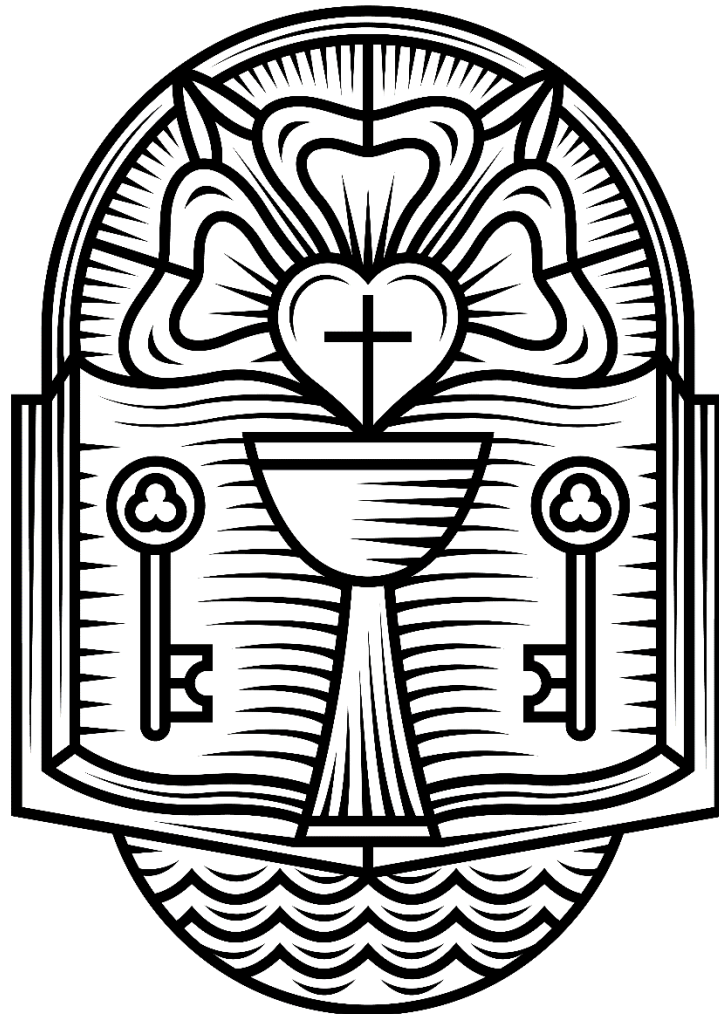


# Lutheran Worship Turns 500

## Rededication: Embracing Our Lutheran Identity in Our Current Context



*2024 Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Symposium  
September 16–17, 2024*

Pastor John P. Bortulin

**But your dead will live, LORD;  
their bodies will rise—  
let those who dwell in the dust  
wake up and shout for joy.  
(Isa 26:19 NIV)**

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*In thanksgiving for all those I have been blessed to call pastor, those who absolved, presided, preached, and handed over for my well-being the body and blood of my Lord Jesus Christ.*

*And, in thanksgiving for all those on the receiving end of the salutation, “The Lord be with you,” who have gathered and blessed me and lifted me up in my calling as pastor with their simple response, “And also with you.”*

*It is actually enough to bring this middle-aged man to tears when he takes time to consider the marvel and mystery of God’s goodness to those of us assembled in our little corner of time and space, a foretaste of the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:9).*

*May this little essay give glory to the Christ and be for the good of our real neighbors in need.*

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## **Introductory Matters**

I recall standing in the back of this auditorium last September, likely by the doughnuts, when President Treptow announced, “We welcome you back in 2024 under the theme *Lutheran Worship Turns 500*.” My first thought, I kid you not, if I did not say it out loud to the brother next to me, was, “Good luck to whomever gets stuck with the practical essay on *that* topic.”

Well, here we are. Initial and ensuing conversations with brothers who were keen on helping (“What you need to say is ...”) did nothing to allay my initial fears. There’s much that could be said, and a little prayer that has been with me the past few months is, “Help me see, Lord; help me see a distinction between what *could* be said and what *should* be said, and may it be beneficial.” We gather to discuss a beautiful thing, the high point of our week and the high point of our life this side of glory. No surprise, then, that opinions abound; that emotions tend to run high; that it’s easy to cast aspersion or a distrustful eye at another brother. “Worship wars!”—*Kyrie eleison*.

