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Plenary Address

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The Formation and Function of WELS Hymnals

What can we discover about worship from the story of our hymnals?

When the *Sampler* came out in 1986, I wasn't sure what to think about it. I was sixteen years old, and I liked the hymns, all twenty-one of them. What I didn't like was the new version of the Common Service. Those of you who were born later than 1980 might not remember how strange it felt to switch from "thee" to "you." "We praise YOU, we bless YOU, we worship YOU." It felt like somebody was pounding that word "YOU" into my brain. I wasn't the only one. There were a lot of angry letters to the *Northwestern Lutheran*.

Of course, the *Sampler* accomplished its purposes very well in spite of people like me. It prepared us for the new hymnal that was in the works. By the time *Christian Worship* (CW) was published seven years later, we were ready for it.

Maybe there's some irony in the fact that the skeptical teenager from 1986 gets to help introduce the next new book of worship, but I can honestly tell you that this time around I'm really excited to do it.

Please don't call it a sampler. We get that a lot. It's true, there are similarities. But the *Sampler* was an appetizer. At two hundred fifty-five pages, *Christian Worship Supplement* is an entrée.

An amazing amount of work is behind the publishing of this book, and I'm not just talking about what the Supplement Committee has been doing since October of 2003, or the gifts of all its contributors. I'm also thinking about the words and examples of

Christians through the ages who fought the good fight and passed a Christ-centered worship heritage on to us.

Hymnals have played an important role in the story of the Lutheran church, and also in the story of our synod. What can we discover about worship from the story of our hymnals?

Ask “Why?”

One thing we can learn is the importance of asking the question, “why?”

“Why do we worship?” is the question that eventually sent Adam and Eve on a desperate hunt for fig leaves. Out of the endless buffet of food God created, he told Adam and Eve to abstain from just one tree. They worshiped him by obeying him, and they knew exactly *why* they were worshipping. It was because God loved them.

The devil claimed to know a better reason. Didn’t that forbidden fruit look delicious? He planted the idea in their heads that worship should be about feeling good, and he has been sabotaging worship ever since. If he can’t snag people with the feel-good tactic, he goes the other direction and makes it a matter of duty, like he did with the so-called religious experts of Jesus’ day. For them, worship was all about rules, and they thanked God that they were not like other men.

Temptation comes slithering our way, too. Isn’t it easy to think worship is all about the music? Isn’t it easy to pat *ourselves* on the back when the service is finished? Every sinner knows how delicious forbidden fruit looks.

But sin always comes with a curse. Adam and Eve didn’t think that far ahead. Maybe we don’t either. Part of the curse of our sin is the absolute inability to worship God. There can be no real thankfulness, or joy, or freedom, or love. It all fizzles and fades, and there’s nothing we can do to make it better. In church and in every day life, only the Lord can fix the “why” behind our worship.

He has. “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (Galatians 3:13). God “un-cursed” us by cursing his Son, and now everything we receive from his hand is a blessing.

Good hymnals help us remember why we worship. In the preface to his last hymnal, published in 1545, Martin Luther wrote, “God has made our hearts and spirit happy

through his dear Son, whom He has delivered up that we might be redeemed from sin, death, and the devil. He who believes this cannot but be happy; he must cheerfully sing and talk about this, that others might hear it and come to Christ" (Eggert, Kurt, "Martin Luther: God's Music Man," p.4).

Why do we worship? Not because it's our job. Not because we're eager to try something copyrighted in 2008. We worship because in Word and Sacrament, the Holy Spirit always holds Jesus before our eyes. One look at him and the devil's duty-driven, feel-good angles on worship look completely ridiculous. The curse is lifted. We are eternally blessed. That's why we worship. And the better we understand the "why" behind our worship, the better we know what to say.

Speak Out

The angels in Isaiah's vision knew exactly what to say when they were worshiping the Lord: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD God Almighty. The whole earth is full of his glory." In his commentary on Isaiah, Luther said, "The truest worship of God is a pure and simple confession" (*Luther's Works*, Volume 16, p. 70).

