



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. Jon Buchholz serves Emmanuel, Tempe, AZ and is the AZ-CA district president. He has served the Board for World Missions with special focus on Latin and South America.

Accuracy Urban Legends in Our Churches?

By Jon Buchholz

We've all received those forwarded e-mails urging us to pass on vital information to protect or inform our friends. Don't do it! You don't need to worry about getting poked by needles in pay phones, becoming a victim of a gang initiation if you flash your headlights at someone driving without his lights on, or running into organ harvesters at parties. Those are urban legends. A quick visit to snopes.com can help you sort out fact from fiction, truth from culture-inspired myth.

Myths and urban legends persist also in our church culture. They are perpetuated by well-intentioned efforts to explain why we do certain things. Worship myths and urban legends propagate themselves when sincere individuals pass along what they've heard and don't independently check the facts.

As Christians committed to the truth, it behooves us to know what's true and what's not. The matters in question are not in every case doctrinal. But they are myths nonetheless, and we don't want to perpetuate fallacies. The following is a short compendium of myths that may persist in our midst; there are more. Since each of these could be a whole article in itself, the goal here is not to provide exhaustive references to refute each misconception, but rather to spur you on to dig deeper to uncover the whole story for yourself.

MUSIC

Myth: Luther used bar tunes and popular folk music for his hymns.

Reality: Luther composed many hymns using a "bar form" that has nothing to do with taverns or drinking songs.

This myth has been thoroughly discredited by scholarly research, but it persists in some circles to justify the use of secular or pop music in the church (if Luther did it, shouldn't we?). Rick Warren even states that Luther would use karaoke tunes if he were alive today! Let's set the record straight and refrain from perpetuating this fallacy.

There is no question that Luther wanted to place God's Word onto the lips of the people. He wanted them to proclaim the gospel in song, and he regarded his music and hymnody as instruments for gospel proclamation. He wanted his music to be sung and enjoyed by common Christian folk. It was to be singable.

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WORSHIP WORDS TO WRESTLE WITH

Purpose

Sacraments

Tradition

Variety

Catholicity

Accuracy

Excellence

Contemporary

Time

Love

Evangelism

Culture

Accuracy

The form that Luther and others chose for many of their hymns was known as *bar form*. This derives from a medieval verse form, *bar*, consisting of three lines having the form A-A-B. The metrical and melodic pattern in “A” is repeated, followed by the “B” section which may include a portion of “A.” An example is *A Mighty Fortress*:

A mighty fortress is our God, A trusty shield and weapon; (A)
He helps us free from every need (A)
That has us now o’ertaken.
The old evil foe Now means deadly woe; (B)
Deep guile and great might Are his dread arms in fight;
On earth is not his equal. (segment of A)

A Mighty Fortress is a *bar tune* that found no origin in taverns or even in popular, secular music. It wasn’t *pop* music. It was *art* music in the German *Meistersinger* tradition.

Of the 37 hymn (chorale) compositions Luther authored, 15 were original compositions by Luther, 13 came from Latin church music, four originated in German religious music, two were religious pilgrims’ songs, and one was originally adapted from a secular folk tune. For this last song, the original melody for *From Heaven Above to Earth I Come* was replaced by the tune we use today, because Luther didn’t appreciate hearing his sacred text sung to the secular melody.¹ Luther wanted his music to be singable, but it was also to be sacred and set apart from worldly, popular culture.

CULTURE

Myth: *Worship styles and forms are an extension and reflection of our culture.*

Reality: *Worship throughout history transcends popular culture, is a separate culture, and is in many respects counter-cultural.*

In the desire to “meet people where they’re at” and make visitors feel comfortable with worship, a growing trend makes what happens inside the church look more and more like what people are used to outside the church. James Dobson uses the phrase “engaging the culture” not only to encourage Christian involvement in secular and political affairs, but also to encourage eliminating internal cultural barriers that might make the Christian experience appear strange to outsiders.