Of course, this conversation, and in some circles, this “war,” is nothing new. It is not new to WELS nor to Lutheranism nor any time in history where two or three gathered for worship, or to discuss worship. One looking for an elusive silver bullet will find that the elusive bullet appears to be just that.

I briefly share that with you, not to cry “woe is me,” nor to be the honored guest at my own pity party.<sup>1</sup> The late Tim Keller lamented on Twitter/X back in 2019: “A shortcoming of our current society is we don’t reason with the other side, we only denounce. Where is the space to do this?”<sup>2</sup> I agree with Keller’s assertion about conversations out there, in society, and that we are poorer for the current state of conversations (or lack thereof). My prayer, my pastoral plea, is that this be a space where brothers can speak, as brothers, on a topic where there will be necessary back and forth until the last trumpet sounds.<sup>3</sup> Dr. Wade Johnston has a little section in his work, *An Uncompromising Gospel*, entitled, “Conversing, Confessing, Correcting, and Being Corrected as Brothers.” He makes a present-day application from his historical view. We do well to take it to heart as **Lutheran Worship Turns 500:**

We owe it to each other to speak clearly, and when we have spoken carelessly, intemperately, or without due clarity, to receive correction with humility and gratitude. There is no reason to persist in our carelessness, intemperateness, or lack of clarity. We have nothing to lose and everything to gain by growing in both our understanding and speech. Our brothers are gifts of God especially when they help us to grow in such a way....

*[Continuing on how brothers discuss such items]* We need to strike a balance. We ought not be silenced into being silent about bad doctrine and practice. That is how orthodoxy is lost. Once again, though, we need to remember that we are not Luther, and our brother is not Erasmus or the pope, and the future of the gospel does not rest on our shoulders. There is a middle ground, and it is fraternal, even as it is frank.... As we deal with each other, it is important to understand our brother’s position correctly, and to strive to understand what has led him to hold it—what is he trying, often rightly, to preserve, although perhaps in the wrong way or with the wrong words?...

I pray that the Lord Christ keeps us ever orthodox and true to His Word. If at all possible, I also pray that He ever keep us from unnecessary *Bruderkrieg*. Nothing is more bitter than a family feud, and many a family feud would end better if all involved remembered they are family. How much more ought this be the case when we are family, not only by blood, but by Baptism—by blood, I suppose you could say, not that flows through our veins, but that flowed through the veins of God Himself.<sup>4</sup>

I’ll admit, confess actually, my numerous faults. In this matter, particularly, I can be quick to speak, slow to listen, and quick to judge. While I may have opinions about a Packer tie

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1. Of course, I have done both plenty of times in the past.

2. <https://x.com/timkellernyc/status/1098303862690197504?lang=en>.

3. AC XXIV and FC SD X, as explained by Pr. Behnken and others, near and far. This, of course, is not to be understood as if it does not matter what I do or my brother does in public worship, but that our conversations with one another be tempered with love, patience, understanding, and a heart for the gospel of Jesus Christ. More on freedom and love later in the essay.

4. Wade Johnston, *An Uncompromising Gospel: Lutheranism’s First Identity Crisis and Lessons for Today* (Irvine: 1517), 99–102.

worn by the presiding minister—*Mr. Chairman, can we call that question?*—do we not owe it to one another to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry (Jas 1)? How grateful I am for an email from the brother whose gathering of the saints on a Sunday morning looks vastly different than mine. And for the brother who picks up the phone to talk about the “why we do what we do” in his context and what that means, if anything, for my context. And for the brother whose invitation for coffee and conversation comes without hubris. I pray that these ongoing opportunities be as worthwhile for these brothers as it has been for me.<sup>5</sup>

Let me state up front my desire to approach this topic **pastorally**. When I pressed “why me?” for this topic, knowing full well there are plenty of you with the education, experience, and theological chops who could run circles around me with your depth of insight into these matters, an answer was repeated: think and present as a pastor. *Where* I pastor, and *when* I pastor, and *whom* I pastor have shaped and formed me in these matters.<sup>6</sup> I will return to that thought, a thought of which Prof. Behnken helpfully reminded us: Luther’s worship reforms can be characterized in many ways. The *pastoral* nature cannot be overlooked.

