



Worship the Lord

No. 43, July 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 Michael Schultz has served parishes in Flagstaff, AZ, and Lawrenceville, GA. He is a member of the Commission on Worship and chaired the hymns subcommittee for *Christian Worship Supplement* for which he also compiled the guitar edition.

The following article is an expanded version of the original.

Contemporary: "What Does This Mean?"

By Michael Schultz

For pastors, it can be such an intensely *personal* thing – this whole thing about the way we worship. It is the pastor, after all, who presides over worship, who primarily charts the course for congregational worship, who spends many hours planning worship and preparing worship. In the same way that counselees bring it with them into the pastor's office, the pastor brings with him into the worship arena certain baggage (essentially a neutral, not necessarily a negative term): childhood experience; seminary training; geographic location; experience in the field; continuing education and corresponding level of expertise; and, as an ever-evolving end product of all of the above – personal preference. And there we are at *personal* again.

Realistically, the personal aspect of what a pastor brings to a congregation's worship ought not and need not be set aside. He is, after all, one whom God has called to this task. We can all have ourselves and not others in mind, however, as we note that *something is amiss when the pastor's personal preference is both the starting and ending point for congregational worship*. Our work in the parish is shepherding (1 Peter 5:2). We approach worship as shepherds. We want our worship planning, preparing, and presiding to be more *pastoral* than *personal*. When the worship question is pastorally framed, it consistently comes out as, "How will this be of good service to God's people?"

As we wrestle with the potentially powder keg term *contemporary*, much of the explosive nature of the discussion can be diffused if we remember to adopt a predominantly pastoral rather than personal approach. It's not merely about your experience or my experience, your survey or my statistic which can either prove or disprove that the unchurched are drawn more toward one worship style or another – *there are too many variables*. It's not about determining which branded generation of current society prefers which genre of music or manner of presentation – *there are too many exceptions*. It's first about that which has neither variable nor exception. How will we approach this rather loaded term *contemporary* in a pastoral way, in a way which unquestionably and consistently brings people the gospel and which simultaneously fosters fraternal and synodical unity?

The Term

It's most unlikely and it's not intended that this article will result in the removal of the term contemporary from all church signs and website worship schedules. Yet one wonders if the use of the term is so diverse that it has become a source of confusion. A case in point would be the

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Contemporary

WORSHIP WORDS TO WRESTLE WITH

Purpose

Sacraments

Tradition

Variety

Catholicity

Accuracy

Excellence

Contemporary

Time

Love

Evangelism

Culture

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nearby parish where the use of a few recently-written songs and the inclusion of a few instruments other than the organ led to the conclusion that the congregation had opted for contemporary worship. Within our fellowship it would be good to land on one understanding of what we mean with the term contemporary. It has been well and succinctly said that our use of the term liturgical has mostly to do with the texts. Those texts are lectionary readings aligned with an observance of the Christian church year, along with the canticles or scripture songs which for centuries have been a part of what many refer to as the historic or Western rite. Used in varying degrees of adornment, paraments and vestments complement a church year emphasis.

A consistent supply of anecdotal evidence gathered from Schools of Worship Enrichment would indicate that those who are pondering a move toward contemporary worship don't typically have in mind the setting aside of the lectionary, the church year, and the basic flow of the historic service. In such cases, there seems to be a common desire for more recent or "upbeat" music. This, of itself, has little if anything to do with a clear articulation of the term contemporary. For our purposes, contemporary worship is corporate worship where readings and sermon texts are not drawn from a standardized lectionary, where an order of service with ordinary, proper, and the ancient texts of specific canticles (Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, Agnus Dei – or variants of these) is not utilized. This definition is offered in the negative because contemporary worship so-defined does not come in one standard form, quite possibly defying a single definition of its own.

