



Confessional Perspectives on Worship

Bringing it All Together

By Earle Treptow

"The world is like a drunken peasant. If you lift him into the saddle on one side, he will fall off on the other side. One can't help him, no matter how one tries. He wants to be the devil's."¹

Dr. Luther knew whereof he spoke. He watched it play out in the ministry of Andreas Carlstadt, his colleague in Wittenberg. Concerned that the common people might not recognize the difference between a Roman church and an evangelical church if they held anything in common, Carlstadt believed that everything that hinted at Rome and its formalism had to go. No outward forms. No ritual. No art. Like a drunken peasant, he fell off on the other side. He got so caught up in his radical reformation that he painted himself into a doctrinal corner, insisting that God deals with us "spiritually, not sacramentally."² In so doing, he robbed the Sacrament of the Altar of its power, turning it into a mere rite to be done only because Christ commanded it. Ironically, in so doing, "Carlstadt himself became a formalist."³

We who have witnessed the drunken peasants in history want to learn from their mistakes. Knowing the drunken peasant residing within, we recognize our propensity to fall off on the other side. We rightly plead for the Lord's mercy, asking him to keep us balanced as we serve his people. It is particularly in the matter of worship that we have reason to offer that prayer. The last eleven issues of *Worship the Lord* have been an answer to such a prayer. United under the theme, "Confessional Lutheran Perspectives on Worship," the articles have considered worship from several different angles. They have offered helpful perspectives for all who have been given roles in the worship life of a congregation. This article aims at bringing it all together, to reflect on the collective wisdom offered to ensure that we avoid "drunken peasant syndrome."

Each day in the newspaper I see a quote from the founder of the *Denver Post*, Frederick G. Bonfils: "There is no hope for the satisfied man." The paper doesn't provide the context for that statement, figuring that it stands on its own as a maxim. Theologically, we might beg to differ in light of the Lord's encouragement to be content. However, giving Mr. Bonfils the

benefit of the doubt, we understand him to say: "Don't ever get to the point where you think you cannot improve. You need to grow as an individual throughout your life. You need to look for new and better ways to do what you are doing now." It's a stewardship issue: to make the best possible use of what the Lord has chosen to give us.

No silver bullet

This certainly has application to our privileged work as leaders in worship. The Lord desires faithfulness from all, regardless of age and station in life, whether we fit in the category of novice or master, rookie or veteran. Faithfulness includes critiquing what we do in worship and asking questions like these: What could be done better for the benefit of God's people? Where can I grow as a worship leader? How can we as a congregation make better use of the gifts the Lord has given for our corporate worship? Unfortunately, the devil takes the encouragement to faithfulness and twists it ever so slightly. He cleverly contends, "Faithfulness means making changes in order to reach more people. If you aren't growing, you probably haven't made enough changes yet."

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Jonathan Fisk, in his book, *Broken: 7 "Christian" Rules that Every Christian Ought to Break as Often as Possible*, identifies a common

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phenomenon in the visible church. He calls it, "IfWeCanJust." In his inimitable style, Fisk addresses the tendency of people, under the umbrella of faithfulness, to search for the changes that will make all the difference, allowing the church to be what it really ought to be. "IfWeCanJust change the liturgy, perfect it, get it right, bring it back, take it forward, then! Then the churches will at last become the Church God wants them to be."⁴ We might call it "looking for the silver bullet" in order to engage more people and grow. Fisk wonders, "What if the silver bullet is realizing there is no silver bullet?"⁵

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That's a useful reminder for us in the area of worship. We would do well to give up the quest for that perfect worship style that will revitalize the congregation and its members. Growth and revitalization happen not through a worship style, but through the Spirit's work in Word and Sacrament. The Lord who earnestly desires the salvation of sinners has packed his Word with power. He promises that he will work through it to achieve his purposes and accomplish what he desires. The worship leader's task, then, is simply to present God's Word clearly and to trust the Spirit to work through that proclamation to convict and convince as he wills.

Clever as he is, the devil twists that truth, too. He argues that, since the Word is the real power, making any changes in worship demonstrates a lack of trust in the Word's power and the Lord's promise. The Lord who worked through the liturgy in use a hundred years ago to create and sustain faith can do the same today; he hasn't suddenly become dependent on human ingenuity. Therefore, there is no need even to reflect on what you are doing in worship, let alone consider ways to improve it. The mark of orthodoxy, the Liar contends, is trusting the Lord and avoiding any thought of change. And the drunken peasant falls off on the other side.