I'm not sure that's how people usually think about it. In general people expect that worship in a Christian church will involve hearing the Bible read and a sermon preached. There will be praying and the singing of Christian songs, and they know it's all supposed to be good for your soul. Not many view worship as a time for pure and simple confession, but that's exactly what it is. Not only during the Creed, but from invocation to benediction, we confess our faith in the Triune God and all that he has done for us.

As you may know, when the Wisconsin Synod was born in 1850 it took some time for us to come together on our confession of faith. Don't get me wrong, we knew about Jesus. But many of our first pastors had come from mission societies of Germany in which the line between Lutheran doctrine and Reformed doctrine was blurry.

Early Missouri Synod pastors, on the other hand, were united in their confession from the start. One of the main reasons they had left Germany was to avoid pressure to compromise doctrine. C.F.W. Walther, who became their leader, was known for his solid grasp on theology.

In time, we in Wisconsin matured in our confession under the leadership of men like synod president John Bading and seminary president Adolph Hoenecke. Eventually we

joined in fellowship with the Missouri Synod and other confessional church bodies to form the Synodical Conference.

But even if you didn't know any of this history, you could probably figure some of it out by looking at the hymns we were singing.

In the early days of our synod, most congregations used either the hymnal of the Pennsylvania Synod or their own hymnals they brought over from Germany. In either case, many of the hymns of the Reformation were gone. For a couple of centuries, pietism and rationalism had influenced the worship life of the Lutheran church. The pietists sang about feelings. The rationalists sang about morality. So the hymnals we were using contained a lot of hymns about how much we love Jesus and how to be a good neighbor.

Early on, our leaders recognized the need for a new hymnal, but there wasn't a lot of money and there weren't a lot of musicians, either. Our first official *Gesangbuch* (that's German for "hymnal") was finally published in 1870. Compared to the books we'd been using before, this one was a breath of fresh air. But by this time, the synod was already twenty years old. We had already developed some bad worship habits that would take some time to unlearn.

On the other hand, Missouri's first hymnal (the *Kirchengesangbuch*) had been up and running from the time the synod was founded in 1847. C.F.W. Walther himself compiled it. Between its covers were thirty-one hymns by Martin Luther, and thirty-nine by Paul Gerhardt. In Wisconsin's *Gesangbuch*, four of the major hymn authors were still pietists. Every last author listed in Missouri's *Kirchengesangbuch* was a confessional Lutheran (Grasby, James, "A Historical Survey and Brief Examination of the Hymnbooks Used Within the WELS," p. 54).

Missouri was a step ahead of us on English hymnals, too. Theirs was published already in 1889, and it contained hymns like "Christ the Lord is Risen Today" and "A Hymn of Glory Let Us Sing," songs we in Wisconsin didn't see in our hymnals until over fifty years later.

Our first English hymnal was a little guy called *The Church Hymnal*, and it didn't show up until the turn of the century. There were only one hundred fifteen hymns in it. Many knew we needed more than that, and we got a bigger English hymnal called the *Book of Hymns* in 1916, but there were still only three hundred twenty hymns, and a lot of the good ones were still missing.

Seminary Professor J.P. Koehler, who had once been a student of C.F.W. Walther, played a key role in getting better hymns into our hymnals. Koehler was not only a skilled theologian; he was also a gifted musician and artist. He had a true appreciation for good congregational hymns, and he wanted other people to appreciate them, too. When he took his seminary chorus on the road to sing, he gave them good hymns to sing, and he explained to the audience why the hymns were good. He helped people appreciate the doctrine and comfort to be found in the Lutheran chorales. He spoke knowledgeably about poetry and music, and more and more of our people started catching on.

At our 1925 convention, there were voices among us who suggested that the Synodical Conference should produce a new hymnal. In 1929, we heard news that Missouri had similar plans. By 1930 we were working together, and eleven years later *The Lutheran Hymnal* (TLH) was published.

