

Contemporary Contexts: April 11, 2011 by Timothy E. Wenger
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Good Morning! It's good to gather to share about such an important topic as worship. In this segment we'll share thoughts regarding worship and the contemporary context. I'm certainly not an expert, but I've been blessed to experience a variety of worship styles and liturgies throughout my years of ministry. One of those styles is referred to as "contemporary."

Definition of Worship

Worship is our work of service [liturgy]. It is our gathering together to give our personal expression of welcome and our praise to the honored guest, our gracious Lord and Father. It is a conversation between pastor and people in the presence of almighty God and directed to Him. Our Lord is worthy of our praise and our attention to Him; therefore we call it is our worship [worth ship]. By the power of the Holy Spirit we are nourished by His Word and Sacrament as we worship Him.

In its fullest experience worship is mountain top. We are strengthened in our fellowship as we confess together, as we celebrate our forgiveness together, as we pray together, as we praise together, and as we learn together. We continually seek to understand His Word so that we can come to know His will and respond in love and service.

Purpose of Worship

As Christians we set aside time to honor God and give Him our full attention. We honor the Lord by gathering together as His people and in keeping His command to "*remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.*" It is a time we come together in humility to engage in praise, prayer, and thanksgiving. It is designed to communicate with God in prayer, song, Word and Sacrament. Worship is in some ways a response to the imperatives of God's Word as found in Colossians 3:16: "***Let the word of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts to God.***" [¹⁷ *And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*"]

Worship Elements as Directed or Suggested by Scripture

Old Testament Practice as carried into Synagogue Worship Included:

- Psalms as Entrance Hymns and Expressions of Praise
- Reading from the Law and the Prophets
- Reflection on the Word of God
- Prayers to the Lord and for the needs of God's people
- Blessing God's people

New Testament Practice: The activity of the early disciples sets a general pattern for worship as recording in Acts 2:42, "***They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.***"

Apostles' Teaching: Some disciples learned these teachings at the feet of Jesus and others learned from fellow Apostles. This is the basic doctrine of Jesus Christ as it fulfilled the Old Testament. This is grass roots learning and sharing as the Holy Spirit helped them understand what Jesus had taught them.

Fellowship: This was the joy of being together as those who knew and could testify to what Jesus had done. Now as they were filled with the Holy Spirit the new Christian fellowship gained wisdom and understanding. They needed to encourage each other. These were spiritual pep rallies to help strengthen their purpose and resolve.

Breaking of Bread: Evidence indicates this time of "breaking of bread" to be common meals together, as well as, the meal of Holy Communion. These disciples were strengthened in the Word as they reflected on the Apostle's Teaching and now in the "breaking of bread" which includes sharing the Sacrament of Christ's body and blood as He had instituted it for the believers.

Prayer: They were a praying church from the beginning as Jesus had taught them to pray and had demonstrated praying to the Father in heaven. Their needs were certainly evident to them as they forged ahead seeking to be faithful to Jesus and follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Epistles show how they prayed for one another and for the various needs that arose within the church and outside in the community.

Essential Elements for Biblical/Lutheran Worship Whether Traditional, Contemporary, or Inbetween

Invocation: We believe that as confessional Christians we gather as a company of believers and acknowledge that the God we worship is the God of Scripture. We, the baptized community, gather and worship in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. The common invocation reflects the baptismal words commissioned by Jesus in Matthew 28:19, **"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."** The pastor announces the God of Scripture and the worshippers affirm their intentions with, hopefully, a strong Amen or Amen.

Confession and Absolution: We confess openly that we are sinners. This general confession reflects our theology. As confessing Biblical Christians we believe as Dr. Martin Luther wrote that we are sinners and saints at the same time, *simul justus et peccator*. We come together with the common problem of sin. We humbly and publicly call to mind together that we are sinners and continue to wrestle with sin. We sincerely confess our sins and we sincerely believe that God for Jesus' sake forgives us. By the grace of God the announcement of forgiveness is given and we are given the reassurance of God's forgiveness. Jesus ministry opened with the plea to those who were listening to His Word, **"The time has come,' He said, 'The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the Good News!"** Mark 1:15. Christians are

encouraged to confess their sins to one another as emphasized in James 5:16 ***“Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.”*** Jesus Himself instructed His disciples to be involved in “absolution.” On the evening of His resurrection victory Jesus instructed the disciples to announce forgiveness as in John 20:21-23, ***“Again Jesus said, ‘Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.’²² And with that he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.²³ If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”*** As confessional Christians we emphasize the need to keep this in perspective as the fellowship of believers gathers for worship.

