



# Worship the Lord

No. 44, September 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 Steven Lange has served Hope in Louisville, KY, since 1998. He was a member the rites subcommittee for *Christian Worship Supplement*. He is a member of WELS Commission on Inter-Church Relations.

## My Times Are in Your Hands

By Steven Lange

When does "the year" begin for you? If you're like most people, you probably think of "the year" as starting on January 1, the first day of the calendar year. If you work in a school or have children in school, your "year" may begin somewhere between the middle of August and the beginning of September. For me, however, "the year" begins on the Sunday closest to St. Andrew's Day (November 30). That day is the First Sunday in Advent, the first day of the church year.

Now, don't get me wrong. I celebrate secular New Year's Day just like anyone else. Since I both work in a school and have three children in school, the school year also figures prominently in my concept of time. But by far the most prominent calendar in my awareness of time is the church year. Its Sundays are the hooks on which I hang all other dates. Its seasons mark the flow of the year for me much more than winter, spring, summer, and fall do. It's not that I'm oblivious to the passage of *secular* holidays and the meteorological seasons. It's just that the *sacred* year has become so much a part of my life that I tend to perceive time according to its framework.

It wasn't always this way. When I graduated from the seminary thirteen years ago, I viewed the church year as little more than a handy tool that made worship planning easier. At the time, I didn't realize that was how I viewed the church year. But looking back on it now, I can see that was exactly how I saw it. I understood and agreed with all the advantages of following the church year that my professors had taught me. Following the church year meant that every year, during the festival half of the church year, God's people were able to review what Christ did for their salvation. It meant that every year, during the non-festival half of the church year, God's people were able to see the effect Christ's life and work had on their own lives. It meant that I did not have to come up with three Scripture lessons for each service on my own. It meant that a safeguard was in place to make sure that God's people heard the full counsel of his Word and not just those portions that I felt like preaching on. I liked the church year; it worked for me. But was it something that truly touched my life? Something that provided an order to my life? I can't say that it was. At that time, the church year was for me just a tool. A handy and welcome tool, yes. But still just a tool.

So, what's wrong with that? In most areas of our lives, a calendar is little more than a tool that we use to mark the passage of time. It's not as if we spend a lot of time meditating on or taking to heart the passage of September to October or the transition from autumn to winter. And besides, nowhere in his Word does God mandate that we *must* follow the Christian church year in our worship. (It is interesting to note, however, that God handed down a sacred

# Time

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### WORSHIP WORDS TO WRESTLE WITH