You can't study the story of hymns in our synod without learning how we've grown in our confession of faith. Ever since the time of Bading and Hoenecke, it was clear to our leaders that the hymns we sang were a key part of our public confession, and, therefore, so was a hymnal.

It's still true today. The way we worship says something about what we believe. You might get by with singing songs in church that come from Christian contemporary radio, if you're careful about the ones you pick. But how often will you sing about original sin? You'll never sing about the blessings of Baptism. Over time, the public confession of your worshiping congregation will take a hit.

Not that we have to boycott "Here I Am to Worship." But singing a healthy portion of hymns that proclaim both Christian "*lehr und trost*," doctrine and comfort, not only praises God and feeds our faith, it says who we are. We come to church not just to speak up, but to speak out. In a sense, the way we worship sets us apart.

Think Big

In another sense, the way we worship can also connect us.

Think of the Apostles' Creed. There's not a different version for every church body. It belongs to the Christian Church. Roman Catholics say it. Presbyterians say it. Even some Evangelicals say it. We say it, too. We're not saying we're in fellowship with them. We're saying there is a larger Church, the one holy, Christian and apostolic

Church. It's bigger than WELS, and we're part of it by faith. That's a good thing to say. It's easy for members of a small confessional church like ours to feel like Elijah felt when he thought he was the only believer left. Saying the Creed is a little bit like the Lord telling Elijah that he has reserved seven thousand in Israel (1 Kings 19:18). It reminds us that we're connected.

The liturgy can work the same way. When we follow the church year, use the Ordinary and the Proper for the day, and preach law and gospel, we're raising the same colors Christian congregations have been flying for centuries.

Our earliest pastors didn't think this way, but it's not hard to see why. Our roots were in pietism. Pietists didn't see much value in the gospel content of the historic Christian service. So they didn't really use the liturgy as much as they just followed an outline: Hymn, Prayer, Scripture Lesson, Creed, Hymn, Sermon, Prayers, Hymn, Benediction. On Communion Sundays they sang "O Christ Lamb of God" and "Holy, Holy, Holy."

Our *Gesangbuch* had one page of communion liturgy. Our little English hymnal had four pages of liturgy. Our bigger English hymnal had sixteen pages of liturgy. Then, in 1941, came TLH. Now, all of a sudden we had one hundred sixty-eight pages of liturgical material.

We didn't make that kind of leap on our own.

Early in the 1800's, more and more Lutherans in the U.S. were getting tired of the feel-good, pietistic worship they had been taught. Lutheran scholars from our country began studying the liturgies of the Reformation. Their goal was to come up with a Lutheran service in English that was as close as possible to what Lutherans were doing at the time of the Reformation. The result was the Common Service of 1888. You can still sing a version of that service if you open *Christian Worship* and turn to page fifteen.

We also got some help from Missouri. Even in their 1847 German *Kirchengesangbuch* there was an outline of the historic liturgy that went back to Reformation time. Nine years later they published an agenda (an order of service) that set the standard for confessional German Lutherans everywhere.

Even so, the move toward this kind of worship in Wisconsin came slowly. When TLH was first published in 1941, a number of Wisconsin Synod pastors wrote angry letters. We didn't like the high church liturgy. We didn't like the new translations. And we didn't like having to buy new books so soon after the Great Depression. Why couldn't we just keep using the old *Book of Hymns?* (*Not Unto Us*, p.190). In time, TLH caught on,

and became *the* hymnal of our churches. As a synod, we came to appreciate the gospel content of the liturgy.

When it came time to revise and renew TLH, things were getting complicated. There was the ending of our fellowship ties with Missouri in 1961. There were the liturgical leaders from Missouri who started falling into a kind of unionism and liberal rationalism not all that different from what Wisconsin had once left behind. There were two Lutheran efforts to produce new hymnals: the *Lutheran Book of Worship* and *Lutheran Worship*, neither of which we in the Wisconsin Synod could accept.