While local church practice has always been shaped to some degree by local customs, an overview of worship practices through the ages and around the globe reveals that Christianity has consistently maintained a healthy separation from popular culture and resisted influences from popular culture. At the same time, the Christian church has developed its own culture, which transcends national, linguistic, and cultural boundaries. At the time of the apostles, the Greco-Roman world was remarkably diverse in ethnicity, language, and local custom. One would expect that local culture and preferences would impact worship style and customs – and in limited measure it did. But a survey of worship practices and liturgical forms from the early church reveals a remarkable consistency among Christians in diverse parts of the world. The church in Alexandria worshiped in a way similar to the church in Jerusalem – and the church in Rome, and the church in Persia – in spite of broad cultural differences between the regions. A study of early liturgies reveals that the customs of the local church developed primarily as an extension of the wider church and not, making the point anachronistically, from the customs of local *popular* culture.

There is a reason for this: Christians are in the world but not of the world. The *sanctuary* is a place that is set apart from the world. It is a refuge from the world, its pressures and its temptations. Forms and instrumentation may vary from place to place, but the dignity, the reverence, the joy of worshiping the Lord in the beauty of his holiness, meeting him in his Word, and receiving him in the Sacrament is consistent. The pattern of divine dialog, proclamation and response, is consistent. The understanding that proclamation is praise, and that Christ, not the worshiper and his experience, is the focus and center of worship, is common across Christian worship through the ages.

A recent article in *US News and World Report* highlights the dissatisfaction that can result when worship becomes too much an extension of popular culture.

Daniel Wallace, a professor of New Testament studies at Dallas Theological Seminary, which trains pastors for interdenominational or nondenominational churches, says there is a growing appetite for something more than “worship that is a glorified Bible class in some ways.”²

Carl Anderson describes changes at Trinity Fellowship Church, Richardson, Texas.

The entrepreneurial model adopted by so many evangelical churches, with its emphasis on seeker-friendly nontraditional services and programs, had been successful in helping Trinity build its congregation, Anderson explains. But it was less successful in holding on to church members and deepening their faith or their ties with fellow congregants. Searching for more rootedness, Anderson sought to reconnect with the historical church.... Anderson and others tried to emphasize the power of liturgy to direct worship toward God and “not be all about me,” he says.³

Likewise, *Christianity Today*, with its finger on the pulse of movements within the church, notes a shift among some Evangelicals away from the superficiality of pop-culture worship, toward a desire for something deeper.

Many 20- and 30-something evangelicals are uneasy and alienated in mall-like church environments; high-energy, entertainment-oriented worship; and boomer-era ministry strategies and structures modeled on the business world. Increasingly, they are asking just how these culturally camouflaged churches can help them rise above the values of the consumerist world around them.⁴

The pop-culture mindset pushes songs to the top of the charts and then abandons them for the next big hit. That same mindset in the church drives restless expectations for things always new and different – the latest cool music, the Order of Service *du jour* – always looking for the television land-like stimulation that will hold the worshipers’ attention and keep them from getting bored.

Our worship practices are not shaped by the latest trends borrowed from the world. The Christian experience in the house of God has always transcended culture and is, in fact, counter-cultural. Our worship ties us to and extends a 2,000-year continuum of Christian culture in a cross-cultural community which circles the globe and spans the millennia.

See the online expansion of this article for the full discussion of several other myths.

SACRAMENTS

Myth: *Celebrating Communion infrequently makes it more special.*

Reality: *Infrequent Communion is a departure from Lutheran practice that originated with pietism.*

Even a cursory read of the Augsburg Confession of 1530 reveals the high regard the reformers had for the Sacrament of the Altar:

Our churches are falsely accused of abolishing the Mass. The Mass is held among us and celebrated with the highest reverence.... Because the Mass is for the purpose of giving the Sacrament, we have Communion every holy day, and if anyone desires the sacrament, we also offer it on other days, when it is given to all who ask for it.⁵

I grew up in a church which subscribed to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, but Communion was celebrated only once a month, on “Communion Sunday.” Why this departure from the practice detailed in the Augsburg Confession? [continued online]