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I know better than to charge others with my failures, but maybe some will see themselves in this description. I typically read *Preach the Word* and *Worship the Lord* within days of their arrival. (*What a good WELS boy am I!*) I finish them both in about ten minutes. In honor of all the neat freaks I have ever known, I place them in a handsome binder on my shelf for ready reference. Unfortunately, I almost never bother to refer to them again. (*What a bad WELS boy am I?*)

I'm not suggesting that a good Lutheran pastor will read portions of *Worship the Lord* every day. But we do well to consider, carefully and prayerfully, what we do in worship and why. That careful,

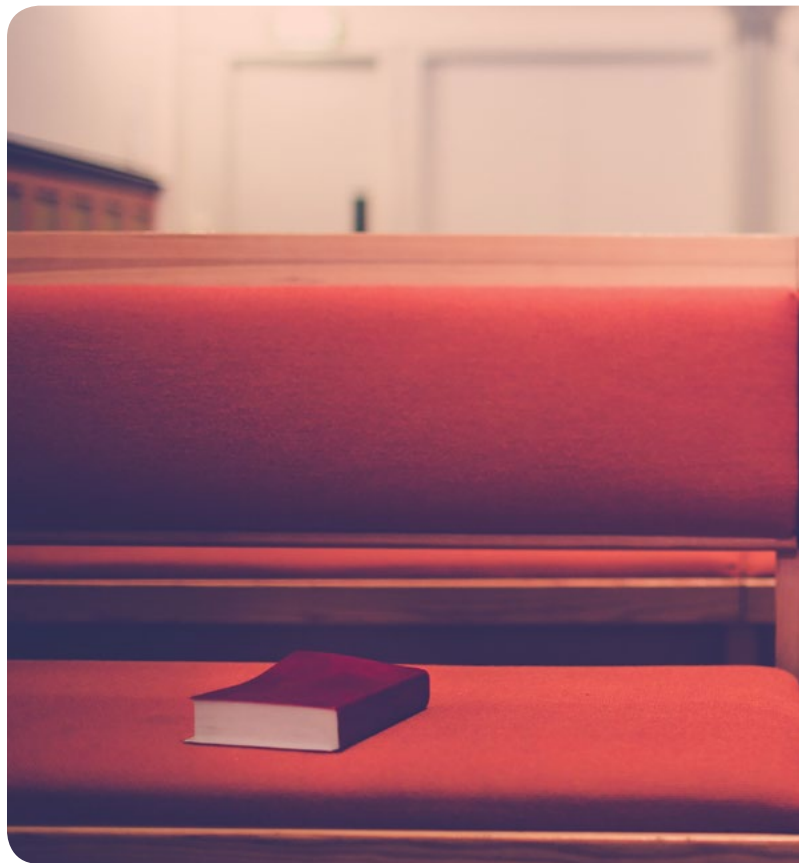
prayerful consideration occurs most naturally in conjunction with worship planning. The next time you do a block of worship planning, whether in blocks of three or six or twelve months, perhaps begin with a critique of your worship. One way to do that is by reading through the issues in this series, picking out some key points, and then evaluating the congregation's worship life in light of those points. Note with thanksgiving the areas of strength and/or growth. Identify areas in which growth could occur, and then let those have an impact on your worship plan. Do so as a matter of stewardship, to make the most of the gifts the Lord has entrusted to you. Do so out of love for your brothers and sisters in Christ who will gather to hear the risen Savior. Do so in the certainty that, until we gather around the throne to worship the Lamb, there will always be areas in which to grow and improve.

As I read through the articles in this series, I noted some thoughts to keep in mind when next I plan worship. I share these with the prayer that you might find them helpful in evaluating worship and ensuring a balanced approach.

A balanced approach in worship

1) *You make changes in worship only after careful evaluation and instruction.*

Pastor Obvious says, "People can be very sensitive about changes in worship." Some, because of their personal history, draw a direct line between a change in worship and a change in doctrine. It doesn't matter how minor or insignificant the change may be from your perspective, they view it as major and significant. Thank



God for congregation members who are concerned about purity of doctrine! Though we might normally view sensitivity to change in worship as a nuisance, we would be better served to think of it as an opportunity to instruct.