Finally in 1983, we decided to create our own hymnal, and *Christian Worship* was published ten years later, under the leadership of our hymnal project director, Pastor Kurt Eggert and the Joint Hymnal Committee. Our goal with CW was, as Pastor Eggert put it, to “preserve, enrich, and enlarge” our worship heritage. Preserving and enriching included updates to modern English. Enlarging our heritage meant, among other things, introducing new hymns like “Thy Strong Word,” and “Go, My Children, With My Blessing.” It wasn’t long before *Christian Worship* became *the* WELS hymnal.

Looking back, it’s interesting to see how our hymnals have shaped our thinking about liturgy. As a synod we’ve come to a better understanding that there’s more to do in worship than follow an outline. We’ve learned to think bigger than that. Both hymns *and* liturgy are our confession of faith.

We’ve also learned by experience that a book of worship that portrays Jesus as both the “why” and the “what” of worship can also help when it comes to what has lately become the more controversial worship question, the “how.”

Work Together

“How” is a sticky question, because we’re not always so ready to think it through as a group: “How are we going to worship *together*?”

We’re used to personal customization of everything. If you order your fast food cheeseburger with no onions, you’ll get it made to order, complete with a little “no onions” label stuck to it, in case you’re worried that you didn’t get it just exactly the way you ordered it. It’s a challenge for us to approach *anything* with a group mentality anymore, much less worship. This was true already in the 1980’s when *Christian Worship* was in the works.

Pastor Kurt Eggert wrote:

All too often one hears in our congregations, "My worship is between me and my God!" This is true, of course – no one worships by proxy. But the conception is all too common among us that Sunday worship is a personal and private activity between God and the individual, carried on almost incidentally or even by necessity with others ("The Shaping of the New Hymnal," p.7).

People still tend to think that way today, only now we're also starting to feel the strain this kind of thinking can cause. You can see it in our congregations. One group prefers keeping worship the same. Another group prefers a change. A third group prefers a different kind of change.

I wonder how many disagreements about worship would disappear if we could take personal preference out of the mix. It's too easy today to take a survey on worship and let the majority decide. Majority opinion might sound like a good use of Christian freedom, but worship is not merely for the majority. It's for everyone. Rather than making choices based on what one group may want, it's better to look at what the whole congregation needs. To a certain extent, we need to approach worship with a "group" mentality.

It's true on a synodical level, too.

The idea of a shared body of hymns and services throughout the synod isn't as readily accepted as it used to be. Twenty years ago, when Kurt Eggert wrote about the value of sharing a general worship pattern synod wide, he didn't have to explain himself. He said, "a *general* uniformity of worship material in the Synod is desirable for obvious reasons" ("Enriching our Worship Heritage," p.6). I'm not sure those reasons are so obvious to everyone anymore. A lot of people today think that each congregation should do its own thing based on their congregation's make-up and preference. Not that there should be a boiler-plate order of service for everyone to follow in exactly the same way, but there is value to a shared philosophy of worship.

You might have experienced it at a Christian burial. The pastor said, "We now commit this body to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust - in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life." Have you ever noticed that in the movies those words always come off sounding like a formality? When the minister is finished saying them, everyone sort of wanders off in his own direction with a lost look on his face. But in real life, at a Lutheran committal, it's not uncommon for everyone

gathered to respond to those same words by singing, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow."

There's something about that moment. It's not just that we all happen to know the words. It's that we all know *why* we're singing those particular words at that particular time. We know the Father's promises. We know the Son's redemption. We know the Spirit's gifts. So at a moment when anyone else in the world would sing a funeral dirge, we sing a song of praise to the Triune God. That's a shared philosophy of worship.

Some of us long for the days of TLH when you could attend virtually any WELS church, close your eyes, and follow along with the order of service from memory. Others of us were very thankful when those days came to an end. We're tremendously blessed in WELS to be united in doctrine and confession, but when it comes to a common philosophy of worship there's room for us to grow closer together.

If you could talk to any member of any of our hymnal committees going back to the committee that produced our German *Gesangbuch* of 1870, I think each committee member would tell you that one of the goals of each hymnal has been to encourage a common approach to worship throughout the synod. Today, I'm here to tell you the same thing about *Christian Worship Supplement*.