To say it in another way: she’s in my mind—the lifelong member who served as our choir director for a mere 68 years. She’s in my mind—the dear saint, new to Lutheranism, who has come through proverbial hell and back, the one who says in a simple, heartfelt manner, “I don’t know five people’s names in this entire congregation, but these are my people. This hour on Sunday morning is my place of peace.” She’s in my mind—recently confirmed, after spending most of her married life in our pews but still not ready to leave the Roman Catholic parish of her youth.<sup>7</sup> You know them, too, in your own place. You love them, too, those who call you pastor. What follows on these pages has these saints in mind.

Pastors Behnken and Peil have been ever so helpful in guiding us through five hundred years of Lutheran worship.<sup>8</sup> These lessons are to be learned and re-learned, and we ignore our history to our peril. What might our generation, in humility, add to the conversation, as we consider the real souls—ever so dear to the Good Shepherd—entrusted to our care? And, might I add, not just the souls entrusted to our care, but to those who will come next, the generations yet to come?<sup>9</sup>

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5. A goal of this paper: may it be a small aid to kindling or rekindling a conversation between brothers.

6. I suppose I could also add to this list: “*by whom* I was pastored and *with whom* I pastored.”

7. I am so very grateful for the hours of catechesis and the hours of listening that helped me understand why that was the case. Lord, have mercy on me, the pastor who is not a good listener, far too often.

8. The reader should note, there are items in this essay that will be receiving short shrift—there are only so many words and minutes, and I cannot read as quickly as Prof. Christie. Some of the items cut were those Pr. Behnken and Pr. Peil have treated already.

9. “Tradition means giving a vote to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead.” G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: John Lane, 1908), 85. This quote was brought to my attention by Rev. Dr. Michael Berg from Wisconsin Lutheran College. Berg, in a private conversation, put it this way: “Public worship is like a grand painting, and not only are we honored, but we should feel a sense of duty to add to it. But, each generation only gets one brush stroke. What will we contribute to the picture?”

## Definitions Matter: “Embracing our Lutheran Identity in our Current Context”

### Our Current Context

I state what I hope is obvious: it seems downright foolish for a middle-aged man from upper-middle class Waukesha County to attempt to posit something that is current, and if we can get past that which is current, to speak anything definitive about your context, let alone my own. I paint with broad strokes.

Should we take a stab at our **American context**?<sup>10</sup> Whose America? Coastal or Midwestern or deep south? Urban or rural? 2023 America or August 5, 2024,<sup>11</sup> America or late 2024 America? Pastor Jonathan Bauer’s keynote<sup>12</sup> at the 2024 WELS National Conference on Worship, Music, and the Arts begins with a helpful summary of the current times in which we serve and is quick to point out the “now” nature of his summary. There are brothers and sisters in tune with the American landscape and who swim more frequently in these waters than I do (mission counselors and college professors come to mind, or a brother or two in your circuit). Seek them out and buy them a coffee for their thoughts. I have found philosophy professor James K. A. Smith to be helpful and enlightening as I navigate current thought and attempt to “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Cor 10:5). A few journals, blogs, and five minutes a day with a national newspaper keep me at least somewhat aware and conversant in “current thought.” Even more, the old advice of “Love God, love God’s Word, and love God’s people with God’s Word” leads me into plenty of conversations in my little orb—members, neighbors, and friends. My understanding of the American context continues to be

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I think your average WELS parish would benefit from a study of some very accessible resources. Where would I start? *Foundations* and *Our Worth to Him* in the new CW line. Berg’s *On Any Given Sunday* will give much fodder for conversation. An oldie but a goodie is sainted Pr. Daniel Deutschlander’s essay on the Western Rite (<http://hdl.handle.net/123456789/4162>). If Pr. Jon Zabell’s commentaries from the 2024 WELS Worship Conference have not yet been made public, they should be soon. Lastly, I found Episodes 29–30 of Mark Paustian’s and John Wildauer’s podcast *Where Two or Three* to be edifying and enlightening. NB, I get no royalties for any of these recommendations.

10. Any thoughtful conversation about our American context should at least acknowledge where Europe has been/is heading. I won’t claim to have a finger on that pulse, but just a little back and forth with Missionary Michael Hartman was helpful. I’m sure our World Mission One Team Members, CICR brothers, and the PSI Team would have something to add. I will say that Magnus Persson’s *Reclaiming the Reformation* and this interview was able to get my mind turning: <https://www.1517.org/podcast-overview/the-decline-of-christianity-in-europe-and-the-west>. Persson’s perspective is helpful, having left a “successful” Pentecostal church for Lutheranism. In this podcast, Persson confesses: “Grace found me.... Now as a Lutheran pastor in Sweden, more and more I am encountering young Europeans who are not looking for relevance, but for well-rooted, stable foundations.” It is food for thought for our present and future American context.

