



Worship the Lord

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Sharing worship ideas with WELS pastors

Articles on key worship concepts may be valuable for analysis in a pastors' study group, board of elders, or worship committee. As WELS parishes work with these concepts, our worship will be enriched for the sake of both members and guests. It will be faithful to Scripture, to our Lutheran heritage, and to our challenges and opportunities as 21st century followers of Jesus. After serving a multicultural parish since 1997 (Risen Savior, Milwaukee), Pastor Fisher became Director of Mission Advancement at Wisconsin Lutheran High School (WLHS) in 2011. He has served beyond the parish by supervising whataboutjesus.com, as a consultant for Schools of Outreach, and on the governing boards for Wisconsin Lutheran College and WLHS.

Culture Clashes with the Not-So-Western Rite

By Kenneth J. Fisher

Cultures Won't Clash in Heaven

"To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!" (Revelation 5:13)

How we long to join the chorus of the Church Triumphant gathered from "every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb" (Revelation 7:9), joyfully praising God for rescuing us from our sin-filled, tear-stained lives! How we long for the worship of heaven! There we will be formed from every culture into God's one chosen people, his universal royal priesthood, his united holy nation. In one blended voice we will forever sing the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light (2 Peter 2:9).

Worship in heaven won't require thoughtful planning, arduous practice, or sensitivity to another culture. It will be spontaneous, united, heartfelt, perfect. I can't wait! But that worship has to wait.

In what language will we sing? Hebrew? Greek? German? Which instruments will set the tempo? European violins? African drums? Bamboo flutes? What style of music will unite us? Four-part harmony? Georgian chant? Gospel music's call and response? Will we need hymnals? Worship planners wrestle with such questions now, but not then. Until then, choices have to be made about music, instruments, hymns, and liturgical forms to communicate in the culture of the people who have called us to serve them.

Worship Takes Places within a Specific Culture

Longing for heaven's perfect worship doesn't change the reality that we are part of a particular culture, here and now. God calls the Church Militant to proclaim the gospel as his "witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8). The gospel crosses into each different culture.

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Culture

WORSHIP WORDS TO WRESTLE WITH

Purpose

Sacraments

Tradition

Variety

Catholicity

Accuracy

Excellence

Contemporary

Time

Love

Evangelism

Culture



Culture is defined in various ways. Most sociologists understand culture as consisting of four elements that are “passed on from generation to generation by learning alone.” These are:

- **Values:** ideas about what in life seems important, guiding the rest of the culture.
- **Norms:** expectations of how people will behave in various situations.
- **Institutions:** the structures of a society within which values and norms are transmitted.
- **Artifacts:** aspects of material culture, derived from a culture’s values and norms.¹

For the sake of simplicity, let’s define culture as a shared system of behavior, values, and beliefs. *The key is that a culture is shared. An individual doesn’t have his own culture. Groups share a culture.* Notice also that culture focuses on what we can observe (behavior) as well as what you can learn only in time from careful listening (values and beliefs).

Some cultures are easy to see. Hispanics, African-Americans, Hmong, Caucasians – all have different cultures and many sub-cultures carved along generational and socio-economic lines. However, culture is defined by more than economics, age, race or language. Just ask a new adult convert if Lutherans don’t have a distinct culture! Garrison Keillor has made millions chuckle by satirizing our distinctly Lutheran institutions, behaviors, values, and beliefs.

Culture Doesn’t Matter – And It Does!

Here are two paradoxical truths:

In Christ, culture doesn’t matter.

In worshipping Christ, culture matters a great deal.

St. Paul, a Pharisaic Jew with Roman citizenship, was a bi-cultural missionary. He deftly navigated both Jewish and Greek cultures. Through the gospel, Paul saw all people the same – sinners needing the Savior. Culture didn’t matter. All cultures desperately need Christ’s rescue. “There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:22b-23). Paul knew that all are restored to him through one common means, the gospel in

Word and Sacrament. “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek..., for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:26-28) In Christ, culture doesn’t matter.

However, the truth remains that in worshipping and communicating Christ, culture matters a great deal. With 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 as his mission motto, Paul expounded Old Testament texts in Jewish services to prove that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah. He quoted Greek philosophers in a sermon at Athens while strumming a chord with their natural knowledge of God. He didn’t change the message: Christ-crucified. But he sought the best ways to proclaim that message to whatever culture he was called to preach in order to “share in its blessings.” Christian love calls for no less today as, together, we worship the Lord in our own particular culture or cultures.

The Western Rite Is Multi-Cultural

Worship conversations sometimes seem to shove a false wedge between those who want to maintain a traditional form of Lutheran liturgy and those who want worship to speak to this day and age. The gospel doesn’t force us to make a choice between these two goals. We can treasure Lutheran liturgical worship. It has historical value; it highlights the sacraments; it showcases the gospel. At the same time, in the context of the heritage of the historic liturgy we treasure the freedom to plan services that are meaningful and culturally appropriate. This is both a pastoral challenge and an opportunity for worship planners.