That's not to say that every congregation in the synod is supposed to do things the same way. For one thing, there are two services to choose from.

Divine Service I is a piece of variety all by itself. It's a fresh musical approach to the historic liturgy, and it is presented in the *Supplement* with even more options for instrumental variety than were available when it was first published in *New Service Settings* six years ago.

In Divine Service II we've cast three of the four songs of the liturgy into poetic form, so that you can sing them with a variety of matching hymn tunes. During the Easter season, you could sing the *Gloria* to the tune of "I Know that My Redeemer Lives." On the Sunday after Christmas, you could sing the same words to the melody of Luther's hymn, "From Heaven Above." The whole service is designed to be easy to learn and easy to use in any size congregation, whether the musical resources are plentiful or few.

There's a good reason why both services encourage the use of the historic liturgy. It's because the liturgy is designed to bring everyone together in worship. It promotes a common philosophy of worship without insisting that everyone has to do things exactly the same way.

Appreciate Art

We have freedom to sing a variety of songs and hymns in church. Some have asked how we went about choosing hymns for this new book of worship.

On the Supplement Committee, I was on the rites team, not the hymns team. But I can tell you from second-hand knowledge that the biggest challenge for the hymns team was the sheer number of hymns they needed to sort through and examine. There were thousands. As you can guess, they looked for hymns that proclaimed the gospel and that were well-suited for congregational singing.

They also preferred hymns that were artful, both in terms of poetry and music. Some might take issue with this last point. Some people don't appreciate art. They don't think it's relevant. If you're at this conference, I'm guessing you're not that person. But there are a lot of people out there who might wonder why a three-day conference on worship and music is also a conference on the arts.

Martin Luther wouldn't have wondered about that. Kurt Eggert once wrote:

Most of us do not think very hard about music. We listen to what we like and simply avoid what we dislike. Most of us are exposed to a remarkable spectrum of musical sounds, the likes of which Luther could not imagine. But we do not think much about it. Even in our hymn singing we seem to be conditioned to sing without much thought, interest, curiosity, appreciation or reaction, unless, of course, the hymn is unfamiliar or "heavy," in which case the reaction is usually negative. Luther thought about music, reacted strongly to it and was articulate about it.

Later in the same presentation he quoted Luther as saying:

This precious gift [music] has been bestowed on men alone to remind them that they are created to praise and magnify the Lord. But when natural music is sharpened and polished by art, then one begins to see with amazement the great and perfect wisdom of God in his wonderful work of music, where one voice takes a simple part and around it sing three, four, or five other voices, leaping, springing round about, marvelously gracing the simple part, like a folk dance in heaven with

friendly bows, embracing, and hearty swinging of partners. He who does not find this an inexpressible miracle of the Lord is truly a clod (“Martin Luther: God’s Music Man,” p.1-2)

J.P. Koehler also had a high regard for the arts. He said, “Poets and artists are in the main the clearest mirrors of their ages” (“Music and Hymnody,” *The Wauwatosa Theology*, Vol. 3, p. 448). He went on to explain that this is because the purpose of art is to get to the truth of things. Art is the use of images or words or sounds to dig deep into the big questions of life. Who are we? Why are we here? Why do we suffer? Who is God?

Many people think that art should be fancy or expensive. Art can be plain. Art can be simple. But the one thing art isn’t is entertainment. Good entertainment doesn’t lead you to the truth. It helps you escape it for the moment. You can call it “reality television” if you want, but there’s nothing even remotely real about it. That’s not necessarily bad. It’s just what it is. In its essence, entertainment provides escape. Art aims for truth. There’s value in remembering these things when we use our Christian freedom to choose music for worship.

At any given moment, we’re all just one Google search away from hundreds of thousands of worship songs that are designed to entertain. The theology is shallow, the poetry is trite, and the music is designed to feel like an escape from real life. These things sell because people want them. But what about what people need?