Purpose

Sacraments

Tradition

Variety

Catholicity

Accuracy

Excellence

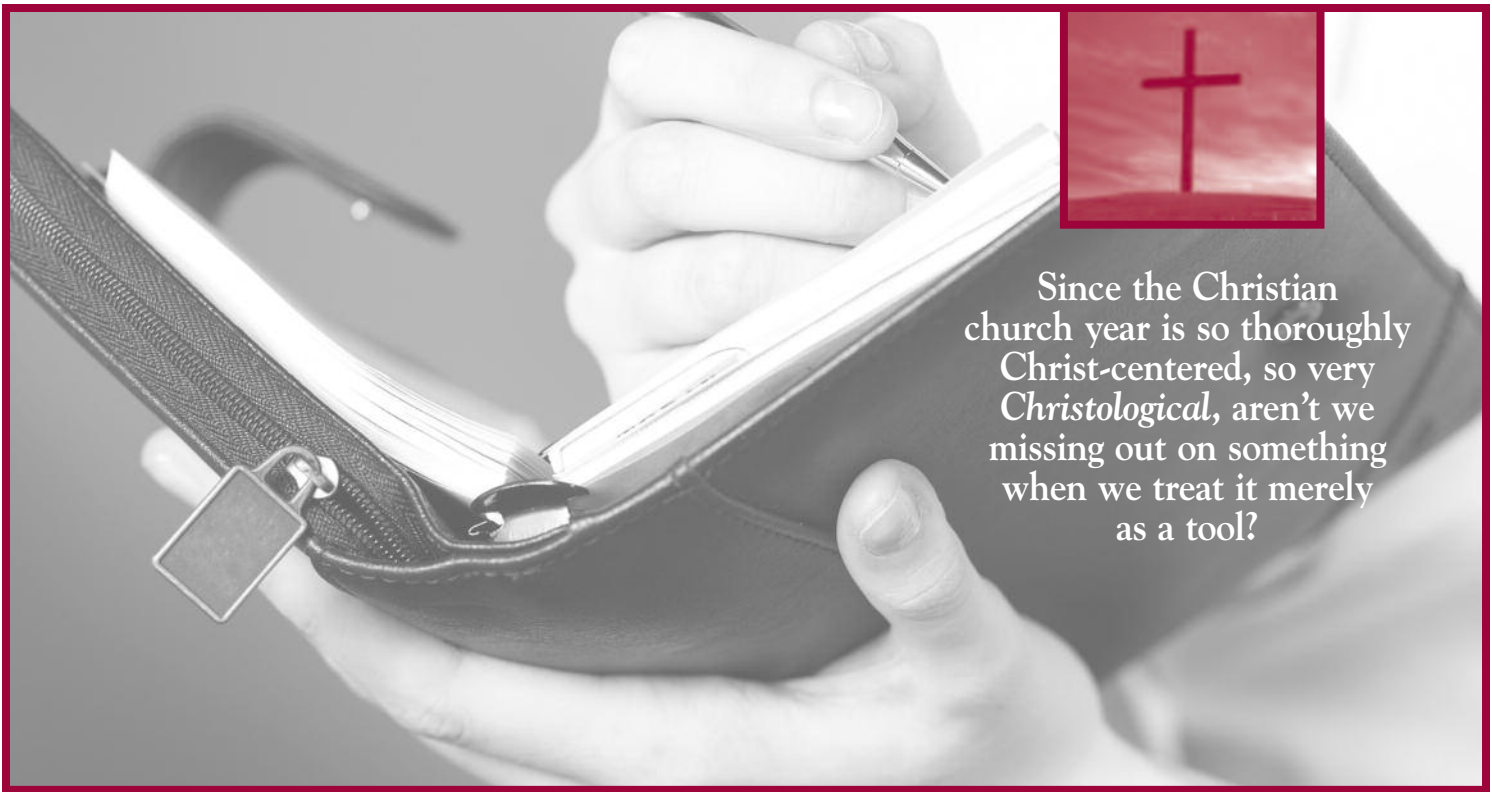
Contemporary

Time

Love

Evangelism

Culture



Since the Christian church year is so thoroughly Christ-centered, so very Christological, aren't we missing out on something when we treat it merely as a tool?

calendar to the Israelites as part of the Old Covenant.) As New Testament Christians, we are free to worship our Savior according to any appropriate calendar – or lack thereof. So, if we choose to use the Christian church year in our worship, why not treat it in the same way as we treat every other calendar that affects our lives?

Perhaps we can answer that question by considering this: When a great quarterback looks at his football, what does he see? Does he see merely a tool that he uses to play a game? Or does he see more than that? Two quarterbacks may have identical skill in throwing a football, but the one that sees his football only as a tool will never become great. Only the quarterback who truly gets to know the football, who understands how it interacts with his body and how it flies through the air, who even considers it an extension of himself will have a chance at becoming great.

The same can be said about a great pianist. When a great pianist looks at her piano, what does she see? Does she see merely a tool whose keys she pushes in order to make sounds? Or does she see more than that? Two pianists may display equal dexterity in depressing the keys of a piano. But the one who sees the piano merely as a tool will never become great. Only the pianist who truly gets to know the piano, who understands how different touches affect the piano's sound, who considers the piano to be an extension of herself will have a chance at becoming great.

So it was in my relationship with the church year. As long as I viewed the church year merely as a tool, my worship (and the worship in which I led God's people) may have been good. But it was not as good as it could have been. I was giving God's people the superficial benefits of following the church year. But something still was missing. I was encouraging God's people to make their entire lives a spiritual act of worship throughout the week. Yet I failed to take full advantage of a supremely rich treasure – the church year – that can be used to accomplish that biblical goal.

The goal of all Christian worship is to focus people's attention on Christ as he serves them with his Word and Sacraments. The Divine Service in all its parts accomplishes this goal beautifully. Week after week, Christ comes to us in the Divine Service, leading us back to our baptisms, absolving our sins, speaking to us through his Word, feeding us with his body and blood, and sending us forth with his blessing. Through all of this, we are reminded that worship is not about us and what we can do for God. It's all about Christ and what he has done for us.

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What the Divine Service does from week to week, the Christian church year does from year to year. As we enter the church year, the season of Advent focuses our attention on Christ's coming, both his first coming at Christmas and his second coming on the Last Day. Then our focus moves to one of the greatest miracles ever to take place on this earth: the Son of God became flesh and lived for a while among us. Throughout the Epiphany season, our eyes are riveted on Christ as he reveals himself as the promised Savior. We see him change water into wine. We witness him calling his disciples. We hear him teaching about his kingdom. And finally we are dazzled by his brilliance as he briefly lifts the veil of his humility on the Mount of Transfiguration and allows his divine glory to shine forth. From these heights, Christ accompanies us through the solemnity of Lent, exposing our desperate need for his salvation and accomplishing that salvation through both his active and his passive obedience. Then, with the image of Christ on the cross still

fresh in our minds, we move into the climax of the Christian church year. For seven straight weeks, we fix our eyes on the risen Christ, rejoicing in the certainty of his resurrection as we witness his repeated appearances to his disciples. We watch with Jesus' disciples as he ascends into heaven. We marvel as on Pentecost he fulfills his promise and sends his Holy Spirit on his infant church. Even in the non-festival half of the church year, the so-called "Time of the Church," our eyes never leave Christ. His words and his works remain the focus as we consider the effect those words and works have on the life of his Church. Everything about the Christian church year reminds us that our worship is not about us and what we can do for God. It is all about Christ and what he has done for us.

