



Worship the Lord

No. 38, September 2009

Sharing worship ideas with WELS pastors

Articles on twelve 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. Prof. Tiefel needs no introduction to WELS pastors. For other readers: he has taught worship and preaching at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary since 1985.

Tradition: A Concept You Can Count On

By James Tiefel

When it comes to public worship, tradition carries some heavy baggage. Tradition is what the Jews embraced when they criticized and rejected Jesus. Tradition was partially the basis for the philosophy Paul identified as "hollow and deceptive" in his letter to the Colossians. Along with papal degrees, tradition is the source of Rome's confusion over the free gospel. Tradition in congregations often inhibits necessary change and even spiritual growth. For some of us, the concept of tradition in worship leaves a bad taste on the tongue.

For others tradition in worship doesn't have a bad reputation at all. In fact, traditional worship practices are exactly what some people are looking for these days – and I'm thinking of more than the traditional Lord's Prayer. Some younger Christians and many new Christians seem comfortable with ancient practices a previous generation would not have tolerated. The 16th century worship customs of the Lutheran confessors are eliciting the kind of enthusiasm they didn't enjoy a half century ago. It will be interesting to see if Benedict XVI's efforts to "undo the damage" of the Second Vatican Council will see parallel Lutheran efforts to reclaim a few of our own abandoned traditions.

Our WELS pastorate has never been real comfortable cozying up to liturgical traditions, and many lay people have tended to mimic the clergy's lack of enthusiasm. But we need to find a way to deal with the tradition concept in worship. We need to step back and attempt an unbiased look at how Christians before us dealt with the worship practices of Christians before them. We need to shed our prejudices, justified as they may be, and come to an honest and pastoral understanding of the value of tradition in the worship life of the people we serve, both the lost and the found.

Does Scripture say something about tradition?

The Spirit's most common references to tradition have more to do with traditionalism. Similar to ceremonialism or formalism, it's going through the form of worship without a heart that trusts in worship's focus. Seeing the same trait in God's people that Isaiah saw, Jesus quoted the prophet: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Matthew 15:8). Old and New Testament writers often criticized this tragic flaw in the people of Israel. It's the fault that lay behind Jesus' words about whitewashed tombs (Matthew 23).

The Spirit never inspired specific instructions about the value or use of traditional worship practices. But the people the Spirit called, gathered, enlightened, and sanctified demonstrate an obvious interest in customs that edified their ancestors. The exiles in Babylon knew better than to re-establish the temple's sacrificial rites in a foreign land, but they reviewed the temple

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WORSHIP WORDS TO WRESTLE WITH

Purpose

Sacraments

Tradition

Variety

Catholicity

Accuracy

Excellence

Contemporary

Time

Love

Evangelism

Culture

Tradition

rituals and remembered the promises they foreshadowed. They sang the psalms appointed for temple worship even after they returned to their homeland and gathered in their synagogues. They celebrated Passover in their homes. Obviously, some of their loyalty was prompted by the Ceremonial Law, and what Moses hadn't commanded the rabbis did. But it is not a stretch to suggest that the attitude of Old Testament believers about the worship practices of their ancestors was guided in part by Solomon's words, "May the LORD our God be with us as he was with our fathers; may he never leave us nor forsake us" (1 Kings 8:57).

Although Jesus' first followers sometimes struggled to understand their freedom from the Old Testament ceremonies, they worked through difficult issues (with guidance from the apostles, especially Paul) and came to rejoice in the fulfillment of the promises rather than in the promises' liturgical symbols and shadows. But even with freedom a sensitive issue and even as they abandoned customs that had been at the heart of the old covenant (e.g., circumcision), they continued to follow the traditional pattern of worship they inherited from the synagogue – a pattern that forms our service of the Word to this day. They sang the psalms, observed the traditional course of readings from the Law and the Prophets and, of course, came to believe what Jesus had said: "They testify about me." Second century versions of the Thanksgiving Prayer (their echo of Jesus' thanksgiving at the Maundy Thursday meal) demonstrate an obvious respect for the traditional Passover prayers.

Although the Spirit does not speak specifically to the concept of tradition in worship, the Spirit's people had no apparent interest in moving away from all the customs their ancestors had found edifying for faith. As they came to understand the concept of freedom, they also learned to know the difference between the peril of traditionalism and the value of tradition. They came to disdain the former. It is not an interpretive leap, however, to suggest that the early Church came to see the worship customs of their ancestors in light of these words: "Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith" (Hebrews 13:7).