Instead of making a change and then dealing with the fallout, consider in advance the impact a change may have on your brothers and sisters in Christ. Then take the time to offer patient instruction, whether in a class, in the worship folder, in an e-mail newsletter, or all of the above. If you hold yourself to that obligation, to do the work of teaching God's people about a change, you will spend more time up front evaluating the change and will free yourself from some unnecessary frustration. (This isn't fail-safe, of course. Some may refuse instruction because they have their hearts set on being upset by changes.) Since changes in worship may have an impact on brothers in the area, bring them into the conversation. Get their feedback.

2) *You strive for excellence in every aspect of worship.*

"Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise."⁶ The One we worship deserves the very best we have to offer. This best may differ from the best in a neighboring congregation. We may have a superior worship space. They may have better instruments and more talented musicians. We may have more gifted vocalists. They may have a better sound system. The Lord who has given us these gifts desires that we do the very best with what we have. He asks us to return to him only what he has given to us. While we will be content with what the Lord has provided, we will not consider

contentment a license for laziness. Part of striving for excellence is to identify areas for improvement. That might be in offering a healthy worship variety or in sprucing up the worship space. It could be in planning for a better worship-leading instrument or providing music for musicians. We plan and strive with the prayer that the best we offer today will pale in comparison to the best we will offer five years from now. That's what the Lamb is worthy to receive!

3) *You equip members to appreciate the distinctive nature of Lutheran worship.*

You teach to enrich people's time in worship, to move them to treasure Christ-centered, evangelical worship, and to empower them to explain to others the strengths of Lutheran worship. You demonstrate how the heart of Lutheran worship is the heart of the gospel: the teaching of justification through faith alone. You help worshipers see how Christ's work for us takes center stage in the service. You teach how the Lord himself comes to serve his gathered people through the means he has established, as the absolution is proclaimed, the Word is read and preached, and the Sacraments are administered. You explain the parts of the service so that it becomes ever more powerfully connected to faith or life.

Those who wish to teach must commit themselves to learning. That requires reading regularly in the area of worship, even while we budget time for reading other topics. Teaching takes intentional effort, making opportunities to teach. You might offer, as part of a core, repeating curriculum, a course on worship that deals both with overarching principles and specific details about orders of service commonly used. You could look for ways to include worship teaching in sermons, whether in a special series on the canticles, for example, or by including the *Kyrie* in an application. Some include, on a regular basis throughout the year, explanations in the service folder regarding the parts of the service. (Helpful samples are on the Commission on Worship Connect site.) Others occasionally offer verbal explanations, for the sake of those who will not read the italicized print in the service folder. Be judicious in that regard. William Cwirla, in an essay included in *Liturgical Preaching*, offers a caveat about verbal explanations: "So-called 'narrative' or 'teaching' liturgies, however well-intentioned, suffer from the defect of being overly explicit. They are pedantic at best, interminably tedious at worst. The same can be said of the general chit-chat that accompanies most presiding at the liturgy. . . . Liturgical speech needs to be *al dente*, not overcooked. It should invite conversation and stimulate imaginative catechesis, setting forth biblical treasures, old and new, like an old merchant at a swap meet. Liturgy is better prayed than picked apart; it is intended to be chanted, not dissected."⁷

4) *You evaluate your preaching regularly.*

Do you remember the horrible assignment given after you preached your first sermon in class? "Watch the video of your sermon." Awkward and painful are the two words most would choose to describe the experience. Perhaps that initial experience so scarred you that you promised you would never watch again. Go ahead and break that promise. Difficult as it may be, watching yourself preach can be most useful. You are far more likely to listen to



constructive criticism from you than from anyone else.

Evaluate the preached sermon in several areas. Most importantly, assess the division of law and gospel to see if it came through as specifically and clearly as you thought it did in the manuscript. Listen for speech patterns to see if there is good variety in pacing and in volume. Listen for overused words and for sentences that drag. Look for habits that might annoy, like repeatedly licking your lips or bobbing your head or fiddling with the ring on your finger. Note what you found effective and helpful in presentation. Particularly note what might have been less than helpful. Keep an electronic notebook of your comments and commit yourself to addressing the areas of concern. Consider also asking for feedback from select members by means of an evaluation form provided to them before a service.⁸ Ask a brother in ministry to watch a recorded sermon and to offer a critique. The process may be painful, but it will certainly be helpful.

