

Confessional Concerns . . . for the Sake of the Gospel
Exalt the Lord: NWD Model Theological Conference on Worship
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First of all, thank you. Thank you for attending this Conference. Thank you for being a part of these discussions. Thanks also to those of you who emailed comments and questions. We have read and discussed them in the course of our preparations. And though it isn't possible for us to get to each one individually, we do hope to recognize most of the issues you have raised and try to provide a framework for addressing them.

In the early meetings of our Conference Committee, we debated the use of the terms "traditional" and "contemporary," because those words have been and are being used to cover a huge range of issues. Certain forms of Contemporary Worship have become "traditional" within congregations, and many theologians argue that the traditional, historic liturgy is "contemporary." In spite of those confusions, or maybe because of them, we settled on sticking with "traditional" and "contemporary" for our discussions here. Frankly, we couldn't think of anything better.

As we wrestled with those terms, I was reminded that I cannot assume that I "just know" what those words mean. I also cannot assume that I understand the positions of others, nor that they understand me. And my thoughts and presuppositions, even my knee-jerk reactions, have to be continually tested as I study and discuss these issues of worship in our church.

As we speak with one another today, tomorrow, and in the days ahead, I am not asking you to "sell out to the other side." Yet, I do hope you won't respond simply by becoming more firmly entrenched in your position, whatever that may be. Let's talk theology, and let's talk practice. Then, after the sessions are done for the day, let's lift a glass together, like good, Lutheran theologians.

Confessional Concerns for Misunderstandings

I'd like to begin by stating the obvious, and openly addressing what I believe are some of the common misunderstandings among us.

What traditional worship is not:

At the risk of starting on a negative note, I'd like to point out a few things that traditional worship is not.

Traditional worship is not divinely inspired. The Scripture texts are, insofar as they are from Scripture, but the format, the order in which those texts have been placed, do not constitute the 67th book of the Bible. The traditional liturgy did not drop down from heaven alongside the King James Version. God does not order nor command us to follow any specific form in regard to our liturgy. What we do, we do because we, the church, have agreed—together—to do it.

Traditional worship is not monolithic. There is not one single set of words that we point to and say, "that's the historic liturgy." What we do have, however, are forms that the church of a given time, in a given place, has agreed to use.

We see this agreement at work already during Luther's later life and in the decades that followed in the *Kirchenordnungen*, the "church orders," of the 16th and 17th centuries. Each city,

dukedom, or principality brought together theologians and laymen to define and describe what theology would be taught in their realm, and how that would be done. These *Kirchenordnungen* often included the text of the liturgy, sometimes even the rubrics (the instructions) that parishes were to follow. The liturgy needed to reflect Lutheran theology faithfully and accurately, for the liturgy was understood as a big part of the teaching of Lutheran theology. The wordings of these liturgies would vary from region to region according to local dialects, but the focus and concern was that what was done in a particular region was agreed upon and adhered to by all, because that liturgy was carrying theology to the people.

Traditional worship is not stagnant or boring. You might not think of it that way, especially if you have endured decades of “page 15, page 15, page 15” done the same way, week in and week out. But as we’ve seen in retracing its history, the liturgy continues to change. While it may not have been practiced or exercised in every congregation, there is also considerable freedom and creativity available within the liturgy. It adapts and adjusts to the changing seasons of the church year, and the differing settings and events of life in the congregation. On top of that, we have enjoyed a wide-ranging hymnody from a variety of sources and experiences.

Traditional worship is not fundamentally an emotional experience, nor is it intended to be. While it can be deeply meaningful and emotional, the liturgy was not primarily designed to appeal to the senses. It was designed, by the church, to meet the real needs of sinners who gather to receive forgiveness from God. It was designed to teach and to deliver God’s Word of Law and Gospel, of condemnation and forgiveness.