That's why it's good to wrestle with the term contemporary. It invites us to ask pastoral questions rather than to pit one form against another, or one brother's or congregation's choice against another's. In our pastoral care of God's people, are we convinced that what we have come up with or might come up with as

alternatives to these liturgical/lectionary texts will present to people the whole will of God (Acts 20:27)? If so, marvelous! If the recently published supplemental lectionary took four men (and others) four years to assemble, are we willing to invest that kind of time and effort to make sure that what we might produce individually is as comprehensive as it ought to be, and rather than going it alone, are we willing to have such efforts reviewed by brothers who walk together with us confessionally? Will we weigh the broader ramifications of what happens when our members visit sister congregations around the country and what happens when members of sister congregations around the country visit our congregation? Will we study and openly discuss whether consistent national worship is best addressed by having congregations walk in lockstep when it comes to orders of worship or by ramping up worship education so that our mobile members are well-versed in Christian liberty as they motor about the country? Ultimately, short of Christ's return, we will be succeeded. How will today's choices play out when I am no longer the shepherd of this particular flock? There may be no stock answers for questions such as these, but from a pastoral point of view, we do well to conscientiously wrestle with them all.

Lutherans who are wise and welcome to check out [the CCLI top ten list] will still have to first ask, "What does it say?" before considering, "How does it sing?"

So often, so much of this seems to boil down to the somewhat nebulous matter of the style of worship we employ and to the endless options we have when selecting the music that will carry the message.

Style of Worship

When covering broad topics, we often have an affinity for neat summaries or bulleted points, such as when we try to categorize all worship in one of three camps: traditional, contemporary or blended. In evaluating the relative “effectiveness” of these options, there are conversations among us which say that moving completely to contemporary worship or offering it as one of two or three weekend options has in mind the young, or boomers, or the unchurched, or whoever it is we feel may be more attuned to such a worship style. No one is saying that we haven’t, but must we not continue to wrestle with the matter of worship that unites rather than parcels up the family of God in a particular locale? Taken to an extreme, we could custom tailor worship for widows, worship for singles, worship for addicts, but in every context, wouldn’t we want to be sensitive to that Word of God (Hebrews 10:25) which describes worship as the assembling of ourselves *together*?

The discussion has undoubtedly already taken place among us any number of times, but the questions from members have not subsided: What is such-and-such a church doing to get all those cars filling its parking lot to overflowing? We graduated from the seminary with convictions about the efficacy of the means of grace, and no one is saying anyone has graduated from those convictions. We owe it to each other, however, to be careful about how we talk about why people attend or visit our services. Those who do or don’t return on the basis of what they saw while church-shopping will say what they will, and their comments have the ability to significantly sway our thinking. Yet our smiles that they liked what they saw or our frowns that they didn’t care for what they experienced need to be tempered by the conviction we have from the Spirit – whether they fully realize it or not, their ongoing presence in the house of God is to be chiefly predicated on their knowledge of sin and their thirst for grace, not on whether or not they judged us to be friendly enough or were comfortable with how we do church.

If, without placing each other in certain castes, we can speak of a spectrum of worship styles which range from high church (historic texts and canticles, full vestments, and a full complement of ceremony) on one end to non-liturgical (informality and absence of lectionary, church year, Lutheran hymnody, and vestments) on the other end, along with everything in the middle, where do we want to stand and why do we want to stand there? Operating on the premises that, to a degree, we already have this diversity in our church body, that those in the middle have mixed feelings about what they see at either end, and that those at either end may end up frustrated about feeling they have to defend themselves before those in the middle, there are some scriptural truths we need to remember. Reverence for the Lord in worship cannot be defined by the orders of service we utilize or the worship attire we or our worshipers wear. So-called contemporary worship among us, of itself, is in no way to be viewed as an automatic departure from orthodoxy. The use of the so-called Western rite is and will ever remain an adiaphoron. We can’t validate worship based solely on the presence or absence of that rite. The Lord serves his people in worship through the means of grace; through those same means, the Lord will provide for worshipers who worship him in spirit and in truth.

Without having visited the Methodist church up the street, I may conclude from their road side signs that their January sermon series

“Relationships for Dummies” did not treat the Epiphany texts of Jesus’ baptism, his first miracle in Cana, and his Isaiah sermon in Nazareth, that their March sermon series “Conversations with God: Growing Closer to God in Prayer” did not treat the Lenten texts of Jesus’ victory over temptation and his mourning over the city of Jerusalem. I myself may loathe a departure from the texts, canticles, and church year of Lutheran liturgical worship, but unless I have been an eye- or ear-witness of departures from biblical truth, I have no basis for equating such a departure with a lapse in faithfulness.