Luther's perspective on tradition

Luther's perspective on the tradition concept wasn't unlike that of the first believers, and he articulated it clearly and concisely. He had experienced firsthand the horrors of traditionalism, perhaps, in early life, even to the loss of his faith. Once he came to understand the gospel, however, he was able to put tradition into perspective. He came to see ancient worship practices not as burdens to afflict faith, but as blessings to aid faith. Luther wasn't oblivious to what the Roman Church had done to the historic rites; he wrote about the "prattling and the rattling"¹ and the "wretched accretions"² that had become part of the liturgy over the centuries. He called the canon of the mass (the central text of the communion rite) "that abominable concoction drawn from everyone's sewer and cesspool."³ At the same time he wasn't



willing to abandon an order of service that had "genuine Christian beginnings." His objective was not "to do away with the service, but to restore it again to its rightful use."⁴

Luther's thinking about retaining the historic Christian rites was influenced by his concerns for laypeople who would have problems adjusting to new orders of service. But his perspective was far broader. He valued the unifying nature of the ancient orders because they protected believers from "the fickle and fastidious spirits who rush in like unclean swine without faith or reason, and who delight only in novelty and tire of it as quickly."⁵ Luther also knew liturgical history and practice, and he respected the voices of the ancient church. Writing about the church calendar, he wrote:

What has been established of old by the agreement of the church and out of love for God and for just reasons must necessarily be observed, not because it is of itself necessary and unchangeable but because the obedience of love which we owe God and the church is necessary.⁶

Luther spelled out his objective clearly: "It is not now nor ever has been our intention to abolish the liturgical service of God completely, but rather to purify the one that is now in place... and to point out an evangelical use."⁷

Luther's concept of tradition in worship? Everything about his perspective flows from his confidence in the gospel. He certainly doesn't accept traditions as though he were a slave to them, but he doesn't carelessly discount them, either. He is respectful of the Church's ancient voice, but willing to fine-tune; grateful for old customs, but appreciative of new forms. Luther has passed on to his theological heirs a balanced and evangelical ideal:

For Lutherans, the word 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

Tradition in “a vital parish practice”

It's difficult to separate the concept of tradition from the personal attitudes of the pastors and laypeople who approach it. Some find safety in traditional worship forms; others feel shackled by them. But discerning parish leaders need to approach this issue with a certain detached objectivity and put personal feelings aside.

It is naïve to suppose that we can divorce ourselves from tradition. It's part of the fiber of human creatures to imitate the customs of their ancestors. To a greater or lesser extent, continuity with the past is part of every society, and today's pastors are wise to consider that the present generation, perhaps more than the generation before it, is looking for roots.

Of course roots can do damage, especially when trees are old and large and drainage systems are crumbling. Church people can obsess over traditional worship forms, and their obsessions can choke growth and outreach in a congregation.

But those who have seen the abuse of tradition need to stop encouraging us to abandon traditional worship forms. They need to help us get our hands around a better perspective, one we've reviewed here in the practices of the early church and the writings of Luther (and found also among the Lutheran confessors).

The ancients have something to tell us about customs that have value for faith. They sifted through and assessed the legacy they received from their fathers, just as we must do. They discarded and adjusted, and so must we. But they began the process with respect and love for the one, holy, Christian and apostolic Church. They did not consider themselves uniquely qualified to abandon customs believers had found edifying for a thousand years. They did not assume that old was invariably ineffective and new was bound to be better, just as they did not imagine that old was perfect and new unacceptable. They built on the experience of the past and moved confidently into the future.

Tradition in public worship is a concept we can count on. Why? Because it is theologically balanced and pastorally responsible. It is born in humility with respect to believers who have gone

before us and love for believers who walk beside us. We can count on it, but we need to work at it. We need to listen before we leap, study before we strategize, assess before we adjust. And then we will live out the truth that each of us is nothing more (but nothing less) than one disciple walking alongside many disciples, hand-in-hand with Jesus, all bound for glory.

¹ LW, Vol. 53, p. 14.

² Ibid, p. 20.

³ Ibid, p. 21.

⁴ Ibid, p. 11.

⁵ Ibid, p. 19.

⁶ *What Luther Says*, 903.

⁷ LW, Vol. 53, p. 20.

⁸ *Handbook of Church Music*. Carl Halter and Carl Schalk, editors. CPH 1978. p. 17.

“They built on the experience of the past and moved confidently into the future.”

Halter, Schalk, Tiefel

“Steeped in tradition, with an eye on the future.”

Hyundai Motor Company

Can some Lutherans learn a healthier respect for tradition from a Korean car company?

CWS Ideas and Instruments: October and November 2009

By Bryan Gerlach

The Accompaniment Edition CD from *Christian Worship: Supplement* (CWS) provides a wealth of resources for musical variety and enrichment. A separate Guitar Edition covers most of the hymns. MIDI files from the Accompaniment Edition CD may be used to teach singers who do not read music. Suggestions below found on the CWS hymn sampler double CD are noted with an asterisk (*). *Planning Christian Worship* (PCW, available online) does not suggest any CWS hymns for the first Sundays in October.