11. As I was preparing this draft, today’s date filled my newsfeed with “remembrances of 1987.” My point: try and pin down the “American Context” in real time—and then call me in the morning.

12. Jonathan Bauer, “Lutheran Worship: What Now?” There is some natural overlap between Bauer’s assignment and this essay. I commend Bauer’s pastoral, timely, and excellent essay to you for your reading and discussion.

sharpened by the real, living humans God has given to me to love, and through whom God loves me. My pastoral counsel in this area? Spend some time thinking about our American context, and then, spend some time not thinking about it, as you live in it, for the benefit of a real neighbor in need.

What of the 2024 **religious context**? The sidewalk from the parking lot to the church doors is growing increasingly longer and more winding. Any number of polls, surveys, and statistical analyses repeat that Christianity in America is on the decline. Confessional Lutheran churches are not immune. Yet, while the sidewalk has gotten longer, there's still a sidewalk. Anecdotally, while the "rise of the nones" is still very real, there are plenty of ears to hear who the Christ is, and who the Christ is *for them*. Paul's address in the middle of the Areopagus, "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious" (Acts 17:22), resonates today. David Zahl has written an accessible book that paints twenty-first-century America as a very religious place, concluding that the quest for righteousness has to go somewhere.<sup>13</sup> I might also add—there's another side to the "increasingly irreligious" American context.<sup>14</sup> The late Rod Rosenblatt's ever-so-helpful video on apologetics has gone with me into countless conversations regarding the nones, de-churched, unchurched, formerly churched, and straying. "Did they leave, and are they staying away, because they are sad, mad, or indifferent?"<sup>15</sup>

We gather for this symposium in the fall of 2024. It is good for us to acknowledge the **secularized context** of our day and age.<sup>16</sup> Already in 2011, Pope Benedict XVI spoke at an ecumenical gathering of Lutherans in Erfurt. You may take issue with the context of his speech. You will certainly not agree with all his conclusions. But I do think he was fair in his understanding that Luther's key issue was grace and that Luther's hermeneutic was Christocentric. Benedict identifies the challenge of secularization and the church's answer:

The second challenge to worldwide Christianity of which I wish to speak is more profound and in our country more controversial: the secularized context of the world in which we Christians today have to live and bear witness to our faith. God is increasingly being driven out of our society, and the history of revelation that Scripture recounts to us seems locked into an ever more remote past. Are we to yield to the pressure of

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13. In conclusion Zahl states, "Again, our religious crisis today is not that religion is on the wane, but that we are more religious than ever, and about too many things. We are almost never *not* in church.... This is why the historical element of Christianity—that Jesus lived and died and rose again—isn't arbitrary but essential. Without the visceral yet well-attested events of Christ's passion, the announcement that 'we have been justified through faith, [and therefore] we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ' would not find the same traction in human affairs, and certainly not two millennia later (Romans 5:1). What would it take for Christianity to find that traction again? I'm not talking about turning back the clock, which would be neither possible or advisable. What might it look like for Christianity to function as a religion of grace today?" He then goes on to answer with his suggestions, to which you could add yours. David Zahl, *Seculosity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2019), 185, 189.

14. E.g., <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2024/july-web-only/athletes-faith-2024-olympics-opening-ceremonies-secularism.html>.

15. "Gospel for Those Broken by the Church" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tTAV3pjPpz0>.

16. Again, Persson: "Although a secular society is not my biggest problem, it's a secularized church." <https://www.1517.org/podcast-overview/the-decline-of-christianity-in-europe-and-the-west>.

secularization, and become modern by watering down the faith? Naturally faith today has to be thought out afresh, and above all lived afresh, so that it is suited to the present day. **Yet it is not by watering the faith down, but by living it today in its fullness that we achieve this.**<sup>17</sup>

A close companion of our secularized context I would name as the **moral context**. Everyone has a cause, or causes, and it is quite easy for us to dismiss those causes with which we disagree with an eye roll or a dismissive wave of the hand. Please understand—I am not at all encouraging acceptance of a cause that is anti-scriptural or anti-Christ. But consider this: if moral outrage is the theme of the day, what might a listening ear and love for neighbor look like? Would this give you opportunity, with Christ as Lord revered in your heart, to give the reason for the hope that you have (1 Pet 3:15)?<sup>18</sup>