The only reason for people to thrill ... is that the gospel of Christ, in Word and song and symbol and sacrament, set them free from the horrible prison-house of sin and hell.

In all of this and in more that remains unsaid, as opinions swirl and congregational practice varies, what can we identify as our pastoral goal? Remembering that it is never so much about us and our preferences and various forms as it is about people and anchoring them in Christ and preparing them for entrance into their heavenly home, what about a worship goal that is in line with being all things to all people, that above all else they might be saved? With such a goal, the only reason people would have for squirming during the service is not that it was so high church or low church that they just couldn’t be comfortable with it but that the incriminating law of God nailed them to the wall. With such a goal, the only reason for people to thrill is not that they found the service so enjoyable and easy to follow or the music so to their liking that they could never think of going elsewhere but that the gospel of Christ, in Word and song and symbol and sacrament, set them free from the horrible prison-house of sin and hell. As we constantly strive to have corporate worship be all things to all people, we can remember that worship ought not be so countercultural that worshipers are so thrown by the form that they conclude they are no longer on earth, remembering at the same time that worship ought not be so cultural that worshipers are so familiar with the form from everyday life that they conclude that they have not been to church at all (Exodus 3:5). With a worship goal of having the Lord serve his people in line with the indispensable truths of sin and grace, truths which level the playing field for every worshiper, how beneficial would it be for God’s people to come into God’s house and to take part in worship services where the style of worship was unnoticeable, if not imperceptible, where *how* the service was conducted disappeared beneath *what* the service delivered: God’s pardon, God’s peace and God’s power for God’s people!

Executing corporate worship to attain such a goal, we can circle back and continue the wrestling match with the term contemporary. Apart from using it to describe non-liturgical worship, contemporary, according to its root meaning of “with the times,” should be the term that covers all worship, not one style of worship. Whether or not we’ll ever be able to reclaim the term with such a meaning may be doubtful, but corporate worship which quiets every worshiper’s guilty conscience with the gospel of peace, which points every worshiper’s eyes toward a returning Savior, and which inclines every worshiper’s heart toward serving that Savior will always be “with the times.”

Music

When there is a vast repertory of worship music that carries the term contemporary in its proper name (Contemporary Christian Music, CCM), we have to recognize that there is much with which to wrestle as we ponder the term. While a thorough examination of CCM is beyond what this article can deliver, worship music in general is a large part of what the “contemporary services” discussion is all about. A pastoral approach will go a long way in enabling us to come together in our thinking and practice, even as so many subjective musical opinions exist.

After the presentation of a conference paper on church music a decade and a half ago, a veteran pastor who had faithfully spent his entire ministry in a cross-cultural setting rose to say, “What we really need to have is happy music.” Such a sentiment undoubtedly still echoes in Lutheran congregations across the land. When organ and “hymnal-only” worship (Gerlach, *Worship the Lord* #39, Nov 2009), coupled with a rare use of any other musical instruments, has brought them to a certain level of frustration with the sameness or the flatness of it all, people can understandably find themselves looking for something more or for something else. When that search leads people toward worship music that cannot be said to have any Lutheran doctrinal moorings whatsoever, both by our scriptural confession and our subscription to the Confessions, we do have a responsibility to be discerning and selective, to make judgments regarding worship music that is or is not commendable.

When Lyle Lange wrote his fine summary of Christian doctrine (*God So Loved the World*), he issued a homiletical caveat against sweeping, law-based generalizations, such as, “You’re all a bunch of drunkards.” Sweeping generalizations have no place when characterizing worship music which is commonly called contemporary. It is uncharitable and inaccurate to castigate all of it as being shallow and without substance. There are countless “praise songs” in that genre of music which, partially or completely, are nothing more than scripture passages set to music.¹ It shouldn’t be surprising that a good number of people will embrace fresh, singable music with a scriptural text.