Luther noted this, and made the preaching and teaching of the pure Word of God the focus of his revisions of the liturgy, both in his Latin service that he edited from the Roman Mass, as well as his German service, where he provided German hymns to replace the liturgical canticles. All of his work was content-rich, for through the various canticles and hymns, Luther sought to teach the many articles of doctrine in our Lutheran faith.

What advocates of traditional worship are not:

I’d also like to point out what the advocates and practitioners of traditional worship are not.

Those who subscribe to the use of our historic liturgy and traditional hymns are not neglecting the need to reach out to this lost and fallen world with the gospel of Jesus Christ. On the contrary, we believe that traditional worship offers tremendous, time-honored, Christ-centered resources that the laity can be taught to use in their daily life and in their witness to the world. Remembering, for instance, the words of a canticle or a hymn, and using those words to speak Christ to another who is in need—is that not what we do when we quote the Scriptures for the same purpose?

The use of traditional worship does not create a dichotomy between “pure doctrine” and “faithful evangelism,” pitting those two against each other as though they were enemies. Pure doctrine and faithful evangelism belong together.

As the sainted Dr. Al Barry often said: “Keep the message straight, Missouri. Get the message out, Missouri.”

Confessional Concerns for Faithfulness

A second area of Confessional Concern I would point to is the Concern for faithfulness, specifically, faithfulness to our theology and its practice.

Faithfulness to our Theology and its Practice

Yes, in all honesty, there are theological suspicions regarding Contemporary Worship. Why? In large part because the Contemporary Worship movement was not born out of the Lutheran church, nor out of the church catholic. Contemporary Worship arose out of 20th century Western evangelical Protestantism, originally out of the charismatic movement. Contemporary Worship also tends to defy description and definition, as one person's "contemporary" is another person's "blended," and new music passes in and out of the mix on what seems like a daily basis.

Now I say this not as an accusation, but as a question: has charismatic or Protestant theological baggage come along with Contemporary Worship? Or is Contemporary Worship imbued with a theological spirit that is different from Lutheran doctrine and practice?

Contemporary Worship does come out of a tradition in which "worship" is defined as and focused primarily on man's act of praise. The very word, "worship," comes from an Anglo Saxon word, *woerthscipe*, meaning to ascribe worth to something.

The Lutheran Confessions, by contrast, usually discuss this subject using the German word, *Gottesdienst*. While this word is difficult to translate simply—the closest we can get is "service of God" or "divine service"—it is a word that provides a two-fold description of what goes on in the liturgical assembly:

first and foremost, God serves us with his forgiveness given in Word and Sacrament; then,

secondly, we respond back to God, serving him with our praise and thanksgiving. In its use in the Confessions, this service also takes place in our daily lives, continuing after we leave the liturgical assembly of God's people.

Again, I say this as a question, not an accusation: how does Contemporary Worship relate to *Gottesdienst*? And what of the content and theological attitude of the wide range of Contemporary Worship music? How do we faithfully examine and address all the theology that comes with that?

I state these questions, perhaps in the extreme, to point out how serious they can be. All too often, though, I've heard such questions casually dismissed, with a "yes" or with a "no," as though we assume "we know the answer to that one." Friends, dismissing such questions either way gets us nowhere. These are the very questions we need to be discussing. They are vital to keeping the message of the Gospel straight so that we can get that glorious message out to the world. If we don't keep that Gospel straight, then there's not much point in our being here.

Faithfulness to our Heritage and our Identity

The traditional liturgy identifies us as a Lutheran church. It is part of our history, our heritage, and our identity as Lutherans, even more specifically, as Missouri Synod Lutherans. Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists each have their own heritage, each differing in their orders and styles of service, each having a different vocabulary of hymnody that reflects their theology. Mingling such heritages without paying attention to differences of theology, practice, and custom, can create confusion about what we believe. Disconnecting from one's heritage can imply a denial of what has come before, a change not just in our practice but in our theology. Furthermore, departure from our heritage can leave the present generation rootless, perhaps even unable to function together as a church body.

