

Worship that Supports Evangelism

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What is the relationship between worship and evangelism? It must first be clarified what worship is. Worship is the Christian believer's response to God's grace in Christ. It includes everything the believer does out of thankfulness to God and in accordance with God's Word. It is the sum total of all the good works done by the believer. As the Apostle Paul says in Romans 12:1, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship." Worship is the Christian's life-offering. It is our privilege as a chosen nation and a royal priesthood.

Although the Lord has left to our sound Christian judgment *how* he wants to be worshiped, he has nonetheless told us *what* pleases him, what true worship is to include. He wants us to hear his Word. He wants us to believe him. He wants our prayers and our praise. He wants to be feared. He also wants us to teach, encourage, admonish and love one another. He wants us to confess his name. He wants us to manage well the gifts he has given us. He wants us to reach out to those who do not know him with the saving gospel. The true worshiper of God strives to do the one without leaving the others undone. This is the Christian life.

What happens on Sunday mornings can only be given the title "worship" if its goal is to reflect what the Christian's daily worship is to be. Professor James P. Tiefel states, Public worship has as its objective to *solidify* the message of Christ on the hearts and minds of the believers and to allow these same believers to *summarize* their whole life of worship.¹

The public worship of the Christian community imitates the worship of individual Christians.²

Some think that public worship should be the main venue for carrying out all the various ministries of the congregation, especially that of evangelism, which many see to be the Church's only mission. *Christian Worship: Manual* says,

Many church members see public worship as almost the entire ministry of the congregation. It should not be surprising, then, that some Christians expect public worship to "carry the load" of all the congregation's ministries. To some, worship ought to be able to function as evangelism, education, discipline, and counseling.³

This conception of worship, however, changes the goal of public worship from being a *summary* of the Christian life of service into the *entirety* of the Christian life of service. Public worship is seen primarily as functional, serving the real purpose, for example, of evangelizing the community. When public worship is forced to carry the load of the congregation's ministries — to become the primary outreach arm of the congregation — none of the objectives of worship can possibly be accomplished.

¹ James Tiefel, WLS Junior worship class notes, p. 17. Available through the WLS student book shop.

² James Tiefel, WLS Senior worship class notes, p. 16. Available through the WLS student book shop.

³ Gary Baumler and Kermit Moldenhauer, editors, *Christian Worship: Manual* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993), pp. 12-13.

Others, reacting to this merely functional view of worship, go to the opposite extreme and wish to separate public worship from the nurture and outreach of the congregation. They would see worship as primarily one dimensional, focusing on the vertical dimension: the prayer, praise and reverent adoration of God. But this defines worship too narrowly. Worship is the display of love for God, which means obeying his commandments. Those include prayer and praise, nurture and outreach. It might be said, therefore, that all evangelism is worship, but not all worship is evangelism, since worship includes much more than that. Since worship is the all-encompassing service of God, worship is the true mission of the Church.

Therefore, if public worship is to summarize the life of the Christian, it must incorporate facets from the entire Christian life. There must be hearing of God's word, a response of faith, prayer, praise, confession, education, encouragement and evangelism. The magnificence of public worship is that, when done well, it aids the entire ministry of the congregation.

Worship serves the congregation best when it remains what the church's worship has always been: the intellectual and emotional interaction between the Bridegroom and his bride, between Christ and his Church. *When public worship matches this objective, it supports in its unique way all other facets of the congregation's ministry* (italics mine).⁴

The purpose of this essay, then, will be to demonstrate how public worship supports also the evangelism facet of the congregation's ministry without itself *becoming* the entire evangelism ministry. Public worship supports evangelism when it is (1) *relevant* to the needs of the visitor, when it is (2) *reverent* in its portrayal of God to the visitor, and when it is (3) *reflective* of God's desire for the salvation of the visitor.

WORSHIP THAT IS RELEVANT...

Worship supports evangelism when it is relevant to the needs of the visitor. This does not mean a marketing approach for our worship services. The Church Growth Movement errs when it listens to non-believers express their needs and wants, and then tailors the worship service to fill those felt needs. Lutheran worship, on the other hand, addresses the deeper needs of non-believers, although these needs are often not even recognized by them.

The Church's worship must be subversive...It listens to the needs of those to whom it reaches out but offers them more than they think they want in the fullness of Christ's answer to their unfelt and deeper needs.⁵

Visitors need to be introduced to a Person: Christ Jesus. This, we know, is accomplished through the Word of that Person. To make our worship services relevant to the needs of visitors does not mean making them feel cozy and at home. It means proclaiming the truths of Scripture and applying those truths to daily life. Marva Dawn points out that

genuine worship that "welcomes the stranger" can only happen by means of objective proclamation—for no one can enter into the feelings of others, nor will newcomers feel that they belong to an already established group.⁶

Emotions are not best addressed by focusing on cozy feelings into which all worship participants might not be able to enter. Instead, let us convey glorious and wonderful

⁴ *Christian Worship: Manual*, p. 13.

