the tradition of a congregation.

For example, the Lenten act of imposing ashes was not part of my personal tradition or the mission congregation I served. In fact, it fell outside the practice of the majority of congregations in our denomination. It did, however, fall within the largest circle: the tradition of the Holy Christian Church.

Is the imposition of ashes part of traditional worship? It depends on your perspective. For my new congregation in Sharpsburg, GA, it had never been part of congregational practice, so it seemed innovative.

But worship tradition was never meant to be static:

Tradition—in the sense of the gathered experience of the Church at worship throughout its history—is an important working concept. For Lutherans, their worship tradition is always a living tradition, continuously developing and living in a vital parish practice. Building on the experience of the past, the Church moves confidently into the future.⁸

That Lutheran worship tradition is a *living* tradition presupposes something other than treasures old. As worship planners, innovation is our hardest work. It's not difficult to set a table of treasures that God's people are used to. But for our worship to be vibrant and varied we need to bring out the new treasures.

Some treasures are truly new, like a song that has never been used by the Holy Christian Church. Truly new innovations are necessary to ensure that the song of the Church is fresh and adapted to our time and place. They are also not easy. You may be able to write something better than 2000 years of Christian history have preserved for us. You also have the capacity to write something far worse. Innovate with a healthy dose of humility.

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Some innovations are new to our denomination: rites, songs, or practices used in other parts of Christendom, but not in the WELS. For example, the service of Prayer at Close of Day gains popularity each year in our synod. A revision of the historic Compline service, this was innovative in our denomination, but was widely used outside of it.

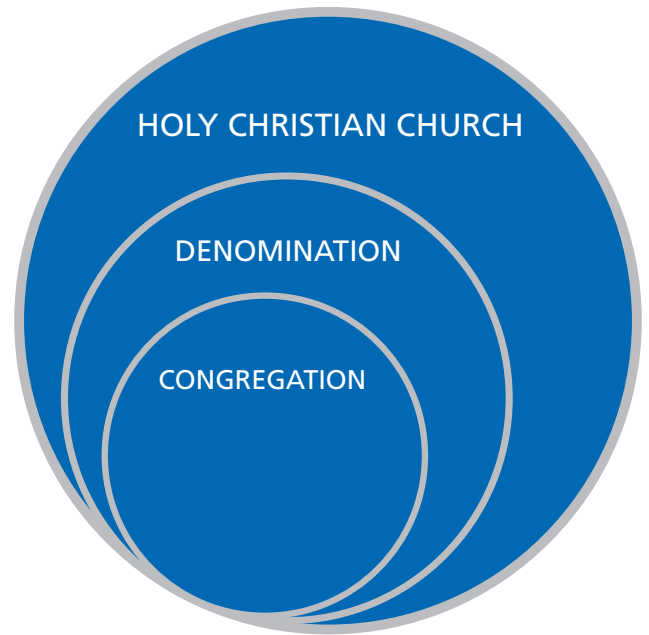
Denominational innovations ensure that our worship tradition is informed by the experience of the Church, not just our slice of it. These aren't easy, either, because worship forms are based on theological presuppositions. Great care must be taken not to import innovative theology along with a form. Innovate with a healthy dose of doctrinal study.

And, of course, some innovations are simply new to you. Thousand year-old forms might seem innovative to your congregation. Have you explored the resources made available by the Commission on Worship?⁹ Worship leaders are charged to bring out not just new or old, but to bring out treasure. Why not make these the first innovations? The first new treasures for God's guests could be the traditions of the Church at large that have been gathered by our denomination, sifted from the chaff, judged to be excellent, and used by sister congregations. Would these things really be "innovative"? Not to the rest of the world, but they might be to your congregation.

Introducing Treasures New and Old

Whether new to the Church or just new to you, introducing forms in your congregation calls for education, patience and a healthy dose of realism.

The couple approached me a few days before Lent and asked to



receive ashes on Ash Wednesday. They knew it was not part of our congregation's tradition, but they always had found it a meaningful beginning to the penitential season. They were happy to do it privately.

I had never imposed ashes before. It didn't fall in my personal tradition or my congregational tradition. I had never thought of introducing the practice. I just smiled at calling it "Ash Wednesday," when it always remained ashless.

The rite¹⁰, however, firmly focuses the participants on their mortality and the words to be spoken one day over us all: ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The imposition of carbon on the head of carbon-based life forms screams, "Don't put on airs! All you are is dust!" It's a powerful reminder of repentance at the beginning of the 40 day walk. It also happens to be squarely in the traditional circle of both Lutheranism and the Holy Christian Church.

The private service that night led to three years of patient congregational instruction concerning this practice. The following year, the Ash Wednesday devotion used the picture of repenting in sackcloth and ashes and why this day is called Ash Wednesday. I noted that for centuries people put ash on their head to remember their mortality. I preached to the sons and daughters of Adam that a second Adam had come to restore all that first lump of dust had destroyed.