Myth: *Baptism by immersion isn’t Lutheran.*

Reality: *Luther, Melancthon, Chemnitz and other reformers advocated baptism by immersion.*

Two things are required for a valid baptism: water and the Word of God. The mode of application of the water isn’t material to the validity or efficacy of the Sacrament of Baptism. The common mode of application among us is pouring or sprinkling (aspersion). Immersion is typically associated with the practice of Baptists. It surprises most Lutherans to learn that Luther advocated baptism by immersion. [continued online]

PREACHING

Myth: *All sins are the same.*

Reality: *This statement misses important distinctions and creates confusion about sin.*

The phrase “all sins are the same” is heard frequently from parishioners, teachers, and preachers alike. An examination of the phrase reveals that in some respects it’s true, while in other respects it’s misleading. [continued online]

CUSTOMS

Myth: *Making the sign of the cross is a Catholic superstition.*

Reality: *The sign of the cross is a way for Christians to remember their baptism.*

We worship in the name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. The rubric calls for the pastor to make the sign of the cross over the people. Some in the congregation make the sign of the cross over themselves at the same time, and people think, “Hmm, Catholic visitors today?” [continued online]

WHY BOTHER?

As stated above, most of these myths and urban legends are not of a doctrinal nature. Millions of souls have reached their heavenly home without having been baptized by immersion. Debunking myths, however, is important. We were taught with a liberal arts approach in college. We recognize that history is important. Passing on false facts to buttress current practice may be done with no malice or even knowledge. But false facts cannot buttress practices. Myths can only lead to misunderstanding. One may choose to make the sign of the cross or not; baptize by immersion or not; use the terms venial and mortal or not. But one ought not make any of these decisions based upon fiction. Together may our conversation about worship and its practices be guided by a powerful combination of biblical integrity, confessional solidarity, and yes, even historical accuracy.

WELS TEEN SURVEY

In 2007 the Commission on Youth Discipleship surveyed the worship preferences of WELS teens.

When it comes to weekly group/public worship, what would you like your church to offer?

- 12% Historic worship using only the orders of service and hymns from the hymnal, led by an organ.
- 50.5% Creative worship using the hymnal along with a variety of other resources, led often by an organ but also regularly involving other instruments.
- 21% Contemporary worship, informal, with nothing from the hymnal, with praise choruses and a praise band involving other instruments.
- 16.7% I am not sure.

These results, a surprise in some respects, raise several questions.

Why might 21% choose the third option? Matters of personal preference and the “wisdom of youth” are partial explanations. How common is the frequency and quality of the second option in WELS churches? If it were more common, would more choose it? What is the level of worship catechesis among us, both in formal modes like Bible classes and in other modes like worship folder notes or sermon comments?

Another question: Is it beneficial to survey people on the basis of stylistic preference? How might teens respond if options such as these are included?

- Worship that best reflects Lutheran theology, with a clear focus on Christ, Word and Sacrament, Law and Gospel.
- Worship that involves a wide variety of people – different ages, ethnic backgrounds, etc. – into a shared experience of receiving God’s gifts and responding to them.

A stylistic preference survey suffers because the terms traditional and contemporary beg definition and can suggest polarization, disunity, rigidity, or lack of creativity. Surveying for stylistic preference can subtly bias the thinking of those filling out the survey. Such an approach can reinforce the idea that worship is more about personal preference than community, what believers do together. In too many churches outside WELS the “worship wars” have devolved into factions that dislike each other’s music. In an event that displays our love and unity – public worship – this should not be!

A Bible study on worship with some faculty members from a WELS high school reviewed the CYD statistics. A participant who has worked with teens for many years offered this comment: “Those who understand Law and Gospel appreciate liturgical worship forms.”

Celebrating the Climax of the Church Year By Aaron Christie

Easter: A Day or a Season?