A good book of worship makes use of well-crafted poetry and artful music to help worshipers dig deep into the richness of God’s Word. Even in the secular world, art tries to address the deep human need for truth, but only in service to the gospel can it succeed. Maybe that’s why worship and the arts have fit together so well for so long.

Embrace History

It’s the same with worship and history. They go together, too, though a lot of people today don’t think that way.

The exceptions are weddings and funerals. At funerals and weddings, people expect a pastor with white hair. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard some guest at a wedding or funeral say to me, “Aren’t you a little young to be doing this?” I’m not sure how much longer I’ll be hearing this, so I’ve chosen to take it as a compliment. I suppose it might have something to do with the unwritten commandment of television

and movie casting. If there is a wedding or funeral, thou shalt find an old guy with white hair to play the part of the minister.

But I've never been called young by any guests at our regular weekly worship. There, if anything, at age thirty-eight I'm a little over the hill. Why is this? Somewhere, somehow, the thought has percolated into our society's collective brain that whenever possible, worship should avoid things older than about twenty-five.

I'm going to just come out and say it. You'll find some old things in the *Supplement*. The text of Martin Luther's great Easter hymn "Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands" – it's in there, set to a new melody. The Nicene Creed, the Preface before Communion, the familiar pattern of the ancient liturgy, the old "O Antiphons" of Advent: they're all there, too.

I'm not saying these things to elicit cheers from those of you who love old things. The point I want to make is that there can be real value in hanging on to what is old. That's not easy for people of today's world. We're not savers, we're throwers. The quicker we can junk the cell phone we own, the quicker we can get a new one.

It's nice that we get to watch a steady parade of shiny new things passing before our eyes. What's not so nice about it is that when trouble comes, that feels new, too. We think nobody's ever suffered like we have. But the early Christians faced persecution to the point of death for their faith. Martin Luther had a weight of responsibility on his shoulders I can't even begin to imagine, and he had powerful enemies and a tender conscience besides. Paul Gerhardt lived through war and poverty and buried his wife and four of his five children. Open your hymnal. Open your supplement. You can sing what they sang. You can trust what they trusted.

But a good book of worship should also contain new things. That's especially true when you're talking about a hymnal supplement.

Aim Forward

Christian Worship Supplement is not a book that is intended to stand alone. The book is a bridge between *Christian Worship* and the next hymnal. When the Joint Hymnal Committee finished *Christian Worship*, its members generally agreed that the fifty-two year life-span of TLH was too long. Thirty years seemed more like it, and the idea was to publish a hymnal supplement when we were half way there. So here we are, in 2008, fifteen years beyond the publication of what some still call "the new hymnal." We're

hoping that this supplement will help pave the way for another hymnal in another fifteen years. That would be the year 2023.

Then what? If our Savior hasn't yet returned, there could be many more generations of Christians who receive the heritage we pass on to them. What will that heritage be?

Too often, worship planners don't think that far ahead. In our search for something that speaks to the people of today, we might forget about speaking to the generations of tomorrow.

We might forget that there's a blessing in taking a corporate approach to the new things we try in worship. It's not one pastor saying to his congregation, "Let's try something new." It's the whole synod saying it. "Let's try this new thing on for size and see how it fits. And not only that, but let's give it, say, fifteen years to see how well it endures." No single congregation will ever be able to approach new resources with this kind of depth or breadth. But a synod can, and a hymnal supplement can help.

So try the gathering rites in the *Supplement*. Try the new canticles in the back of the book. Use the meditations in your chapel services, your church meetings, and your home devotions. Give the supplemental lectionary a spin. Fifteen years from now, we'll have a very good idea about which new elements from this book deserve a place in the new hymnal that we will produce then, and in the worship heritage we pass on to future generations.

Communicate

One concern some people have about what we're passing on to future generations has to do with technology. After all, this is 2008, and we're publishing a new *book* of worship. If you read the hymnal news headlines back in January (as I'm sure you all did), you learned that the old Billy Graham hymnal called "Mission Praise," has become the first hymnal to be released in an entirely electronic format, making it easier than ever to project the whole service on a big screen in front of church.