Sharing of the Word: We share the Word as Psalms and Psalm verses are often used to announce the theme of our worship. We share the Word with readings from the Old Testament, the Epistles and the Gospels. The Word is the heart of the sermon as we seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit to help us proclaim and apply the Word of God in our daily Christian walk. Law and Gospel are proclaimed so that the Holy Spirit can work through God’s tools to guide and direct us and to enable us to grow through His Word of life. Jesus shared the Word from Isaiah as the scroll was handed to Him in the synagogue as recorded in Luke 4:15-21.

Credal Statements: These statements of belief help us declare our faith to one another and to reflect upon the main elements of our faith in our worship. Creeds mark us as confessional believers and show unity among believers. The words of the creed summarize the main teachings of our Triune God as reflected upon and witnessed to in Holy Scripture.

Prayer: The prayer of the day is often used to focus our thoughts and collect the central focus of the Word in prayer. General prayers of the church include praise, confession, thanksgiving, and requests to our Lord on behalf of the people of God assembled, as well as, the community, nation, and world. Offerings put our prayers into action as we share together from our God-given resources to help meet the needs of those far and near whom God places in our ministry.

Sacrament: The main services of the week offer opportunities to be nourished through the gift of Holy Communion. The Lord invites us to come often to be renewed, to share His body and blood, and to remember His great act of love for us sinners. Holy Communion provides an intimate time to receive the body and blood of Christ together. It also provides another opportunity for the Holy Spirit to work through the Word of promise in the sacrament to strengthen us. Communion was a regular part of the early church as they ***“broke bread”*** together. It was Jesus who had taught them to ***“do this often in remembrance of me.”*** His promised forgiveness was a consistent way to celebrate the love of Christ and His ongoing gift to the church.

Songs, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs: Songs and music are used by God’s people to praise Him and to reinforce the message of God’s Word. Songs and music enable God’s people to be

involved as this enhances the themes and accents of the season. The Lord has suggested music to motivate the hearts and lives of His people throughout the Old and New Testament. In the Old Testament this included a variety of instruments.

Fellowship: The unity and bonding and togetherness of people is part of worshipping together. This happens because the Holy Spirit aids us in our fellowship as worship is built on the gifts of the Word and Sacrament.

Blessing: God often directed the leaders of His people to bless the people and the people to be blessed as they parted from one another and went in peace. There are Holy Testament and New Testament blessings that echo the Lord's blessing to His people as shared above. The giving of peace and the blessing is a way to offer God's blessing to His people as the Lord instructed Moses to tell Aaron in Numbers 6:24, ***"The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace."*** The New Testament writers used a variety of blessings in the close of their epistles as they sent greetings to fellow believers and fellow churches. A common one used in worship is 2 Corinthians 13:14, ***"May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."***

What is Contemporary?

Luther suggested in his German Mass of 1526 that parts of the liturgy could be substituted by hymns with the same content. This was an order of worship in **Lutheran Worship** as *"Divine Service III"* on pages 197-198. This freedom is reflected in *"Divine Service –setting five"* on pages 213-218 in **Lutheran Service Book**.

A hymn like *"Seek Ye First"* by Karen Lafferty [LSB 712] was contemporary some years ago when it came out in 1972. Now it is considered an "older" praise hymn by the contemporary world and seems acceptable by many "traditionalists." At the least it is used by many in blended worship. A number of "contemporary" songs are direct reflections of Scripture. This certainly seems to fit into the encouragement we receive in Colossians 3:16, ***"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God."*** For example; *"I'm Trading My Sorrows"* is a direct reflection of 2 Corinthians 4 and *"Open the Eyes of My Heart,"* accents the Word from Ephesians 1. Other contemporary songs reflect a statement or emphasis of a characteristic of God like *"Awesome God,"* or *"Forever God is Faithful."*

"Spirit of the Living God" which is included in *"The Other Song Book"* by David Anderson is a great offeratory verse and sounds contemporary yet it was copyrighted in 1935.