There are, however, pastoral reasons that confessional Lutherans have not been inclined to publish such songs in hymnals or to generate approved lists of Christian contemporary music which Lutherans, too, can properly utilize. A “music first” approach,² where music is given the place of “doing its thing” ahead of the text doing its thing, would be an approach opposite of the psalmist for whom the text was “everything,” and who then tagged that text “for the director of music.” “Text first,” not necessarily written first in time order but necessarily ranked first in order of importance, is a pastoral principle to follow in hymn or song selection. When thousands of non-denominational or other-denominational Christians, by their use of it, push a contemporary Christian song to the top of the CCLI top ten list, Lutherans who are wise and welcome to check out that list will still have to first ask, “What does it say?” before considering, “How does it sing?”

Incorporating the likeable, singable contemporary worship song into the service is undeniably a marvelous part of what we, in Christian freedom, can do. Let’s not judge each other for doing so. As in every matter of Christian liberty, however, maintaining that it is permissible (1 Corinthians 10:23) is followed by asking if it is

constructive. As we evaluate, we ask not only, “Does it edify?” but also, on the basis of the text, “How much does it edify?” and, “How much can it edify?” Songs which every Christian *can* sing differ from songs which, by virtue of their content, confessional Lutherans will choose to sing or publish or memorize. Would this song serve as good material for a hymnology class for young or adult Christians? How much food for the hungry soul does it offer? In this area of pastoral work, we want to wrestle with the matter of selecting hymns and songs with texts which allow people to sip and sing that the Lord is good as compared with hymns and songs with texts which allow people to drink deeply and to taste and see that the Lord is good.

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Letting the gospel predominate, the people participate, the experience of the church be honored, and the arts be fully utilized are Lutheran worship principles that offer marvelous help in evaluating contemporary Christian worship music. Refrains of “Worthy is the Lamb” which omit “that was slain” and why he was slain and that his having been slain means justification that brings life to all people may innocently and unintentionally, but tragically, be skipping past the gospel. Strangely placed rests, key changes, uncommon interval jumps, and even the mildest amount of syncopation (a single off-beat sixteenth note) can quickly hush the congregation’s song and prohibit the people from participating. Exclusive selection of the recent over the ancient falsely pretends that we have no Christian forebears, while exclusive selection of the ancient over the recent falsely pretends that we do not live in the 21st century. Two approaches lose sight of the wide array of what the Lord makes available to us artistically, for the praise of his glorious grace in Christ: exclusively employing one instrument and exclusively employing only one particular ensemble of certain instruments.

Jesus Paid It All is a hymn written in 1865 by Elvina Hall with music composed by John Grape. Its refrain, “Jesus paid it all, All to him I owe; Sin had left a crimson stain, He washed it white as snow” easily aligns with Lutheran theology. Its musical setting in a Baptist hymnal (or heard on cyberhymnal.org) has a distinctive sound. Its altered musical setting played with piano and strings and sung by Fernando Ortega (“Storm” album) has an altogether different sound. Its drastically altered musical setting played on acoustic guitar, eventually accompanied by a full band, and sung by Kristian Stanfill³ sets yet another entirely different mood. Singing the Stanfill rendition of that song in Sunday worship in the congregation I serve would result in polar reactions. Some would walk out of church with a smile, saying, “That’s more like it!” Others would walk out without making eye contact with me because for them it went over about as well as a porcupine in a balloon factory. The pastoral question is not, “Which musical setting do I regard as the best?” or, “Which musical setting will people appreciate the most?” A pastoral approach to that music which seems to be so attractive to so many is to ask, “Will it edify

all the gathered guests in the house of God, allowing them all to participate without polarizing these precious saints?" If not, the best pastoral practice may be to recognize that it and a host of other doctrinally acceptable songs may well be better left to personal, private worship on the computer screen or iPod rather than infused into corporate worship.