How many of you know the traditional Common Doxology? How many of you have sung it in your congregation at least once in the last year? I served as a delegate to the Synodical Convention in 2001, when one of our Synod's youth came to the podium with results from a survey done at the National Youth Gathering. I'm sorry that I cannot now remember the numbers quoted, but there was a marked decline in the number of our youth who knew the Common Doxology. What a pity it would be if the Synod in convention could no longer spontaneously rise and break out in that great hymn—a part of our heritage—because our people no longer know the words or the tune.

In fact, since you've been patiently sitting there, listening to me, I invite you to rise and join in that glorious Doxology now. [SING]

Maybe we're not so far gone in our divisions. The Common Doxology is the only hymn I know that guarantees spontaneous harmony among Lutheran Pastors. Why? We know it. It's part of our heritage.

Confessional Concerns for Unity

Even though we can still sing the Common Doxology together, when it comes to worship, we are, sadly, a Synod divided.

That's why we're here today. There are divisions between congregations, as one congregation is "traditional," while another is "contemporary." There are divisions within congregations, as those who attend at 8:00 don't know how to worship with those who attend at 10:30, because everything is different. I wasn't really aware of it until recently, but I understand that there are divisions between congregations that practice Contemporary Worship, because each has its own vocabulary of songs, sometimes quite different from other congregations around them.

As each pastor and each congregation "does its own thing," individualism strains and can even break unity in the church. As individuals, or small groups of individuals, make the decision that, "this is what we're going to do," they can create confusion, division, and even offense within congregations and between congregations.

Frankly, from my own experience and researches, I have serious questions about who is really authorized to make liturgical changes for a congregation. I also have questions as to whether any one, as an individual, is really qualified to do so. (Sorry, guys, but one or two courses in Worship at the Seminary does not a liturgiologist make).

What I find more troubling, though, is that we don't seem inclined to discuss these things with one another before we attempt something new. Few individuals seem willing to submit their proposals to wider peer review, say, at the Circuit or District level, in order to build understanding, consensus, and agreement on their liturgical course of action. There is a tendency for each to do what is right in his own eyes, regardless of the opinion of others. That's not the way the Church has developed her liturgy, nor the way the Church has maintained her unity.

As in many other issues, the Church has been through the battle of "freedom versus unity" before.

In 1525, Luther wrote to the Christians in the Baltic state of Livonia:

For those who devise and ordain universal customs and orders get so wrapped up in them that they make them into dictatorial laws opposed to the freedom of faith.

But those who ordain and establish nothing succeed only in creating as many factions as there are heads, to the detriment of that Christian harmony and unity of which St. Paul and St. Peter so frequently write.

Still, we must express ourselves on these matters as well as we can, even though everything will not be done as we say and teach that it should be. ("A Christian Exhortation to the Livonians," *Luther's Works*, American Edition Volume 53, page 46).

I'm not trying to be a fear-monger, but growing diversity and increasing departures from a common practice is causing fear. I've heard it from the lips of many people. It's more than a fear of the unfamiliar (that, "we've never done it that way before"). It's a fear of leaving behind, and perhaps losing, treasures that have been precious in the lives of our forefathers in the faith.

The treasures they don't want to lose—that I don't want to lose—are the treasures of traditional worship, of the historic liturgy. These are treasures that have been tested and agreed upon, not simply by a committee, but by the church at large. They are treasures that we ourselves have received and enjoyed. They are treasures that some of us wish to keep and use to pass on this faith, this Gospel, to our children and grandchildren.

So today, we're here to talk. If we are going to come to agreement and unity in this day and age, then we need to have the same sorts of discussions as did the church in the past: open and honest, theological and practical discussions about the historic liturgy, and contemporary worship, and the content they bring to bear in the Service of God.

We need to talk with one another so that with clarity, with faithfulness, and with unity, we can proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

For Your Discussion:

How does the traditional Divine Service become a barrier to or a treasure for the proclamation of the Gospel?