I am proud to be a liturgical Lutheran. I am not proud to be a German, because I am not of German descent. Neither is our liturgy. Lutheran worship doesn’t use a “German” liturgy. Although the Reformation began in Germany, Martin Luther carefully and cautiously adapted the historic liturgy, the Western Rite. This liturgy shows influences that are Greek, African, Middle Eastern, Italian, French, Spanish, German, and more. It is rooted in thousands of years of tradition and has thrived within hundreds of different cultures. It has been adapted and amended as it has conveyed the gospel in Word and Sacrament to millions upon millions for thousands of years. True: a particular form of worship is not mandated in the New Testament (nor in the Lutheran Confessions). But the Western Rite has served the church well on multiple continents in a myriad of cultures. That’s why Lutheran worship transcends contemporary culture and does not bind us to any one culture.

The Scriptures do not mandate a particular form of service. They do demand that the law’s crushing blows and the gospel’s healing salve be applied with precision. They do demand a high regard for our Lord’s promises in his Sacraments. They do demand the firm belief that the Holy Spirit is present and active in Word and Sacrament, creating a people for God and continually renewing the people of God. Praise the Lord that our liturgical worship accomplishes all of this for people in every culture!

There is another major benefit that crosses our varied cultures: Liturgical worship annually traces the cycle of Christ’s life for us. It allows us to join in the cycle of seasons and celebrations. As we follow the Church calendar through Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week, Resurrection, and Pentecost, we are more than

mere spectators of history. We celebrate his grace, share in his sorrows, and exult in his victories for us. Liturgical worship offers rich lessons in a swirl of colors, symbols, and customs – no matter what our culture.

Treasure What We Have Received

An African-American member of a WELS church, who grew up in various non-liturgical African-American churches, explained to me how the liturgical worship benefitted him:

I like the rote [of liturgical worship]. It helps me to remember. In the past I wouldn't always get any clarity from the much longer services [in other churches]. You never knew what to expect from week to week. . . . Lent wasn't observed. I didn't know what Maundy Thursday was. . . . I don't need you to get me to perform so you somehow can get me to "feel" the Holy Ghost.

After a dozen years of serving a cross-cultural setting, several values in patterns of liturgical worship are evident:

- Hymns and liturgy proclaim Scripture's essential teachings.
- Means of Grace focus.
- A clear, Christ-centered message.
- A common experience for God's people.
- An annual review of Christ's work for us and in us.
- A weekly review of God's plan of salvation.
- A unified theme for the day.
- Continuity for God's people.
- Participation by those who are illiterate.

There are great blessings in liturgical worship both for those new to the faith and for those long familiar with the liturgy.

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Cultural Choices Still Need To Be Made

The worship choices before us will not conveniently fall into "traditional" liturgy and "contemporary" worship categories. The choices we must make are simply more complex than that. We need to carefully wrestle with choices about hymns, musical instruments, the use of arts, etc. The challenge for us is to understand our culture (or cultures) so that we best proclaim the gospel both in our preaching and in the liturgical forms we use. For example, those who plan worship will determine how best to teach the meaning of a Paschal candle (if present), the liturgical colors, and the ebb and flow of the church seasons. Children's sermons are great opportunities to explain why a pastor wears an alb and a stole or how the church year proclaims Christ for us.

In planning worship, we exercise care in selecting and adapting liturgical forms that are appropriate to our people. Not every hymn in the hymnal, supplement, or songbook should be sung in every congregation. Today we have a hymnal and a supplement with multiple liturgical forms. Not all are appropriate for every place

depending on the congregation's musical gifts and training. The western church, except for Roman Catholicism following the Council of Trent, has never required slavish adherence to one form. Martin Luther designed the German Mass with new songs set to new tunes in the language of the people. He also retained a form of the Latin Mass. He carefully composed new hymns in German for the people to sing. He taught. He composed. He planned. So must we. That won't come easily.

In the multi-cultural parish that I served, Mother's Day often topped Easter's attendance because our school children made breakfast for the mothers who were mostly African-American. In the culture of our neighborhood, mothers earned high praise. The church was packed. Motherhood was on everyone's mind. Although our liturgical service focused still on Christ for us, the theme of the day stressed the blessings of Christian motherhood in the light of Christ being our Savior. The mothers appreciated the gospel's comfort applied to their lives in God's family.

Avoiding Cultural Insensitivity Calls for Love and Patience

When it comes to worship, one size doesn't fit all. Dangers lurk on either side of the divide between those who strive to be "contemporary" and those who prefer a constricted implementation of "historic liturgy." Walk, instead, the narrow Lutheran middle.

Lutheranism does not hesitate to critically examine its heritage from the past, subjecting it to sound theological, psychological and sociological examination for its meaning and usefulness for our own time. In doing so, Lutheranism is reminded that a sentimental return to any earlier age, ignoring later history, is no more adequate an answer than to suggest that each age must start anew to fashion structures of worship and prayer.²

Do we recognize the need for new forms and different expressions in different cultures? Do we understand that there will be a difference between liturgical worship in a Hispanic congregation and an Anglo one? People seem to understand that common sense and love for the Great Commission calls for you to preach in the Spanish language to Hispanics who don't understand English. Does the same brotherly love rejoice when a Hispanic service features the beat of drums and the strumming of guitars without organ? It will, according to my associate who served the Hispanics in our neighborhood, if you've grown to understand Hispanic culture.