After 52 years of use, *The Lutheran Hymnal* had served a wonderful purpose, but the time came that it was ready to be set aside. One wonders if our church body's next hymnal will ever be able to reflect unity in the way our 1993 hymnal did (*Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal, CW*) with a usage rate of 95% or higher in our congregations. Good hymnals have always been precious books. Whenever it happens that we again choose to publish a set of 600 hymns for worship in our congregations, whether the volume comes in printed or digital format or both, those 600 hymns will not form the un-crossable border for our congregational song. Tens of thousands of other hymns and songs will be out there. Both now and then we will need to wrestle with the texts and the music and the genres of music which constitute those hymns. Both now and then it will be a necessary and worthwhile assessment of worship music which we make, because the people of God are the objects of our attention. Their edification and their preservation in the Christian faith are our pastoral objectives.

A Plug for Contemporary

Recent talk of staying with or letting go of the NIV translation speaks to the incessant change of language which comes with the passage of time. While thoughts of our church body's next hymnal may not conjure up the same deep concerns regarding necessary language updating as confronted the Joint Hymnal Committee (1983-1993), an analytical look at CW still reveals the need for continuing reevaluation of both music and language.

Poetry is God's gift. In so many places it is the literary form of the scriptures. In so many instances we need to pause and ponder, in order to accurately discern what it is saying. When singing poetry, we don't have the luxury of time to pause and ponder, since, after a few seconds, we need to be singing the next line. Think about identifying subject and verb in stanza three of *Silent Night*. In the sung phrase, "...Radiant beams from thy holy face," radiant is not an adjective and beams is not a plural noun. Radiant is an adverb, a shortened form of radiantly (poetic license), and beams is the verb. Love's pure light radiantly beams from the holy face of the Son of God. Especially when poetic verse is sung, the text needs to be readily understandable or its point is easily missed.

One draw of contemporary music is that there are far fewer language hang-ups. Hymns rich in doctrinal content need to be readily understandable. A pastoral concern for the third grader or the thirty year old would lead one to evaluate whether or not any troubles are *betiding* him these days, whether or not the saints have done any *sojourning* lately. In many cases the language of ancient poetry cries for explanatory instruction. After all, you can't just hack away at poetry to make it understandable – what you end up with isn't poetry any more. Plenty of cases, however, cry out for improvement. Translations into English verse are in many cases centuries old. Fresh translation into contemporary English is a great way to keep using a strong, Lutheran text.

In less than a year, congregations will have at their disposal all of the electronic graphic files for all of the worship music in CW, as is already available for Christian Worship Supplement (CWS). Through the purchase and the securing of the appropriate license, worship leaders and congregations will have access to that entire corpus of music indefinitely. In less than a year, they will also have access to all of the music of CW and CWS in MP3 format, both organ and piano versions, along with other accompanying instruments. Within a few months, all of our currently published (CW and CWS) worship music will have been digitally preserved for future use for as long as we choose to use it. Where will we go from there?

As in the past we have sought to emphasize the need for training young musicians so that they can be the keyboardists and accompanists for years to come, the call needs to go out again for fresh texts, fresh translations of texts, and fresh musical compositions which read and play in today's language and music. If we were to use recently published Getty and Townend hymns as an example (CWS), we find noticeably fresh language and music. There is a striking difference, is there not, in the language of the lines below?

Let your blessing me attend; From all evil me defend. (CW 464)

Take your truth, plant it deep in us; Shape and fashion us in your likeness... (CWS 723)

Poetry will likely always invert common word order somewhere or other, but we don't talk that way anymore. This is one place where we desperately need the contemporary. Whatever else did Luther have in mind when he stated that his translation goal was to have Paul speak the German of the people of his day? When poetry is no longer in the language of the day, it is time to ask if we are wiser to publish it for intended, regular use or to archive it for occasional, selective use.

I don't doubt that there are a couple hundred hymns in CW that most of us are not all that inclined to use any more, for both linguistic and musical reasons. I don't doubt that there are many who have gladly abandoned the 68 year old music of the canticles of *The Common Service* starting on CW p. 15. Thrilling is not the word that comes to my mind when I think of the music of the Gloria on p. 16, though the music of that service remains dear to a good number of our people. Let's wrestle with this, though: When we become convinced that there is music that both we and the people we serve are no longer inclined to use, when we become convinced that both we and the people we serve are not well served by language or poetic word order which are no longer in common use and tend to leave people unclear about what they are singing, and when we simultaneously have a legitimate and sincere concern for insuring that visitors will benefit from receiving linguistically clear and musically appealing gospel proclamations, it is not necessarily time to search through the worship music of all of Christendom to locate whatever might appear to be better than what we are ready to discard. It is time to consider and to work on and to implement a solid, sensible, confessional, creative expansion of what is best for Lutheran worship.