⁵ Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 286.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

truths to which we might all respond with genuine emotions of our own. Subjectivities cannot be shared; telling you about my feelings will not bring about the same feelings in you. Only if I tell you what aroused my feelings can you respond to that same stimulus with subjective reactions of your own.⁷

What every visitor needs the Lutheran Church has in abundance. Marva Dawn asks, “How can worship best convey God’s self-giving presence to a stranger in our midst? The Christian heritage of liturgical rites and responses has functioned in such a way throughout the ages.”⁸ Concerning the liturgy David Valleskey writes,

From the opening greeting to the parting blessing the liturgy proclaims the Christ who was born, lived, died, rose, and ascended “for us and for our salvation.” The full reality of full forgiveness is announced in the absolution, the sermon, and the words of institution. The cause of forgiveness, the finished work of Christ, is reviewed in the appointed lessons from the Word. The person of Christ is taught in the songs of the liturgy. It is obvious that the public worship of the church sets a full table of the gospel. And the gospel is what the Holy Spirit uses to convince and convert the lost.⁹

Many would argue that the liturgy “turns off” visitors because they find it archaic and dull. But this premise has yet to be proven. “Anyone who insists that visitors are ‘turned off’ by liturgical worship must first ask himself if it is the Liturgy or the way the Liturgy is done which offends.”¹⁰ It is not within the scope of this essay to defend the use of the liturgy in worship. But given that the liturgy offers such high quantity and quality of gospel proclamation, one must seriously ask himself the question, “If I decide not to use the liturgy, how will I replace the gospel proclamation and the connection with the Holy Christian Church of old that is lost as a result?”

It should be stated that “using the liturgy” does not mean doing the exact same thing from week to week. Not only are there weekly variations built into the liturgy, like the readings, the Psalm and the sermon, but even the Ordinary can contain variety in musical settings and styles. Marva Dawn emphasizes that “our worship practices must embody the truth in ways that relate to people, that invite them to experience the truth firsthand and not simply as irrelevant tradition.”¹¹

In order for the liturgy to have its full impact upon people, it must be understandable. From the words that are spoken or chanted to the rising and sitting, kneeling or singing, the congregation must understand the significance of the symbolism. Many people who are turned off by the liturgy or think it to be boring simply don’t know the significance behind it. “The problem for many who don’t like worship is that they don’t understand it.”¹² Although worship is not the primary place to educate members or visitors about the significance of each phrase and action, the relevance of the liturgy can slowly be taught through *occasional* explanations by the

⁷ Ibid., p. 175.

⁸ Ibid., p. 141.

⁹ David Valleskey, *We Believe—Therefore We Speak: The Theology and Practice of Evangelism* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1995), p. 187.

¹⁰ James P. Tiefel, “Liturgical Worship for Evangelism and Outreach,” 1990, p. 16. Available in the Essay File in the WLS library.

¹¹ Dawn, p. 113.

¹² Ibid., p. 149.

presiding minister. For example, he might say, “We rise to meet Christ, who comes to us in the Gospel” Or a weekly explanation of a single portion of the liturgy or of the church’s symbolism might be included in the bulletin, inserting a small box in the bulletin answering a new question each week, e.g., “Why does the pastor begin by saying, ‘In the name of the Father...’?” Such education makes the gospel that is in the liturgy relevant to the lives of members and visitors alike.

Another factor in making worship relevant to the needs of visitors is to make sure that the praise of the believers includes the reason for their praise. It does the visitor no good to hear the members singing, “I will praise the Lord,” if the member never explains *why* he is praising the Lord. The question could be asked if such hymns do the members themselves much good. If we let the gospel and the objective proclamation of God’s truth shine through in our hymnody, then members and visitors alike will benefit.