The Western Rite has used various styles of music throughout the centuries from Ambrosian chant, to Gregorian chant, to Bach, to folk music. It still can be adapted to meet the needs of the church in different cultures today. Following the Western Rite doesn't require everyone marching to the exact same tune. It is the gospel that relates to and challenges each culture with its life-changing message of forgiveness and hope in Christ Jesus. A liturgical structure is a clay jar – just as we are – for carrying that treasure to people everywhere.

God doesn't love one style of music more than another – even if we do. Not everyone who gathers at public worship has the same physiological, sociological, and psychological needs. God created people with magnificent variety. Have you ever thought about what we ask some people to give up when coming to a typical WELS service?

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I was really pleased with the first sermon that I heard [at a WELS church]. I could understand each word. But the music was so slow. It had no meaning to me. I could not sing along. I was raised on Gospel music. I sang in the Gospel choir. The music [in a WELS church] was a real stumbling block to me. What I learned to do was to just read along when everyone else was singing. Now I can actually sing along...but it took a while.³

Christian love calls for us to make decisions about worship out of love for others. St. Paul reminds us: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:3-4). Worship isn’t about personal preference. One person may love Bach’s music, another may prefer Gospel music. As those who lead and plan worship, we are called on to make decisions with the desires and needs of everyone in mind. “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:2-3). In public worship, not *I*, but *we* is the important word.

Because we are sinners, we are constantly tempted to elevate our own cultural understandings, practices, and preferences as being the “only right way” for all. We are constantly tempted to regard the beauty and the gifts of another culture as inferior to our own. Anthropologists label this bias for one’s own culture as “ethnocentrism.” More biblically we might call it a lack of neighborly love. As Martin Luther once said (defining the corruption of original sin) “*Homo incurvatus in se est*—human beings are turned in upon themselves.”⁴

Are we listening to the experience of our brothers and sisters from other cultures who worship in our midst? Are we who lead ready to make choices that reflect patience and love that is sensitive to others’ tastes? A few years ago, at Risen Savior we began celebrating “Juneteenth Day” on a Sunday near to June 19. Do you know what “Juneteenth Day” is? It is an African-American holiday which celebrates the Emancipation Proclamation finally being announced in Texas. Why remember this event in worship when the majority of members are not African-American? In a word – “respect.” Respect for the African-American experience of the many who are members. As a multi-ethnic congregation, we sought to avoid the typical majority culture attitude of “You can come as long as you act like one of us.” We tried to demonstrate that we were open to growing in our understanding of another’s culture. The common preaching value was clear. The lessons, hymns, and liturgy connected the unknown freedom of American slaves to the spiritual freedom that many miss in Christ. Of course, this was introduced carefully. I wouldn’t recommend that most congregations follow this specific example, because it wouldn’t make sense in an all-white community to celebrate an African-American holiday.

Worship planning is challenging. With all of the options for variety in lessons, songs, and styles, it might sound easier to open the hymnal to page 15 each week and just do the same old same old. That’s why it’s easy to drift off the Lutheran middle of the road and wander down

the path of shallow traditionalism or take a detour into things more trendy. A final thought points to a better way:

Can we avoid both stale traditionalism and empty modernism in favor of culturally attuned, sacramental worship that connects the members of the Church both past and present? To the extent that we can be all things to all men, while refusing to be of the world, we can. To the extent that Christ empowers us through the Gospel, we will.⁵

“The liturgy is neither exclusively ‘Lutheran’ nor ‘German.’ ... Much of today’s negative propoganda against the liturgy is inaccurate.

The western rite is a transcultural and multicultural product with roots from ancient times in North Africa, Syria, Palestine, and the like. This same frame of worship is shared by three quarters of a billion Roman Catholics, the main Eastern Orthodox Churches, the pre-Calcedonian Churches, the Anglican Communion, and over seventy million Lutherans, the majority of whom are not German.”⁶

¹ Houlst T. F., ed. *Dictionary of Modern Sociology*. Littlefield Adams, 1969. p. 93.

² Halter, Carl and Carl Schalk, eds., *Handbook of Church Music*. CPH, 1978. p. 16.

³ An African-American, now a long-time WELS member.

⁴ Wendland, Paul. “The Apostle Paul and Culture.” Presented to the World Seminary Conference, August 7-11, 2006. *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Summer 2008. pp. 5-6. Available at wlsessays.net.

⁵ Zabell, Jon. “Being Faithful with Law and Gospel in Contemporary Worship.” Presented to a pastors’ study group in Denver on March 11, 2002.

⁶ Krause, Richard. “Worship Wars at the Dawn of a New Millennium.” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Summer 1999. p171.