If it's true in architecture (Tomhave, *Worship the Lord* #22, Nov 2006, "Building Decidedly Lutheran,"), then it's true for corporate

worship. Let's keep building worship services that are decidedly Lutheran. The resources do exist. Two years after its release, how many worship leaders and members involved in worship planning realize that there are 140 pages of alternate settings, descants, handbell scores for C, B-flat, E-flat, and F instruments for the 85 hymns in CWS? How much work could we do to provide similar resources for those hymns in CW which will be reprinted in the next ten Lutheran hymnals? How much work could we do to provide downloadable new resources prior to the publication of the next hymnal? The Spirit has gifted the members of Christ's body with the gifts to pull it off, and to pull it off well. It will take work. It may involve consultation with brothers who have such gifts to a greater degree. But let's stay together in the same Lutheran boat, and let's pull on the oars together. That's what confessional brothers and sisters do.

Encouragement

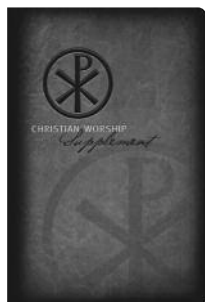
As a band of confessional brothers, intent on preserving the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace, we are well advised and perhaps

are in need of admonition to be done with labels. So-and-so is not a contemporary guy or a high church guy or a traditional guy. He is a brother in Christ. Personal worship preferences and practices can easily divide. Hearts beating pastorally toward members entrusted to our care and toward fellow brothers will be hearts which strive for unity under him whose pastoral heart beats with perfect love for us all. If you tell me about the kind of services you lead or you ask me about the kind of services I lead, I wouldn't want to converse about high church or low church. I wouldn't want to call it traditional. I wouldn't want to call it contemporary. I would want to call it worship.

¹ "Jesus Messiah" by Chris Tomlin is an example.

² See the song writing process of a different Chris Tomlin song: "How Great Is Our God" http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JpfKLi_4LQ0

³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nfWgJRh4U4w>



CWS Ideas and Instruments: August and September 2010

By Bryan Gerlach

This article is available only in the shorter original version of WTL #43.

Contradictory Impulses

"Will we weigh the broader ramifications of what happens when our members visit sister congregations around the country and what happens when members of sister congregations around the country visit our congregation?" ... "No one is saying that we haven't, but must we not continue to wrestle with the matter of worship that unites rather than parcels up the family of God in a particular locale?" M. Schultz

In January of 2010, Stephen Valleskey presented an essay: "Lutheran Worship Reforms of the 1500s that We Can Still Use Today." Some quotations follow. The entire essay is available on Connect under Valuable Worship Reading.

"A middle way must be found between the two extremes of license on the one hand, that is, everyone doing their own thing in worship, and legalism on the other, thinking that we may bind consciences where God has not spoken.... Luther's approach was not to impose uniform worship forms by law and regulation, nor was it simply to do nothing, but to follow the tack of godly exhortation.... Decisions on the outward forms of worship, in which we are free, ought not be based on personal preference and choice.... To Luther, the solution lay in the direction of the free yielding of personal whims and opinions in favor of working through to a common consensus in worship....

"FC X does not make the individual congregation free to worship as it pleases, nor can it be used to counter what we confess in the Augustana and provide a Lutheran congregation with the option of becoming non-liturgical as that word is commonly understood....

"It is not as if the Lutheran reformers were unaware of the contradictory impulses of the exercise of Christian freedom and the desire for a measure of uniformity in worship, and that we today have been the first to discover this tension. But somehow, by the grace of God, they managed to steer a middle course through the potentially explosive and disruptive issues that surround Christian freedom in worship, a minefield that confessional Lutheranism is treading gingerly in our times."



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Sharing worship ideas with WELS pastors

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