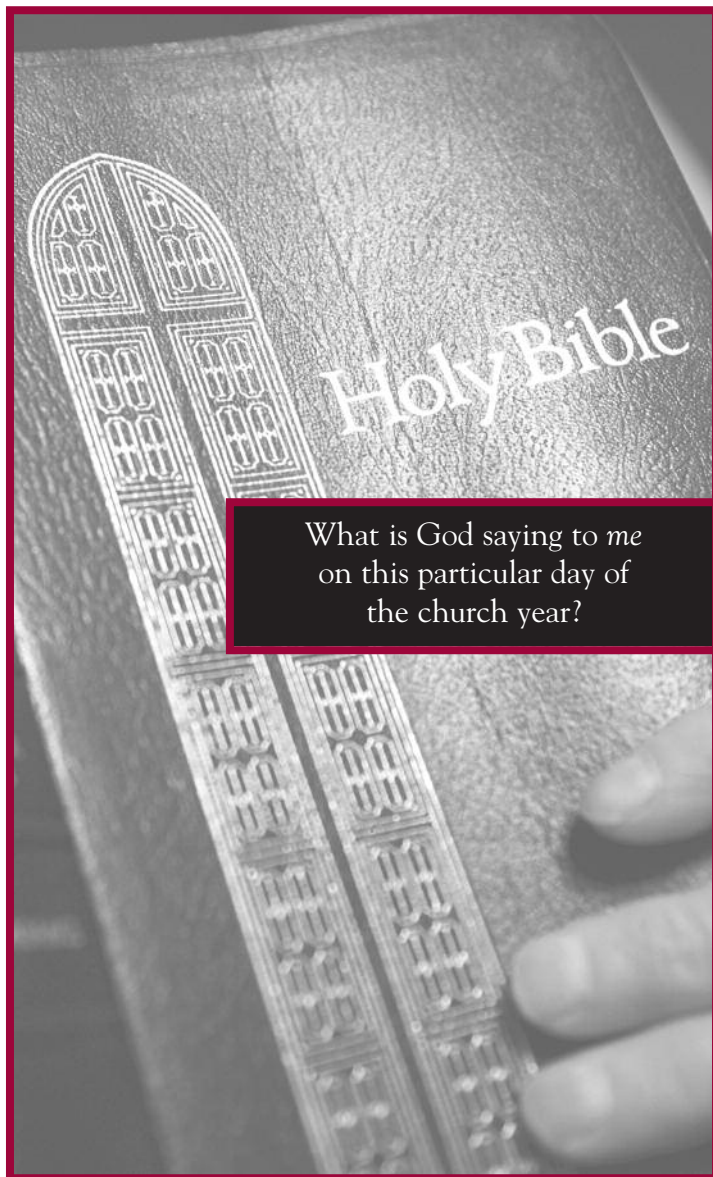
The Christian church year reminds us that our worship is not about us and what we can do for God. It is all about Christ and what he has done for us.

Since the Christian church year is so thoroughly Christ-centered, so very *Christological*, aren't we missing out on something when we treat it merely as a tool? We have seen in many previous issues of this newsletter that the liturgy is not merely a tool for putting the elements of the Divine Service in order. The liturgy itself is a proclamation of Christ. Imagine how much richer our worship becomes when we realize that the same is true of the church year! This "calendar" that we follow is so much more than just a means of marking the passage of ecclesiastical time. It is in itself a proclamation of Christ. As such, it is worthy of more than just our cursory consideration. It is a devotional treasure that can only enrich our lives (and the lives of the people whom we lead in worship) the more we meditate on it and take it to heart.

So, how can we make more devotional use of the church year so that we don't just treat it as a tool? Perhaps we can take a cue from the way in which we prepare our sermons. Before we can preach a sermon to God's people, we must first preach that sermon to ourselves. And so, as we study our text, our first question is not "What is God saying to my congregation here?" It's "What is God saying to me here?" When we have first taken to our own hearts the specific message God is proclaiming in that portion of his Word, we are much better equipped to take that message to the hearts of our hearers. And that message will strike our hearers much more personally, since they can see that we are speaking as one whose heart God's message already has touched.