I write this next paragraph on the heels of the Republican National Convention and in anticipation of the Democratic National Convention. In six weeks we would expect 150 million plus voters to turn out for a national election. As we consider our current **political context**, I simply commend to you again the papers of the 2023 symposium, thanking God that our Lord Jesus Christ did not have a preferred political party, and that our gracious Lord continues to rule in two kingdoms, and this for our good.<sup>19</sup>

A final thought about our current context. I wonder what the past couple of pages would look like if I were to write them six months into the future, or six months ago. There's a lesson there, to be sure. While we live, move, and have our feet squarely in the present, at the center of these discussions shall be he who is the same yesterday, today, and forever, Jesus Christ our Lord (Heb 13:8). Onward, then, we go.

### Our Lutheran Identity

His name is Doug. He lives in the village of Vernon, too. Doug and his dear bride moved in as our neighbors a few months after we moved to Wisconsin. By the end of our first conversation, we recognized we are both Saginaw natives, cheer for the *right* university in Michigan, and

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17. [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2011/september/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20110923\\_evangelical-church-erfurt.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2011/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20110923_evangelical-church-erfurt.html). Emphasis added.

18. Author "Bryan J" expounds on this topic. I believe I heard this disarming line first from Prof. Mark Paustian, about how to respond to those who say they do not believe in God, "Tell me about the God you do not believe in; maybe I don't believe in him either." <https://mbird.com/psychology/if-its-preachy-and-annoying-is-it-ok-to-ignore-it/>.

19. Pastor Bauer's concluding thought in 2023 applies to the topic of this symposium: "As a result of this unbalanced confidence, we take up our work in Christ's two kingdoms in a deservedly unbalanced way. As much as we care about what happens during the next 413 days for our nation, we care more about maintaining the clarity of our gospel witness during those days and the people who need it." Jonathan Bauer, "Exiled Insiders: Our Sempiternal, Subversive, Submissive Life in Two Kingdoms Ruled by One Crucified King" (paper presented at the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Symposium on Two Kingdoms, Mequon, WI, 19 September 2023), 55. <http://essays.wisluthsem.org:8080/handle/123456789/7349>.

perennially get our hopes up about the Tigers, not so much about the Lions (but last year was fun, a lot of fun, except for the last quarter and a half). Doug and I share many interests and quite a few things to squabble about. I could go on, but you all need a Doug in your life.

Doug's been to St. John's in Mukwonago a few times—Christmas service for my kids when they used to be little and cute; maybe a confirmation, my mom's memorial service. Doug was also my ride to the airport when I flew out to Salt Lake City to work a few days on the hymnal project and to preach at Pastor Peil's installation service. The conversation was natural: "Why are you going to Salt Lake again?" You be me. You've been lobbed a softball. You have the opportunity to explain the work of the Rites Committee, the hymnal project, and the purpose of an installation of a Lutheran pastor in Salt Lake City. You have the opportunity to pour it into his ears, and to lay it onto the heart of a man you love, a man who makes fun of your golf swing in a way your members are too kind to do, a man who, like me, would be lost apart from the living Lord Jesus who is most decidedly for Doug, who is most decidedly for you. You have the opportunity to lay something onto his heart, and not just something, but *the* thing. Oh, this conversation can go so many ways. What is Lutheran worship about? What is Lutheran pastoring about? Why—by the grace of God—was this electrician's boy from Midland, Michigan, being dropped into the Salt Lake Valley, and what should he do there?<sup>20</sup>

Doug is in my mind, and others too, on Sunday morning. They are in your mind, the ones about whom you have prayed—"Lord Jesus, can you bring *name* up this sidewalk today?" They are in your mind, those who have left or ran away sad, mad, or indifferent. They are in your mind, those who would not dream of missing.<sup>21</sup> I could not agree with Pr. Behnken more (and he stands squarely on SA II, and on the Holy Scriptures, not in that order) when he defines the center of our orthodoxy (what we teach) and our orthopraxy (what we do) as being none other than our justification through the life, death, and blessed resurrection of the Lion of Judah—Jesus Christ our Lord. Our Lutheran identity confesses the chief article, **the article of justification**.

