



Worship the Lord

No. 42, May 2010

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. Pastor Aaron Christie served Faith, Antioch, IL, for thirteen years. This summer he transitions to Trinity, Waukesha, WI. He is the district worship coordinator for the Southeastern Wisconsin District and a presenter for WELS Schools of Worship Enrichment.

Excellence for Christ in All Things

By Aaron Christie

Excellence Is Difficult to Determine

"A good cigar is a cigar I like to smoke." "A good wine is a wine I like to drink." And good music? "I can sing and dance to it." It is hard to argue with what people like, so we are easily tempted to view the topic of excellence as an exercise in artistic snobbery. But why should my personal picking and panning be the prime measure of a thing's true quality? Could it be that I enjoy a certain cigar simply because I have never had a legal opportunity to enjoy the best that Cuba has to offer? Could it be that the professionals at *Wine Spectator* know wines better than I do? Or why is it that everyone knows the name J. S. Bach, but almost no one remembers the name Franz Tunder? Could it be that Bach's music is quantifiably better than Tunder's? Finally, why was it that when it came time to propose to Miss Right, we looked for our dinner to come with a table cloth under it rather than wrapped up and super-sized in a Styrofoam coffin? Welcome to the difficult world of discussing EXCELLENCE in worship. Excellence is a difficult topic as we strive to balance objective qualities over against subjective perceptions and preferences.

Current worship conversations in WELS are raising the topic of excellence rather regularly. Reactions to this *worship word* have been mixed. Some agree that we need to give greater attention to this topic. Could it be that WELS was just a little bit too proud of being "low-brau" in her past? Others worry that a discussion of excellence might possibly lead to burdening tender consciences. Am I practicing excellence or mediocrity? Are my best efforts good enough? Still others are sensitive to the effectiveness of the Word being impinged by a discussion of excellence. Could all this talk about excellence be the church growth camel's nose poking under our tent?

Excellence and the Human Creature

It is important from the outset to put to bed any theological reservations we might have about this topic. I recently witnessed a mid-week service at Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, IL. Excellence was everywhere. The buildings were impressive and well cared for. The musicianship was superior. The crafting of the message was carefully done. Sadly, however, the Gospel – the justification of the sinner through Christ – was 100% absent. *Excellence without the Gospel is empty.*

But the ditch on the other side of the road must also be avoided. This ditch reasons that we have the Word in its truth and purity, therefore everything else we do is of secondary or even little importance. Cluttered chancels, faded paraments, sloppy bulletins, poorly practiced music,

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and rambling sermons are perhaps too often excused because we believe that the Word alone is the power of God for salvation. But a question needs to be asked: Does mediocrity truly please the Mediator? The Word alone makes the unwilling willing and the unbeliever a believer. But the Word does not enhance the design of a bulletin or provide logic to an illogical sermon outline. *Making the Gospel into an excuse for that which is less than excellent is enigmatic.*

This is most certainly true: the Word *alone* is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. The Spirit is pleased to work *only* through the means of grace. Lutheran pastors struggle to retain these amazing truths in this day and age. We are not ministering in the golden age of Lutheran orthodoxy, but in Arminian America where the means of grace are downplayed at best – denied at worst. Hoenecke’s dictum is worth memorizing: “Spirit not without Scripture, Scripture not without Spirit – that is sound teaching.”¹