[Change can be hard: "Ole joke of the deer and walleye" or another illustration.]

The “Traditional Divine Service” is best when it speaks to the contemporary gathering

In a sense contemporary is what is being currently used. For that matter the “*traditional*” divine service is contemporary if it relates to the hearts and lives of those worshipping. We as worship leaders would certainly hope that we are not just reviewing something that “had been meaningful” only in the past. We desire for our worship to be meaningful today as we worship. Certainly we use Words of God revealed and written down thousands of years ago. We do not substitute for the Word of God as it stands as the only norm and rule of faith and doctrine. We use the Lord’s Prayer as a reflection of what Jesus taught. We may use various translations but the text has its roots in the Greek of the New Testament. For many of us in the LCMS we appreciate that our forefathers and mothers in America used the German liturgy in their worship. For them this was “traditional” and the English was “contemporary” or in some cases “unacceptable.” Some held firm for generations to teach German to the next generation so that the worship could remain in German and the “catechism” taught properly. I suppose if we are going to fight to preserve the original we need to brush up on our Hebrew and Greek so we can teach our confirmation classes and adult information classes the original language of the Scripture so that we can get them on board for “*traditional*” worship. I am not trying to treat “*traditional*” lightly because I find the “*traditional of Lutheran worship*” to be most meaningful and helpful. I also enjoy a “*high church Lutheran service*” on occasion. Some of my favorite hymns come out of old traditions, like, “Holy, Holy, Holy [text R. Heber 1783-1826]” and “Lord, Take My Hand and Lead Me [text J. v on Hausmann 1825-1901].” There are also some newer ones hymns; like, “Thy Strong Word Doth Cleve the Darkness” [M. Franzmann 1907-76].

Creedal Statements As An Example Have Changed in their Presentation:

Spoken Creeds: Most often the Apostles and Nicene Creeds

1. Apostles: Many Protestants [including Lutherans moved from the Traditional “holy catholic” translation to “holy Christian church.” A number of Protestants have chosen to go back to the first meaning of the translation of the Latin to “catholic.”
2. Years ago many moved from Holy Ghost [German - Geist] to Holy Spirit [Latin - Spiritus]. In the LCMS the major shift to “Holy Spirit” was the introduction of this as the standard in Lutheran Worship Supplement and then Lutheran Worship in 1982. At the same time there was a shift from “quick and the dead” to “living and the dead.”
3. There are as well more “contemporary” translations of the Apostles and Nicene Creeds. Some of these have non-specific gender reverences.
4. Someone developed a “Christmas Creed” which inserts more of the Christmas accounts in the creedal statement for occasional use.

Creedal Statements Are Also Sung:

1. Creedal Statements have long been sung in churches as a alternate to the spoken creed. Martin Lutheran wrote a sung version to the “Nicene Creed”

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in the hymn *"We All Believe in One True God."* This was developed in 1525. It was included in The Lutheran Hymnal. The Apostles Creed sung version by Tobias Clausnitzer was done in 1668 and included in TLH. These also are included in Lutheran Worship and Lutheran Service Book.

2. Gregory J. Wismar developed a creedal statement in a hymn called *"In God We Believe"* which is sung to the tune of *"Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise."* This tune lends toward a firm affirmation of our central beliefs.
3. There are certainly other songs with creedal statements. For example there is one to the tune of *"Ode to Joy."*

Building a Worship Service Sensitive to the Essential Elements and Meaningful for the Occasion

Questions to consider as you plan worship:

1. When you plan a "contemporary service" or a "traditional service" what elements do you see as essential?
2. What benefits have you found over in offering a worship service with "contemporary" elements?

Jesus is The Light of the World and He is our Light. As in Matthew 28:20 He makes great promises to be with us, *"And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

Questions for the small group discussion:

1. What parts of your regular worship service do you consider "contemporary?"
2. Do you feel confident that we can blend or use old and new elements in worship and still be faithful to a clear confessional Lutheran approach to worship?

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