October 25: “Next to the attachment to hearth and home, a person's chief attachment is to his purse. So it is not out of order to

consider what God has to say about his gifts of wealth and to let him put those gifts in a proper context for us” (PCW). Whether in times of economic prosperity or hardship, we need law conviction and gospel motivation for topics related to materialism. As with any spiritual topic, music can help embed God's message in the hearts of his people.

755 “Your Kingdom, O God, Is My Glorious Treasure” is a “two-pager” that is easier to learn since part of the melody repeats – an AABA structure. Point this out if an informal teaching time precedes the service. It's always best to use a soloist or choir to sing

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the first stanza of a new hymn, even if taught before worship. No additional instrumental parts are available, but a solo instrument can still assist in introducing the hymn and doubling the melody when the congregation sings.

PCW also suggests 768 “How Firm a Foundation” and 779 “I Sing as I Arise Today,” with familiar tunes. Both express a general trust or spiritual focus that is in sharp contrast to the materialism apparent in the lessons.

November 1: In the *Christian Worship* calendar this is Reformation. All Saints’ Day may be observed if the parish will later participate in a joint Reformation service.

Reformation: PCW suggests 781 “I Lie, O Lord, within Your Care.” Note how well this complements the supplemental Second Lesson, Daniel 3:16-28, even though it is from the Evening section. PCW comments: “Think of the holy martyrs through the ages, from the time of Cain through the murders of Stalin and Chairman Mao; think of the hundreds of thousands of Lutherans slaughtered or made refugees during the Thirty Years War and more recently by Hitler and then by the communists; think of the pious faithful who came to these shores to escape persecution by the Protestants and even those who called themselves Lutherans...” A hymn of eight stanzas invites alternation singing with choir and/or soloist. Consider a creative organ accompaniment for stanza 7 – starting loud, including reeds, but quickly a decrescendo for the line “a light to show some hidden way.” The decrescendo may continue through the last stanza’s peaceful affirmation. Possibly repeat the last phrase as a quiet organ coda using the softest sounds available.

All Saints’: What is the thematic difference between All Saints’ and Saints Triumphant (November 15)? The lessons for Saints Triumphant often encourage us who are not yet rejoicing in heaven. All Saints’ may focus more on thanksgiving for those who have gone before us. Hymns for the two days often combine the two emphases. Note how these themes are intertwined in the following suggestions from PCW. In parentheses: PDF parts from the Accompaniment Edition CD.

704 Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending (Brass parts and descant for C and B-flat instruments)

727 There Is a Higher Throne (Alternate accompaniment)
An SATB arrangement by Bruce Greer with piano and optional instruments was featured at NPH repertoire workshops earlier this year: OL-284938.

* 728 Jerusalem the Golden (Brass parts)

* 729 There Is a Blessed Home (Descants 1 and 2 for C and B-flat instruments)

* 730 Blessed Are They (Descant for C and B-flat instruments)

731 The King Will Come at Age’s End

* 776 Sing with All the Saints in Glory (Melody for C, B-flat, and F instruments)

The Accompaniment Edition hymn notes state:

Some congregations employ the practice of reading the names of the sainted congregation members on Saints Triumphant Sunday.

This practice could be incorporated into the singing of this hymn [730]. The accompanist could pause after verse 3, where the names of the saints could be read aloud. After the pastor or worship leader has begun reading the names, the accompanist could begin to play this hymn softly in the background. After the reading of the names is completed, the congregation could finish the hymn beginning at verse 4.

These notes are available at the new Connect worship site, under Quick Links/Christian Worship Supplement. We are in the process of moving worship resources to Connect. To login or create an account on Connect, go to <http://connect.wels.net>.

A responsive dialogue of Bible passages and names of the deceased is available at the new Connect worship site, under Quick Links/Newsletters.

November 15, Saints Triumphant: See suggestions above under All Saints’. Consider also CWS 788, a new canticle based on Revelation 7 and 1 Corinthians 15. The Electronic Pew Edition includes a bulletin-ready copy for use when a choir or soloist sings the verses and the congregation sings only the refrain.

Note that the refrain of CWS Psalm 118 also makes use of 1 Corinthians 15.

November 22, Christ the King: Consider CWS 787, a new canticle based on Revelation 4 and 5. The opening three lines occur again at the end. Since this refrain occurs only twice and is longer than the refrain for CWS 788, it’s best for a soloist or choir to sing the entire song if it’s not yet familiar. The Electronic Pew Edition includes a bulletin-ready copy for use when the congregation sings only the refrain. In a busy week that includes Thanksgiving and preparation for Advent 1, this is a simple option for a soloist.

PCW also suggests:

704 Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending (Brass parts and descant for C and B-flat instruments)

731 The King Will Come at Age’s End

Share these ideas with musicians by referring them to Connect or by pasting just the content above into a message.