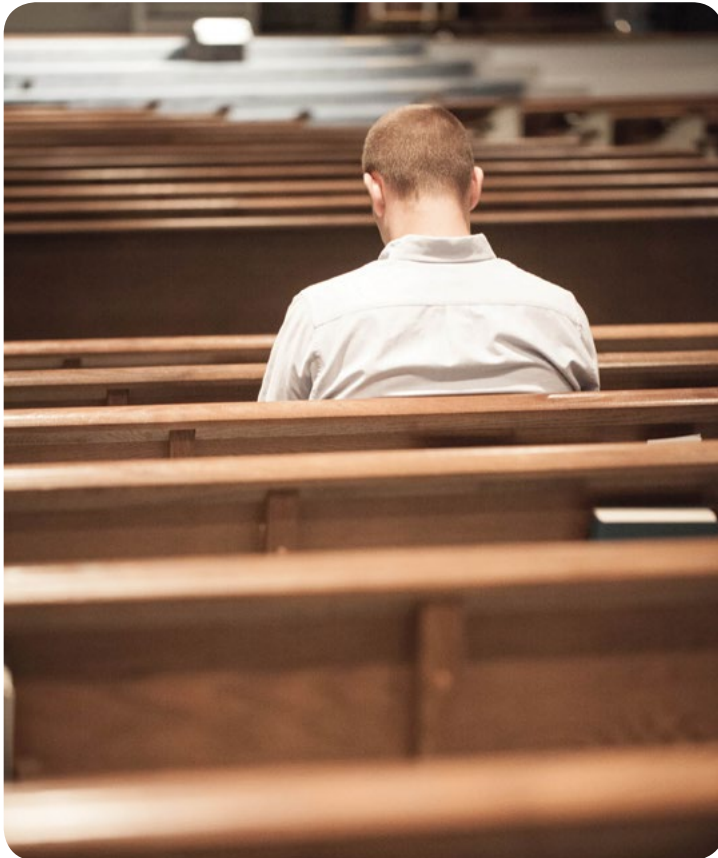
5) *You do not make your approach to worship the standard by which all others are to be judged.*

The Lord wants us to be faithful to him, his people, and the calling we have graciously received to serve in his church. The desire to be faithful moves us to expend time and effort to grasp anew the principles of worship given in Scripture and handed down to us by our forebears. After expending that kind of effort and determining

how to conduct worship in a way that glorifies the Savior and edifies his people, it is only too easy to think that everyone else ought to come to the same conclusions. Without ever intending to do so, we begin to think that our way is the right way, the only way that honors the Lord, trusts his promises, and demonstrates love for souls. Those who deviate from that pattern, we assume, either were too lazy to think the matter through carefully or too selfish to give up their personal preferences. It is one short step from there to an arrogance that sits in judgment of others.

Rather than taking a place in the judge's seat, we take the role of a servant. We honor our brothers by talking to them. Better, we honor our brothers by listening to them. The prayer of St. Francis comes to mind: "Grant that I may not so much seek to be understood, as to understand." It may be that we will have to point out a weakness or error in our brother's way. Or, it may be that we will better understand why he has chosen to do what he is doing. The possibility even exists that we could learn something from our brother that would have a positive impact on our worship.

How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!⁹ That unity is God's gift to us. We want to do all that we can to preserve it by loving our brothers, respecting them, and trusting them.



¹ *Luther's Works*, Volume 54, Fortress Press: 1967, p. 111.

² Quoted in Koelpin, Arnold, "What is Scriptural and What is Traditional in Lutheran Church Work?" p. 7. Available at wlsessays.net.

³ Koelpin, p. 7.

⁴ Fisk, Jonathan. *Broken*, CPH: 2012, p. 165.

⁵ Fisk, p. 176.

⁶ Revelation 5:12.

⁷ Cwirla, William. "Unfolding the Meaning of the Liturgy," in *Liturgical Preaching*, CPH: 2001, p. 137.

⁸ A form developed by Pastor Jon Hein is available under "Planning for Worship" at connect.wels.net/worship.

⁹ Psalm 133:1