The part of public worship with the greatest possibility of comprehension and relevance to the visitor will be the sermon. A visitor may not understand all the vocabulary of a hymn. He may not know what the various symbols in the church convey. But the sermon is the part of the service in which the truths of Scripture are expounded and directly applied to the listeners: members and visitors alike. Richard Balge explains the purpose of preaching:

The purpose of preaching therefore is twofold. It is (1) to lead sinners to Jesus and (2) to edify those who already confess him as Savior and Lord. Gospel preaching therefore has both a missionary and a pastoral purpose. The sermon speaks to believers and to unbelievers to lead them both to salvation in Christ... Though unbelievers and hypocrites may be present in a worship service, yet a sermon presupposes that those who hear it are already the people of God... It does not address people as though they are godless unbelievers. As sinners with an Old Adam, yes; but as sinners controlled by their Old Adam, no! Every sermon will contain “specific gospel”; that is, it will clearly present the way of salvation for the benefit of anyone who does not yet know and confess Christ as Savior and Lord.¹³

Interestingly, Balge states that while the purpose of preaching includes leading unbelievers to Jesus, the method of preaching will address all the listeners as if they were already the people of God. Here is a good example demonstrating that public worship cannot serve as the primary evangelism arm of the congregation, since evangelism is best done when law and gospel can be specifically applied. Nevertheless, visitors will be present at worship and can benefit greatly from a sermon. For this reason, C.F.W. Walther warns, “Any sermon is wrong that does not present all that is necessary to a person’s salvation.”¹⁴

For preaching to be relevant to the needs of visitors, it must be text-based. It must be understandable to the visitor, even though it is directed toward the members. It must contain enough of the plan of salvation that the Holy Spirit can work the miracle of conversion, and most of all there must be consistency in the law and gospel presented in sermons. A young woman who was eager to share her Savior with a friend invited her friend to come to church with her. After weeks of making excuses, her friend finally decided to accompany her to church. But they went on Mother’s Day, and the sermon that day was about the blessing of mothers. It never got

¹³ Joel Gerlach and Richard Balge, *Preach the Gospel: A Textbook for Homiletics* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1982), p. 4.

¹⁴ C.F.W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), p. 25.

around to law and gospel. Preaching a sermon on Sunday morning that does not contain an abundance of law and gospel does injustice to the members of the congregation, since for many the worship service is (unfortunately!) their primary meal of the Word during the week. But for the visitor a lack of applied law and gospel in the sermon could truly be fatal if they never come back again.

WORSHIP THAT IS REVERENT...

Worship also supports evangelism when it is reverent in its portrayal of God to the visitor. Reverent worship is worship in which participants give God their best because he has given us his best. Reverent worship portrays God as the Great King, the Everlasting Ruler, the Holy and Just, the Gracious and Merciful Lord, as the Great I AM instead of our buddy. Reverent worship exudes a sense of holy ground, transforming the ornate cathedral or the humble WEF unit into the dwelling place of the Living God. “[The Church’s worship] is truly unlike anything else in the entire world. How the people of God gather for and conduct themselves in worship will, then, reflect that reality, namely, that this is heaven on earth.”¹⁵

Such a taste of transcendence in public worship is beneficial to member and visitor alike. Marva Dawn asserts, “The more we encounter the holy God in our worship, the more we will recognize our utter sinfulness and be driven to repentance.”¹⁶ A reverent portrayal of God in worship is an honest portrayal. He is a God who is to be revered and held in awe. Not only so, but worship that is reverent is attractive to the visitor. Chances are they have enough buddies. An attempt to make them feel like they’ve entered our living room when they walk through the church doors is not necessarily what they’re looking for.

Offering God our best is not only biblical. It’s attractive. Yet there are people who want to pit worship against evangelism, as if what we have to offer in Lutheran liturgical worship (as just described) is not for today’s Gen-Xers. It is also claimed that Gen-Xers with a church background may find worship that exudes transcendence and excellence to be appealing, but that Gen-Xers with a non-churched background are intimidated by that and are looking more for relationships. Why do we have to pit one against the other as if reaching unchurched young adults through relationships means we have to downplay worship?¹⁷

In fact, turning worship into fellowship time, doting on visitors and making them think worship is all about them and their feelings undermines the worship of God and is detrimental to worship that is public.

Fundamentally, this ideology [of intimacy] causes us to think that participants in a worship service must feel cozy and close to each other. This fallacy prevents worship from being truly *public* and open to those who are not part of the community. The Christian community does develop warm and caring relationships that are nurtured in times of fellowship. However, worship is for God and should not depend on cozy feelings either toward each other or toward God—although the result of good worship will be a deepening of both. In fellowship times, we welcomes strangers best by conversation

¹⁵ Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod Commission on Worship - Reporter Insert, “Reflections on Contemporary / Alternative Worship,” January 1998. Personal files of Pastor James Huebner, Milwaukee.

¹⁶ Dawn, p. 90.