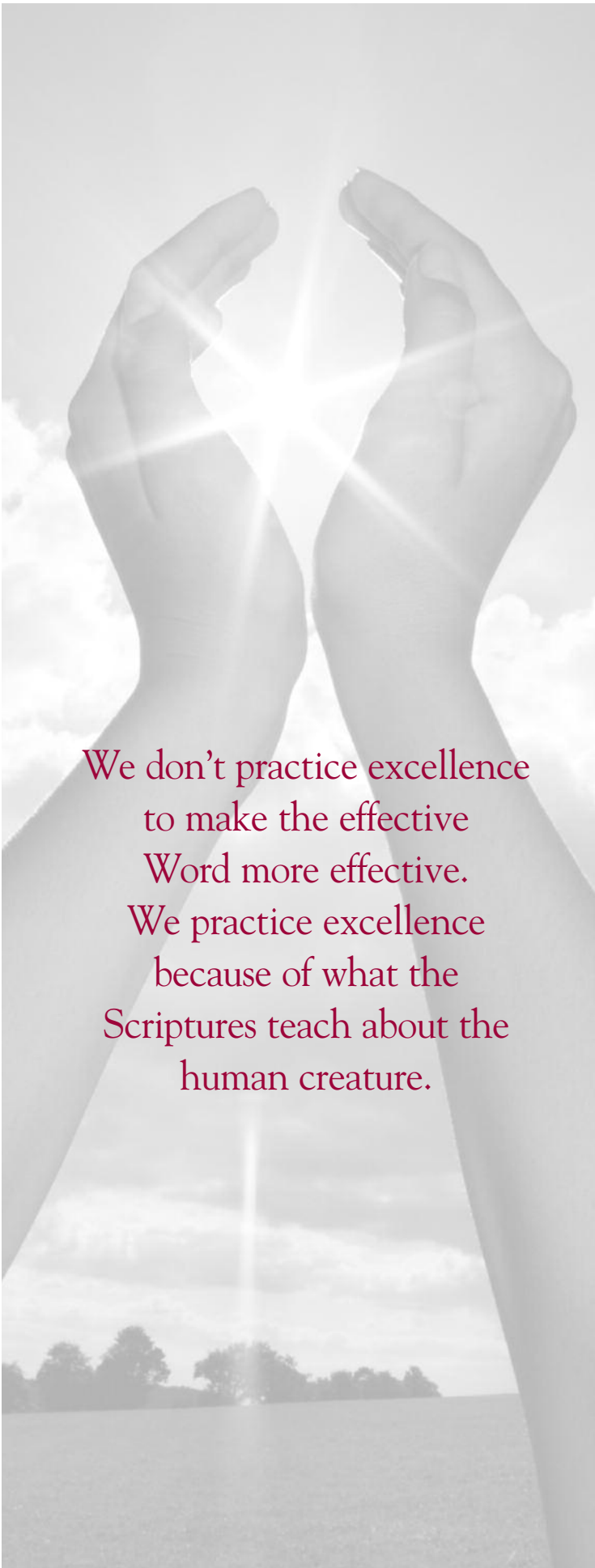
Our Lutheran fathers do not stop there, however. While they were careful to point out that the Word does not work magically or mechanically, they affirmed that it does work psychologically as well as spiritually and supernaturally. It truly enlightens the human *mind*. It truly touches human *emotions*. It truly strengthens human *will*. Hoenecke writes: “According to what the Scripture says, the working of Scripture proceeds in a manner appropriate to the intellectual nature of man.”² And how is the human intellect informed? Though ears that hear, emotions that are touched, minds that analyze, and eyes that see Word reinforced by art. (Furthermore, God has blessed us with the *visible* Word – the Sacraments. God comes to us also through tongues that taste and remembrance of a sinful nature drowned daily. Using elements of his creation, God brings his saving means to us through the organs of the body.) *To forget the psychological working of the Word is to come close to a gnostic view of the human creature.*

In sum: We don’t practice excellence to make the effective Word *more* effective. We practice excellence because of what the Scriptures teach about the human creature. Excellence has nothing to say when it comes to the *working* of the Word. It has plenty to say when it comes to *working with* the Word.

Take some time to review the sections of Scripture that deal with worship in the tabernacle and temple. Old Testament worship was primarily an elaborate sermon (a “shadow” of Christ). Temple worship, however, was not a simple sermon; it was elaborate and sensory in the extreme. God the Creator deliberately chose to communicate with his human creatures in ways that addressed human senses in striking ways!

Can you imagine coming over the Mount of Olives and seeing the temple for the first time? How *lovely* is your dwelling place! The priest could have ministered just as well in a khaki tunic, but God designed a vestment that proclaimed the priestly office and thereby the Great High Priest who was to come. What does it look like to see an animal’s blood being splashed against the sides of the altar? Those sights preached a sermon.

Sounds? Ears heard the beautiful sounds of highly trained Levitical choirs and musicians. Ears were also assaulted by a cacophony of bleating and bellowing animals. Those sounds preached a sermon.



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Could their noses smell the aroma of incense wafting in the distance? Was the lovely smell of incense overpowered by the smell of burning hair and hides? Those smells preached a sermon. Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness!