I expected that last paragraph would not elicit any tomatoes being tossed. What else might the pastor say (Doug *et al* in mind, from Saginaw to Mukwonago, New Ulm to Salt Lake City) as he considers our Lutheran identity in public worship? **Lutheran worship is evangelical.**

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20. The sermon was based on the Gospel for the day, Mark 2, the calling of Levi/Matthew. "Brother pastors, but especially you being installed this day: the Physician doesn't come for the healthy. For the sinner. You may be tempted to forget, but you dare not forget what you need is what they need. What kind of one who is healed would keep it from them? So each day begins with your baptism. He rescued you and now, joy upon joy, you know where it's at. Thank God, you know where it's at. Not with wind, fire, or earthquake, but in that sweet whisper. In water. In wimpy wafer and wine. So out you go ... among the righteous and the tax collectors and the sinners, to be with them. Not to be their Messiah (the same reason you know that flock you loved and serve so well is ok—you ain't their Messiah), now here, not to be the Messiah, but with his sweet word in your ears and now out of your mouth: I forgive you all your sin; to sound the urgent summons 'follow me.'"

21. Around the coffee table, I'll tell you about greeting worshippers in front of St. Paul's, Plymouth, Nebraska, one day when a car approached from the south as a similar car approached from the west!



One of our teachers in the church uses the term “Christ-obsessed.”<sup>22</sup> It does not ignore the law, for indeed, what would the purpose be for the Christ who came, apart from the answer of the law’s demands, and our failure to meet those demands? And what would the Christ-centered life look like apart from the Sinai conversation, inaugurated and clearly “from on high to us,” from him who rescued his children long ago from slavery and certain death through the waters of the Red Sea, and then sat down to have a talk with them about this new life?<sup>23</sup> Our evangelical identity does not ignore the law, but does recognize that the law’s demands are never satisfied by the one who worships, but by the one who is worshipped. Our evangelical identity knows the law is being preached in various forms and in umpteen ways to our people, every single day, but to hear *Christus pro nobis* is a strange word, a word that we cannot live without. This is our identity.<sup>24</sup>

**Not only evangelical, but our identity is also incarnational.** Go ahead and read Athanasius’ *On the Incarnation* for your children’s Christmas Service. Actually—with no offense to St. Athanasius—don’t do that. But you can ask the question: “How many of you showed up to church tonight and are surprised that there was no room in the inn? And the virgin gave birth? Like—you did not see that one coming?!? But you are here today, either because you love that story, or more importantly, through that story, the Father is loving you.” The incarnational reality of our Lutheran identity (and its import for our worship, preaching, catechesis, and counseling)—is that the Lord would love you in this way. He loves you as a fleshy Jesus. He loves you as a real Jesus, a Jesus with ten little fingers and ten little toes, two little ears, a mouth, and a nose.<sup>25</sup> He loves you, a Jesus who lived in a body and died in a body and bodily rose. He loves you, a Jesus who ascends but does not leave his body or his church behind. He loves you, a Jesus who bodily reigns and rules and will return, in his body. This bodily Jesus will return for those us of who died, in a body, and will one day live in an incarnational reality, bodily, never more to die (1 Cor 15). What scandalous love! Not just that your God would be worshiped and known by you but that he comes in such a way that you would know him and not be consumed. Alberto La Rosa Rojas, in a thought-provoking essay “Liturgies of Belonging,” speaks to the depth of Jesus’ incarnational love: “Christ’s love for Galilee is love from within; it is the love of a *paisano*, of a native. It is not merely the love of a

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22. Mark Paustian and John Wildauer, hosts, *Where Two or Three*, podcast episode 29, “Worship (Part 1),” January 24, 2024, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/episode-29-worship-part-1-w-jacob-behnken/id1459281433?i=1000642818267>.

23. Have you ever taught the Ten Commandments that way? Yes, from the enchiridion. But also in the context of the Exodus? Then the ready application given to us by Luther’s flood prayer (*Christian Worship*, 262): what does your new life look like by virtue of your baptism? A life of freedom. A life of service. A Lord who loves you enough to say: Let’s sit down and have a talk.

24. Pastor Joel Gawrisch wrote a thought-provoking article entitled “Participation” (*Worship the Lord*, January 2024). “To encourage such participation, public worship acknowledges what is already true, Christ is in us because he has been, and is, for us.”