¹⁷ James Huebner, “Excellence in Worship,” p. 5, presented at the WELS National Conference on Worship, Music & the Arts, Carthage College, Kenosha, Wisconsin, 19 July 1999. Personal files of Pastor James Huebner, Milwaukee.

and actions that focus on them. In worship, contrarily, we welcome them best by worshipping God in a public way.¹⁸

The fact is, worship that is *irreverent* or too simplistic cheats us. It “deprives us of the grandeur of an infinite God.”¹⁹

A reverent attitude toward God on the part of the worshipers serves as an evangelistic witness to visitors. It says, “My God is great. My God is powerful. My God is bigger than I. My God deserves my best.”

Visitors will be attracted to liturgies in which the participants love what they are doing because God is in their midst.²⁰

In genuine worship even a complete stranger can sense adoration, profound conviction, honest confession, and intense joy that form a powerful witness to the reality of God.²¹

The non-Christian who is present as a congregation of believers wholeheartedly participates in the worship may well be led to want to learn more about the Christian faith that produces such a heartfelt response. In this respect, the public worship of the church serves as a pre-evangelism tool.²²

Many who have entered churches across the United States do not sense any reverence or awe on the part of the members of those churches. In fact, “worship in the United States seems more often to be characterized by boredom than by glimpses of heaven.”²³ To maintain the “glimpse of heaven” atmosphere in corporate worship, excellence in planning is a must. James Huebner comments,

We cannot add to the power of God’s law and gospel which alone can convict and convince [our visitors], but we may be doing things which construct unnecessary and unwitting obstacles to the gospel. What can we do to remove those obstacles and barriers? I submit - do everything involved in corporate worship with excellence. And I mean EVERYTHING! God who has given us His best deserves nothing but the best in every detail of our corporate worship.²⁴

Marva Dawn adds,

How will we teach Christianity’s specialness if the music in our worship services imitates the superficiality and meaninglessness of the general world and our sermons talk about subjects that those in the pew can learn from psychologists, sociologists, and the local television station?...Our worship services...must be planned in a genuinely worshipful way that invites persons into the essence of truthful Christianity.²⁵

¹⁸ Dawn, p. 140.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 149.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 275.

²¹ Ibid., p. 289.

²² Valleskey, p. 189.

²³ Dawn, p. 275.

²⁴ Huebner, p. 5

²⁵ Dawn, p. 46.

To form character, the means must match the ends. If we want deep faith, we must be nurtured by deep experiences of its reality. That is why it is so essential to plan worship well, for we must be concerned with how every action in the process of the faith journey affects the development of our character.²⁶

Well-planned services take time and preparation. Huebner goes so far as to say that, if the pastor is the planner,

he should have the lessons, theme of the day, and the psalm and hymn choices printed out and handed to all involved in worship music at least a year in advance. Then the musicians and choir directors can do their planning and practicing so that each service is a unit, and each offers to God the best.²⁷

Who can plan worship perfectly? Isn't it more important to get the members participating in worship than to strive for excellence every time? Huebner explains, I don't want to scare anyone. God knows full well that even the very best of what we offer to Him is imperfect. For Jesus' sake, God does not count that against us. But just because He is merciful in accepting our imperfect worship, that should not be an excuse for laziness or sloppiness. If you want to use the 5th and 6th grade band students to accompany a hymn, pick one in the range they can play well, and don't assign to them an intricate descant.²⁸

In the end, worship services that are consistently done well will teach the visitor much about God's Being: that he is a great and an awesome God. It will also teach them much about ourselves: that we consider God to be a great and an awesome God. Reverence in worship is best expressed by excellence in worship. Making the worship service a place of awe and reverence will undoubtedly support evangelism: at most, by actually introducing the visitor to our Savior God; at least, by removing obstacles that might keep a person from coming back.

I believe that today's younger generations, and all generations for that matter, expect excellence. We have every reason to work at excellence in worship, not just because it is attractive but primarily because the God who has given us His best deserves nothing but the best. In the end, we are trying to accomplish a balance between reverence and relevance. We want worshipers to experience the "Wow! We're in the presence of God!"²⁹

WORSHIP THAT IS REFLECTIVE...

Finally, worship supports evangelism when it is reflective of God's desire for the salvation of the visitor. Win Arn makes the observation,

In our modern culture, the understanding of what was once a theological imperative—of people outside Christ being eternally lost—has changed in the minds of many believers...Little remains of the first-century Christian's burning conviction that without

²⁶ Ibid., p. 117.

²⁷ Huebner, p. 5.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 5.

²⁹ Huebner, p. 5.

Christ, every person is forever lost.³⁰

Our congregations are not entirely immune to society's apathy concerning non-believers. On the other hand, there exists a great mission zeal in our synod and a strong desire to see the lost won for Christ. The more we lead our members to see visitors as souls whom Christ wants in his kingdom, the more they will be able to reflect that desire of God in the way they welcome visitors. Visitors will notice if the congregation displays a passion for souls.