At the end of the service, there was a note in the service folder inviting anyone interested to remain for the rite of imposition of ashes. Thirty people stayed and left with ash on their forehead in the shape of a cross.

A few days later I gathered reactions to this "innovation." A common response mentioned that ash on the forehead felt like an ostentatious display of repentance. Many wanted to be less obvious.

The next year, we "innovated" again. In the weeks leading up to Lent we included notes on a different method of imposition. We would impose in the European style: sprinkling dry ash on the crown of the

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head, rather than oiled ash in a cross on the forehead. The change meant to preserve the focus of rite while allaying concerns about Matthew 6.

On the third Ash Wednesday more than 120 people stayed for the rite of imposition of ashes. This old rite—never part of our congregational tradition—has become a treasured action each Ash Wednesday. We have followed the same pattern of patient instruction with treasures that are truly new: new songs, new rites, and new practices.

That same day, however, I was reminded of what happens if there is no education or patience in worship innovations. One of my members had parents visiting from the Midwest. These WELS members had never been to our church and certainly weren't part of our process of patient education and instruction over the past years.

They sent word to me that they "had never seen that before in a Lutheran Church. That's Roman Catholic." Of course, what they meant was that they hadn't seen it before in *their* Lutheran Church, and that made it seem Roman Catholic *to them*. Sometimes the difference is simply perspective.

Worship innovators need a healthy dose of realism. Not every innovation will appeal to every member. Not every innovation will end up being treasured. That doesn't mean we shouldn't innovate. Just make sure it's treasure.

Consider the treasures Luther added to the storeroom. His *Formula Missae* was drastically different in focus, but nearly identical in form to its precursor, the late Medieval Roman mass. Mostly, this was treasures old. It was well received. His innovative order of service, the *Deutsche Messe*, retained the structure of the mass but used the vernacular and newly composed hymns—treasures new. So how did Luther's innovations fly?

A full year after the introduction of the German Mass he said: "The gospel suffers great contempt. When we initiated the German mass, everyone wanted it; now it is all the same to you whether it is in German or Latin.... The songs have been composed and are sung for your sake so that you can sing them here and at home, but you sit here like a block of wood."

Twenty years later, the picture hadn't changed much. Joseph Herl references a list of the liturgical propers sung in Wittenberg in 1543-1544 (two years before Luther's death) and concludes that 90 percent were found in pre-Reformation liturgical books.¹¹ So much for the new treasures!

Martin Luther treasured innovation: he gave songs, rites and practices to the Lutheran Church in Wittenberg and around the world, but not all of his innovations were appreciated—even in his home church.

Conclusion

Like the host of a dinner party, your worship storehouse is full of treasures God wants you to share with your gathered guests on Sunday morning. What will you bring out? Treasures old, for certain: lessons, rites and songs that have been treasured by the church for centuries. Like that familiar shrimp and grits dish we had eaten many times before, bring out old worship treasures, not because they're old, but because they're good.

Also bring out the new and emerging treasures of the Church: new songs, new styles, new texts. Like a dish your guests have never had, set the table with new worship treasures that let your guests see God's grace in brand new ways.

We don't bring out a rite, simply because it is old. We don't use a song simply because it is new. We bring them out, because they are treasure—whether new or old, treasure fit for God's gathered guests.

So bring it out with joy! Gather your guests, bring out the old and say, "Remember when we had this?" Then bring out the new with equal joy and say, "You've got to try it!" Not because it's old; not because it's new; because it's treasure.

*Not because it's old; not because it's new;
because it's treasure.*



- ¹ Brunner, Peter. *Worship in the Name of Jesus*, 221.
- ² Herl, Joseph. *Worship Wars in Early Lutheranism*, 10.
- ³ Read Luther's "Letter to the Livonians" (AE 53:41) for pastoral perspective on puncting tradition and blazing your own trail in worship forms.
- ⁴ WA, Br 3, No. 793, 373-374, referenced in the introduction to the *Deutsche Messe* in AE 53.
- ⁵ Augustana VII, XV, XXVI, XXVIII with corresponding coverage in the Apology, and Formula of Concord X.
- ⁶ Bryan Gerlach called it, "The most successful denominational hymnal, by adoption percentage, of the last generation."
- ⁷ Maschke, Timothy. *Gathered Guests*. CPH: 2003, 451.
- ⁸ Schalk, Carl and Halter, Carl. *Handbook of Church Music*. CPH: 1978, 16-17.
- ⁹ The new hymnal project just begun by WELS will continue the work of CW: Supplement, gathering innovations for the Church and our denomination that are quickly becoming treasured parts of congregational tradition.
- ¹⁰ See CW: Occasional Services.
- ¹¹ Herl, 11-14.