25. My children have forbidden me from singing the preschool ditty that accompanies these words. But they’re not here today, so ...

passerby filled with pity, it is intimacy.”<sup>26</sup> If this incarnational reality is true, and we confess it is, unabashedly, we need to think about the implications for our public worship.

**Our identity is sacramental**, and I will discuss some practical worship implications of that later in this essay. For now, our scriptural and Lutheran confession allow us to state that which has been a struggle historically and in our present context. The Christ is incarnate, and God still deigns to be with us when we gather in a real, present way. He comes through means. He comes sacramentally, giving and forgiving and strengthening. He comes in Word. He comes in Word and water. He comes in Word and bread and Word and wine. He comes in Word out of feeble lips. I recognize that there are plenty who have a confession of the Lord’s Supper, Holy Baptism, and Holy Absolution, those who understand “inspired and inerrant,” yet whose hermeneutical textbooks would deny the sacramental identity that is ours. I recognize what separates me from a church down the road, is not “we are just a little different on the sacraments.” Our worship reflects that truth.

**Our identity is a liturgical identity.** I suppose that means I should take a stab at defining liturgical. Not yet, if you will be patient with me. But everyone has a liturgy. Everyone has a way of doing things. Everyone has a way of worshipping. If our identity is that which is rooted in Christ (built on the gospel, where the church stands or falls), and if we understand the incarnational and sacramental realities of the God who comes to us (because we could never climb to him), then our liturgies will reflect that confession: He is here for us. Not only is he here for us, he’s actually doing something for us and to us. Here’s a prime example of *lex orandi, lex credendi* in real-time.<sup>27</sup>

**Lutheran worship understands vocation.** We live in real time. We are called to serve, called to love, called to be free, and called to be captivated by Christ and for our neighbor. We are the sent ones. We leave with a *bene-diction* in our ears and possibly a song on our lips. We are not living sanctified simply for sanctification’s sake. My mechanic’s greasy hands,<sup>28</sup> the artist’s dreaming vision, and the teacher’s extreme patience—I watch and stand in awe as they get lost in their craft for their neighbor’s good. Our vocations are our vocations for a purpose, for many purposes, and my week quickly turns from the house of the Lord to the houses and businesses, streets and byways of my community, for the Lord will put me on as a mask for others’ benefit, and hide himself behind the masks of others. How I long for that day, when faith gives way to sight, but that longing is not set opposite to my vocation, it actually gives my vocational life charge and meaning.

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26. Alberto La Rosa Rojas, “Liturgies of Belonging: A Theology of Migrant Experience,” *Comment* 42.2 (Summer 2024), 13.

27. There’s more to say here, but for time and space, I’ll point you to Pr. Behnken, Pr. Peil, and also Pr. Treptow’s “*Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi* and the Use of Variety in Worship” (<https://www.worshipandoutreach.org/writings/blog/lex-orandi-lex-credendi-and-the-use-of-variety-in-worship>) for a clear and concise treatment of this phrase and practical import.

28. I promised him I would not drop his name, lest a bunch of you show up on his doorstep.

Want it said another way? **Our identity is missional.** Christ is at the center of our worship and Christ is our all in all. This turns us outward, towards others. “That church over there; that pastor over there; they think about others.” You know how difficult that is, at times. Baptize and teach, teach and baptize, instruct, counsel, rebuke, absolve, preach, commune, bless, laugh with, cry with, and pray for *name*. Your neighbor will be blessed.

**Evangelical. Sacramental. Incarnational. Liturgical. Vocational. Missional.**<sup>29</sup> I think I said some things there. But I did not say everything. There are other items that have something to say to our Lutheran identity (and most I will cover as we keep moving):

- Our Lutheran identity acknowledges the reality of **original sin and the bound will.**
- Our Lutheran identity embraces *simul iustus et peccator*.<sup>30</sup>
- Our Lutheran identity is **rooted in freedom** and **recognizes true freedom means serving for the neighbor’s benefit.**
- Our Lutheran identity is **rooted in history, but not simply for history’s sake.**<sup>31</sup>
- Our Lutheran identity is **aware of a real-time in history, with real neighbors,** recognizing our time and their time is in his hands.

### Embracing

My hope is that what I said above, and what follows, actually does something for you, as you think about the where, when, and whom of your pastoral labors. My general attitude towards this symposium and this assignment a year ago fell far short of an embrace. As I come to this point in the essay, and with consideration given to Christ at the center of our worship and people in need, this is not the time for “woe is me” or Lutheran triumphalism. This is the time to embrace our identity as long as God has given us time and space to work.