The last installment of *Worship the Lord* featured Pastor Steve Lange offering time-honored suggestions on making the most of your Holy Week. Holy Week, ending with Easter, is certainly the high point of our Christian year. Sadly, Easter has suffered the same fate as Christmas. It is primarily viewed as a specific *day*. Obviously, it is that. It is the celebration of Jesus' resurrection, sin's defeat, the sinner's justification (Rom. 4:25), and Christ's triumph over sin's wages – death! But note well: Easter is also a SEASON of seven Sundays, a “week of weeks.” Investing time and planning in the entire season of Easter will help congregations avoid the feelings of a “post-Easter plunge” in worship. (From the mountaintop to life-as-usual in one week!)

- If you do not have one, consider the use of a Paschal candle. This ancient symbol of Christ can be placed in the center of the chancel during the weeks of Easter, recessed at the close of the Ascension service, and placed next to the baptismal font for the remainder of the year where it continually recalls Romans 6. We are baptized into the resurrection of Jesus!
- Consider substituting the canticle “Thanks Be to God!” (CWS #788) or “This Is the Feast of Victory” (CW #265) for the *Gloria*. Initially the congregation can sing the refrain and a choir, soloist, or pastor can sing the verses until the entire tune becomes familiar.
- Leave the sanctuary decorated for Easter (lilies included, as long as they last) for the entire season of Easter.

The Ascension of Our Lord

Ascension is an afterthought in many parishes, especially when schools are ending their year with a flurry of banquets and special events. Ascension deserves better! It is the grand finale to Christ's saving work. Sadly, it is a grand finale often whispered at best, forgotten at worst.

- Resist the temptation to review the entire life of Christ at Ascension. Ascension is a specific day and deed in the ministry of Christ. Preach and plan it as such.
- Plan ahead for the use of children, choirs, and special musicians in the service.
- The Service of Light (CW p. 54) is preferable to Prayer at the Close of Day (Compline). The Service of Light is more festive. Compline is more repentant and meditative in tone.
- If your parish has a paschal candle, recess it during the final hymn. We recess it on stanza 4 of CW #171 “You see him now, ascending high up to the portals of the sky.... Hereafter Jesus you shall see returning in great victory....”

- Don't sweat attendance. Several years ago our Ascension service had 90 in attendance (counting the classrooms singing). After a decade of dedication to offering our best in that service, attendance is regularly around 300 in a parish that averaged 545/weekend in 2009.
- If you are looking for a place to begin enriching your worship offering, begin with reestablishing Ascension in your people's piety.

Pentecost: More Than a Birthday

Ascension recognizes the withdrawal of Jesus' visible presence among his people. Pentecost celebrates the sending of the Holy Spirit to his people. Ascension and Pentecost go together like ham and eggs.

Pentecost is often described as the “birthday of the Church.” It is this, but it is more. It is the third and final of the great church year festivals: Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. Spend the day focusing on the quiet work of the Spirit. He still works his miracles every day in the midst of every nation, tribe, people, and language.

- Because Pentecost is one of the chief festivals of the year, consider celebrating Holy Communion, even if it is not a “communion Sunday.”
- On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit reversed Babel. Pentecost is a perfect opportunity to use music with an *international flavor*. Can the children sing a song in Spanish? How about a piece from Africa? Something with a Caribbean beat? Gospel? For example: go to giamusic.com and under PRODUCTS you will find the African American Church Music Series with 179 items. The point? There is an abundance of literature to choose from.

May our dear Lord richly bless your preaching, teaching, and planning as you unfold the meaning of Jesus' resurrection for your flocks!

Notes for Accuracy

- ¹ See Joseph Herl, *Worship Wars in Early Lutheranism*. Oxford, 2008. p. 21. Historian Paul Nettl states: “Luther was embarrassed to hear the tune of his Christmas hymn sung in inns and dance halls.” (*Luther and Music*. Muhlenberg Press, 1948.)
- ² *US News and World Report*, December 24, 2007, “A Return to Tradition.”
- ³ *ibid.*
- ⁴ *Christianity Today*, February, 2008, “The Future Lies in the Past.”
- ⁵ Augsburg Confession, Article XXIV, 1, 34.