Why not do something similar when it comes to the church year? As you plan the services that will take place on the various days of the church year, approach each day with the same questions you ask yourself as you prepare your sermon: "What is God saying to me on this particular day of the church year? How does this day's message fit in with the overall message God is communicating to me throughout this particular season? How does God proclaim his law to my heart in each of this day's Scripture Lessons? How does he proclaim his gospel to me?" Meditate on these questions not just as you plan the service in advance but also as you prepare for the service throughout the week leading up to it. Let the message of that week permeate your heart as you prepare to share that message

with God's people. Live in the church year; don't just let the church year be an addition to your life. And then, whether you celebrate January 1 as New Year's Day or as the Festival of the Name of Jesus or as both, you will be wonderfully prepared to lead God's people in worship. For when you stand before them, they will see that the message of the church year that you are sharing with them on that day is not merely a lesson from a prepared calendar. It is, instead, a "premeditated" proclamation of Christ and all his benefits!



What is God saying to me on this particular day of the church year?

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Why should there be a church year at all? Would it not suffice to just have a secular year and fit in the liturgical features – readings, colors, hymns and rituals – for those who want them?

Maybe. But then at a time of unprecedented faith confusion, the church year provides a wonderful alternative structure to Christians living in an increasingly unstructured spiritual world. It enables them to participate in an event of breathtaking grandeur: the incarnation, ministry, passion and resurrection of the very [Person] of God that ordered the universe at creation (John 1:3) and who became the new Adam, the prototype after whom man is called to pattern himself....

It makes a difference that, regardless of the secular joys and horrors around us, we commemorate Christ's self-revelation at Epiphany, participate in his passion during Lent, and rejoice in his resurrection at Easter.

All this was done "for me," Luther never ceased to point out. It was not done for the postmodern new trinity called, "me, myself and I," as theologian and psychologist Christopher Hershman keeps mocking contemporary hubris. No, it was done "for me" in the sense of one who is in need of salvation.

Uwe Siemon-Netto, UPI Religion Correspondent, 11/14/2002  
caymannetnews.com (still in 2010, maybe other sites too)

Some people think that having a rigid order of every-Sunday readings is too restricting. I must respectfully, but strongly, disagree. I've noticed, so often, in congregations that do not follow the Church Year and the appointed readings that there sets in an impoverishment of teaching, it is easy to miss the major events of Christ's life and the chief doctrines of God's Word when there is not a thorough presentation of the Scriptures main stories and teachings, as is made possible through the Church Year and its appointed readings. The Church Year allows us, together, to hear about all the major events in the life and ministry of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, in the first half of the Church Year, then to reflect together on the fuller implications of the life of Christ on our lives. It is a wonderful pattern, or rhythm, that the Church Year Provides.

Paul McCain's Cyberbrethren blog, February 10, 2010, which contains this quote:

As the seasons of the church year make their annual circuit, the preacher has no other task than to unfold the *mysterium Christi*, the mystery of Christ. He makes it known in all its splendor, with a sense of awe and wonder and with all its meaning for the faltering lives of Christ's little ones. Source: Ernest Koenker, *Worship in Word and Sacrament*, p. 46 (CPH 1959)

## Comments from Others

### Live in the church year, or just use it as a tool?

The church year "is a devotional treasure that can only enrich our lives (and the lives of the people whom we lead in worship) the more we meditate on it and take it to heart" (Lange).

Consider a personal devotional life that is based in the church year. *Treasury of Daily Prayer* (CPH 2008) is a valuable resource that brings together Scripture readings, prayers, psalms, hymns, and devotional readings from the church fathers to guide daily prayer and meditation on God's Word. One reviewer writes:

My brothers and sisters in Christ, I must make a confession to you. I struggle at being faithful at my own personal daily devotions. I could perhaps make excuses referencing my schedule and the daily pressures – but those are actually all the more reason I need to be in the Word of God and prayer even more. Actually, the only reason for my struggle is my own fault, my own sinful flesh, for the flesh is always lazy, weak, and constantly ignores my need for the Word of God and prayer.

But now Concordia Publishing House has provided me (and all of us) with this wonderful resource to help in this daily battle against the flesh. Since I received my copy it has become a great tool for me in my struggle against the flesh. I leave my copy open on my desk so that the first thing when I come in each morning I can use it right away. It is always open to each day's readings and prayers. When I travel, I also have a copy on my laptop right there on the Windows desktop....

Is this just for pastors? NO! Anyone who can read will benefit! Fathers and mothers leading their families in devotions will profit. Students and anyone who will benefit from a structured approach to prayer and the devotional life can use this great resource. Tell your people about it – let them try it.

—Herbert C. Mueller, Jr

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2929 N Mayfair Rd, Milwaukee WI 53222-4398  
Phone: 414/256-3265 FAX: 414/256-3899 <[www.wels.net/worship](http://www.wels.net/worship)>

**Worship the Lord**  
Sharing worship ideas with WELS pastors

**Mark your calendar and alert your musicians! The next national worship conference is July 19-22, 2011.**