Can worship in WELS connect more with our senses without becoming overly emotional? Absolutely. Can these things also be abused? Without a doubt. Confessional Lutherans will maintain an absolute reliance upon the means of grace while taking into account the very real physical/spiritual makeup of man. Strive for excellence as you communicate for all of man's senses. Evangelical Lutheran pastors know that the Word alone works, but that human eyes will read it in the bulletin. The Word alone is the power of God, but is the sound system powerful enough for elderly ears? We will not need the light of the sun or moon in heaven's temple, but is our earthly sun making our services far too bright or uncomfortably hot? In short: Strain gnats (Matthew 23:24) to your soul's peril, but let the narthex carpet be the cleanest in the county!

If we feel a bit guilty or worried about whether we're giving God our best or not, well, perhaps we should. Then run to the Savior for his perfect pardon. Out of pure joy and thanks, let your next effort in worship be inscribed with JJ and SDG!

Excellence as a Matter of Stewardship

Perhaps even more to the point, however, is the matter of stewardship. Being willing to settle for something that is less-than-best because we at least have the Word in its truth and purity is really an aberration! The Gospel of free forgiveness in Christ calls for nothing but the best from God's people in response. This isn't a burden for consciences. Rather it is an awesome privilege – an act of worship for a creating, redeeming, sanctifying God. J. S. Bach began each piece of music with the initials JJ (Latin: *Jesu, Juva*, "Jesus, help"). He ended each of his manuscripts with the initials SDG (*Soli Deo Gloria*, "To God alone the glory"). If one is going to invoke Jesus' name at the beginning and dedicate it to the greater glory of God at the end, then that music will be the best one can compose!

We are stewards of God's TIME. How much time went into planning our service? How much time was spent practicing the best musical offertory that I could offer? How much time went into the production of the bulletin? A printed bulletin, after all, is a public printing of our Christian faith. How much time went into decorating the chancel? Or were the same old flowers placed in the same old place? How much time was invested in mastering the delivery of the sermon? We put TIME into things we judge important. Does our weekly schedule match what we believe about the critical importance of corporate worship in congregational life?

We are stewards of God's TALENTS. Is the best music we can play being offered? Are the instrumental resources in our congregation being put to use? Are artistic people allowed a real opportunity to decorate the church or commons in a way that will make festival services even more festive, yet remain tasteful? When was one of my sermons last critiqued by a brother whom I trust and whose opinion I treasure?

We are stewards of God's TREASURE. We usually think of this as offering God our money. True. But we are also offering him the piano we regularly use for worship. Is it the best we can offer him? Or was it donated to the church second-hand after someone purchased a new piano for their living room? Why not donate the new piano to church and keep the second-hand one at home? Or take a look at the pews. Here the people of God sit to worship the God who created the oak on which they sit. Shouldn't the pews be at least as nice as the fine new dining room chairs at home?

Finally, we are stewards of God's TRUTH. Does the truth for a particular Sunday pop off the page of the bulletin? Is our sermon not only packed with truth, but also packed with creative ways of expressing it? Think of how magnificently Isaiah expresses God's truth or how graphically Ezekiel does the same. It is one thing for a hymn "to not say anything wrong." It is another to seek out hymns and spiritual songs that are packed with truth in ways that will touch the intellect and emotions.

Martin Franzmann's *Ha! Ha! Among the Trumpets* contains a powerful sermon, "Theology Must Sing," that is worth the price of the entire book. It is a must read for anyone who would like to drill down further into the topic of excellence. Franzmann preaches:

Another argument might be called the "tin whistle" argument. Its essence is something like this: "After all, a man can make music on a tin whistle to the glory of God, and God will be pleased to hear it." True, true, true – if God has given him nothing but a tin whistle; but God has given us so infinitely much more. When He has given us all the instruments under heaven with which to sing His praises, then the tin whistle is no longer humility but a perverse sort of pride.³

Excellence in worship as a matter of stewardship recognizes that God has blessed most of our congregations with far more than tin whistles. This brings us back to the earlier point about burdening consciences: if we feel a bit guilty or worried about whether we're giving God our best or not, well, perhaps we should. Then run to the Savior for his perfect pardon. Out of pure joy and thanks, let your next effort in worship be inscribed with JJ and SDG!

"When I find the singing itself more moving than the truth which it conveys, I confess that this is a grievous sin, and at those times I would prefer not to hear the singer" (St. Augustine).

Excellence or Opulence?