Reflecting God's desire for the salvation of visitors is a part of the worship service itself. Arn mourns the fact that

very few lay people feel able to effectively share their faith. When asked why they are a Christian and church member, many can mumble little more than, "Well, it's a good thing to be." Not that they aren't enthusiastic about the reality of Christ in their life, they have just never been helped to communicate it. Most Christians today lack the training which would enable them to share what Christ means to them with a non-Christian in a natural, effective way.³¹

Worship is not the place to carry out the training of members for evangelism, but as a summary of the Christian's life, public worship does provide opportunities for practice. Frank Senn explains,

Our liturgical texts proclaim [the good news] with undiminished clarity. They make public statements of the gospel which most of us would not be bold enough to make in a private one-on-one conversation. That, of course, is a function of ritual: to enable us to say and do in public what we would hardly dare to say and do in private. So the liturgy itself is a model for evangelical proclamation.³²

When believers are gathered together confessing their sins, confessing their faith and singing to God and to one another about their faith, they are, in effect, practicing for evangelism. Again, this "practice" will not give members everything they need for witnessing about Jesus, but it gets them speaking the words of witness Sunday after Sunday, and even those who never make an evangelism call are still witnessing to the visitors in church.

Another part of worship that reflects God's desire for the visitor's salvation is the Prayer of the Church. Historically, this prayer has always included a plea by the saints that the Lord of the harvest would reach the lost and bring them into his kingdom. Such a prayer is itself effectively helping the lost, even though it is not evangelism in the narrow sense. Not only so, but visitors present will hopefully understand that this church does not see them as "outsiders" or as nuisances, but as precious souls who need — and have — a Savior.

Likewise evangelism is summarized in worship through the offering, in which believers symbolize the offering of their entire selves to the Lord. Naturally, then, a part of that offering goes to support the active evangelism of the congregation and of the synod. Since visitors probably do not realize this, the pastor might from time to time pray an offering prayer in which the congregation asks the Lord to use their offerings to bring the gospel of Christ to the world.

Finally, worship reflects God's desire for the salvation of the visitor when the

³⁰ Win and Charles Arn, *The Master's Plan for Making Disciples* (Church Growth Press, 1982), p. 8.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

³² Frank C. Senn, *The Witness of the Worshiping Community* (New York/Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1993), p. 30.

congregation shows a passion for souls in its attitude toward visitors. Marva Dawn encourages, Let us continually remember that unbelievers are brought to Christ 95 percent of the time not by style of worship but by friends. Consequently, our worship must be such that it nurtures the kind of welcoming character that will reach out to the unsaved with the gospel.³³

This welcoming character is shown before anything else in the thoughtful preparation of the church for the visitor. Such preparation includes: reserving parking near the church for visitors; developing a system of greeters to seek out the visitor and tell them what they need to know; providing a staffed nursery for the care of children; keeping the church grounds attractive. None of these things will convert the visitor, nor are they effective evangelism. But a welcoming atmosphere in the church does serve to show the visitor that the worshipers and the God whom they worship care about the welfare of the visitors.

The welcoming character of worshipers also reflects God's love for the visitor in how the members treat the visitors. In a sense, visitors are intruders and "outsiders." The believers are all part of the family of God. The visitor is not. It is healthy and even necessary for the members to have a special bond with one another and to consider one another "family members." But this attitude must never turn into elitism. Rather than treating visitors like intruders, congregations accurately reflect the love of God for them by treating them like the one lost sheep, recognizing themselves to be the ninety-nine. Members reflect God's evangelism zeal by welcoming visitors as if they were the prodigal son returning to his father's house. This is not to assume that a visitor automatically becomes a Christian, but knowing what a big step it is for a non-believer to cross the threshold of our church building, knowing the gospel content of our worship and the power of the Holy Spirit in that gospel, it is proper for us to celebrate the arrival of visitors and treat them as honored guests and potential family members.

Evangelism is only one spoke on the "worship wheel." We must be careful not to emphasize the evangelism aspect of public worship to the detriment of the various other aspects. But public worship that truly summarizes the worship life of the Christian will certainly include evangelism, at least in summary form. When public worship is relevant, reverent and reflective of God's mission zeal in the ways outlined above, the worshipers themselves becomes powerful tools in God's hand: tools to attract and convert the visitor, and tools to support the whole congregation in its efforts to bring the lost into fellowship with their Savior God.

³³ Dawn, p. 125.

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