While it's true that *Christian Worship Supplement* also comes with a ton of helpful electronic resources, these are intended more for use with paper than with a video projector. Musical graphics files just don't translate all that well to the big screen.

One reason we decided to aim for paper and book is so that people can have something to hold on to. Lutherans in the days of the Reformation might have used their hymnals

more at home than they did in church. In our early synod history, hymnals were often produced in two editions, one for church, and a pocket edition for home.

I suppose the day is coming when every home will have the kind of presentation technology that is found now only in churches and meeting halls, and supper around the table will be followed by a dimming of the lights and the faint glimmer of a blue screen on the dining room wall as the devotion projector warms up. But even that will never replace the heft of a book in your hand, something you can take with you camping, or to the hospital, or on a visit to a sick friend, something your children can hold as they sit in the pew next to you.

Besides all this, replacing books in worship entirely with presentation technology might not be the forward progress we're so often led to believe it is.

In his famous 1985 book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman maintains that television has robbed us of the ability to think and talk about things the way we used to be able to do in the age of print. According to Postman, whether you're a newscaster, a politician, a teacher, or a preacher, nobody will listen any more unless you entertain them. He sees a day coming when people will not only lack understanding of the world around them, they just won't care.

In a 2003 article for the *Chicago Tribune* Julia Keller echoes some of what Postman wrote about television, but applies it instead to the world of PowerPoint®, in an article called "Killing Me Microsoftly." She wonders if we're losing the ability to think in anything other than bullet points.

Just this year a Pulitzer Prize winning columnist from Miami, Leonard Pitts, Jr., wrote a piece with a title that says it all. It was called "Is Google Making us Stupid?" (*Green Bay Press Gazette*, June 15, 2008).

A week ago, in an a review of a newly published anthology from *TIME Magazine*, one journalist wrote: "Those of us who traffic in words for a living feel somewhat under siege these days, like a Donkey Kong machine sitting forlornly in the corner of a ramshackle pizza parlor while teenagers on the sidewalk outside play Grand Theft Auto on their handhelds" (*Time Anthology Reaffirms the Printed Word*, AP, July 18, 2008).

In a book called *The Vanishing Word*, Arthur W. Hunt III, a Christian with a PhD in communication, applies this line of thinking to the life of the church. He sees the pervasiveness of imagery in our society as a pagan attack against the written Word of God.

A projection screen can be used wisely in church. If you want some valuable help, sneak into the conference session called “Technology in Worship.” But there are lots of things to think about besides “hands free” worship and saving paper. For now I’ll just say that if you’re projecting the words of your hymns or your order of service, projection technology generally works best with the kind of worship resources that don’t carry much depth or require much thought. *Our God is an Awesome God* can work pretty well on the screen. It fits up there. But it’s not so easy with a hymn like *Dear Christians, One and All Rejoice*, where a single progression of thought is carried through ten verses, and the words you sing from the screen keep disappearing. It can be done. It’s just not ideal. We need to be aware that if we’ve made the decision to project all the words of our hymns and services on a screen, we’ve also made a decision about the content of those services.

There is a richness to God’s Word and Sacraments that fading images and flashing words on a screen will never be able to communicate as well as church art and architecture, signs and symbols, and print on paper. And God has so many wonderful things to communicate to us!

Count Blessings

When you look back over our one hundred fifty-eight year history, you can see how we’ve shaped our hymnals. You can also see how our hymnals have shaped us. And you can’t help but give thanks.

It is said that the first time Luther heard Paul Speratus’ new hymn, “Salvation Unto Us Has Come,” he wept tears of joy. By God’s grace, we’re still singing the same gospel, from our pulpits, in our classrooms, in our homes, in our hearts, and in our hymnals.

What’s more, we have God’s promise from his Revelation to St. John that his song will never be silenced, and that we’ll still be singing it long after every earthly hymnal has passed out of use: “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!” (Revelation 5:18).

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