Finally, how do we know where the boundaries of excellence lie? Is this excellence or is this a tin whistle effort? Is this excellence in making music or has this become an exercise in showmanship? Is this excellence in art that proclaims Christ or is this art for the sake of art? These questions need to be carefully and honestly answered. St. Augustine pondered these same types of questions when commenting on the roll of music in proclaiming the Word of God:

"I waver between the danger that lies in gratifying the senses and the benefits which, as I know from experience, can accrue from singing. Without committing myself to an irrevocable opinion, I am inclined to approve the custom of singing in

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church, in order that by indulging the ears weaker spirits may be inspired with feelings of devotion. Yet when I find the singing itself more moving than the truth which it conveys, I confess that this is a grievous sin, and at those times I would prefer not to hear the singer.”¹

If dozens of members’ children eat Cheerios at a granite-topped breakfast bar, might the Lord’s Supper be worth the same level of quality?

Our ministry context might help us determine what is excellent or what is opulent. When our new sanctuary was built, a few voices raised questions about the granite top on our altar. But *dozens* of members’ homes have granite counter tops. If dozens of members’ children eat Cheerios at a granite-topped breakfast bar, might the Lord’s Supper be worth the same level of quality? The granite top on the new altar wasn’t opulent. It is simply putting into practice what David said to Nathan: “Here I am, living in a palace of cedar, while the ark of God remains in a tent” (2 Samuel 7:2). In our suburban American context, the granite altar top was excellent, not opulent. A bush congregation in Africa is a different context. Beware! Opulence will quickly make a sanctuary into a sanctified Tower of Babel and church music into a Broadway show. “I confess that this is a grievous sin, and at those times I would prefer not to hear the singer.”

In order to aim for excellence – and avoid anthropocentric opulence – evaluate art, architecture, and music according to categories that inform our use of reason: magisterial and ministerial. A magisterial use of reason sits in judgment of Scripture. A ministerial use of reason uses reason to properly interpret Scripture. Is our music, art, and architecture magisterial or ministerial? Does my precise playing promote the means of grace? Excellent! Or does my virtuoso playing become a side-show along side the means of grace? Opulence. Does my power point slide help underline a key truth in a tasteful and artistic way? Excellent! Or does my non-stop parade of power point help underline my technical savvy? Opulence. You get the picture. Now on to a life time of decisions!

Excellence to the End

May our dear Lord richly bless you as you strive for excellence in your planning, preaching, and playing. Our God is worth nothing less! And then prepare to be rewarded. Every now and then you just might see an eye tear up – a child of God’s eye that has been touched by the grace, beauty, and splendor of God. Let this brief, passing moment of excellence in worship serve as a tasty appetizer of the perfect worship that will be ours in heaven. Then – and only then – will there be excellence for Christ in all things!

¹ Hoenecke, Adolf. *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*. NPH, 1999. Vol. IV, p. 21.

² Ibid, p. 13-14. This quote appears under Thesis 3: “In so far as God’s Word is indeed word, or speech, its power works psychologically.”

³ Franzmann, Martin. *Ha! Ha! Among the Trumpets*. CPH, 1966. p. 92.

⁴ *Confessions*, book 10, sec. 33. Quoted in James Gaines, *Evening in the Palace of Reason: Bach Meets Frederick the Great in the Age of the Enlightenment*. NY: Harper Perennial, 2005. p. 49.

Last summer’s WELS convention accepted the Ad Hoc Commission’s recommendations regarding the pursuit of excellence. “When we use the gospel, God’s work will be done. But we will not be satisfied with anything but the best efforts at sharing God’s truth” (AHC report).

The following resources, available at the Connect Web site, can assist pastors, worship committees, and other groups in their pursuit of excellence.

“Excellence in Worship,” a worship conference keynote address – from 1999, but still relevant.

Worship the Lord, numbers 11–17, a series on worship planning.

Worship the Lord, numbers 18–28, a series on church architecture.

Worship the Lord, number 39, “Variety: Stewardship for Gospel Impact.”



When scientists were discussing what should be beamed into outer space to reach potential alien cultures, biologist Lewis Thomas said, “I would vote for Bach, all of Bach, streamed out into space. We would be bragging, of course.”

And so we did. When the Voyager space craft was launched in 1977, it carried with it recordings from earth, the first being the first movement of Bach’s Brandenburg Concerto No. 2 (Paul McCain’s Cyberbrethren blog, March 21, 2010, Bach’s 325th birthday).

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