## Our Lutheran Identity Embraced in Our Current Context

### We Are Liturgical People

What is liturgical? If we define it etymologically, liturgy, *leitourgia*, is the work of the people. Common usage also defines liturgy simply as the gathering of God’s people for worship. The

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29. As you might imagine, those foci did not originate with me. Years of conversations, years of study, and years of worshipping continue to reinforce them for me. If I need to give credit, it was probably the conversations with the brothers, and specifically from the teaching and writing of my colleague Rev. Dr. Michael Berg, that first led to a bullet point list, which continues to evolve.

30. I know it’s not very pastoral to have favorite shut-ins, but the dear sister who has cross-stitched above her fireplace, “SIMUL IUSTUS ET PECCATOR,” gets a vote. Also, cf. Johnston’s argument on understanding the *simul* as it pertains to pastoral care and preaching in *An Uncompromising Gospel*, 79–83.

31. At the heart of both Pr. Behnken’s and Pr. Peil’s essays is the gospel.

production of *Christian Worship* gave us this: “Our working definition of liturgical worship can be viewed as the use of the ancient rite with its ordinary and propers (including a set lectionary), the observance of the Christian church year, and regular provision for the sacrament of the altar.”<sup>32</sup>

Humans who occupy time and space are bound to worship something.<sup>33</sup> In the broadest sense, we are all liturgical people.<sup>34</sup> Tish Harrison Warren gives insight into the liturgies that fill our everyday lives—liturgies that form us.<sup>35</sup> Consider the different liturgies of life, from the liturgies of an honor guard (the twenty-one-gun salute, playing taps, folding of the flag, and the presentation to the widow “on behalf of the President of the United States and a grateful country”), to the liturgies of Friday night high school football (“And now, for your starting lineup”), to the liturgies of the bride coming down the aisle and, “the moment we have all been waiting for, let me present to you for just the second time, Mr. and Mrs. Just-Been-Married,” otherwise known as “the *hideous* grand march” (emphasis mine), we are liturgical people.

We are all liturgical people. We recognize this in all facets of life, silly and utterly serious. And there are reasons for these liturgies, whether it is this little piggy went to market or all the way home; or an ancient rite that places vows before rings before you may kiss the bride.

It stands to reason that we are also liturgical people when we gather for worship.<sup>36</sup> We are going to do something—formal or informal, high or low, traditional or contemporary, rigid or loosely hanging together.<sup>37</sup> Not only are we liturgical people, but how we worship both

32. Michael Schultz, “The Future of Worship in the WELS: From the Perspective of a New Hymnal Project,” (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Institute for Worship and Outreach, Mequon, WI, 20 May 2013), 12. A few pages later, Schultz adds: “Why our church body and its Commission on Worship are not exclusively but are yet strongly supportive of liturgical worship (as just defined) is really not a matter of tradition but of confession.... ‘Not exclusively but strongly supportive’ was the carefully chosen phrasing ... because the Commission recognizes that ancient rite, church year based worship services are by no means the only way Christians can acceptably worship the Lord,” 16–17. <http://httpwww.welshymnal.com/resource/55>.

33. Luther’s words on the First Commandment come to mind. I like the Reader’s Edition’s translation: “A god means that from which we are to expect all good and in which we are to take refuge in all distress.” Paul McCain, Robert Baker, Gene Veith, and Edward Engelbrecht, *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions: A Reader’s Edition of the Book of Concord* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2005), LC 1.2.

34. “To be human is to be a liturgical animal, a creature whose loves are shaped by our worship.” James K. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016), 23. The entire first chapter “To Worship is Human” is thought-provoking about our time together. The sixth chapter is very helpful as we consider our time together in worship with our children.

35. “We are shaped every day, whether we know it or not, by practices—rituals and liturgies that make us who we are. We receive these practices which are often rote—not only from the church or the Scriptures but from the culture, from the ‘air around us.’” Tish Harrison Warren, *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices for Everyday Life* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2016), 29.

36. Pastor John Kleinig concludes, “Every pastor is either a witting or unwitting ritualist.” His short essay is worth the read. John Kleinig, “Witting or Unwitting Ritualists,” *Lutheran Theological Journal* 22.1 (1988), 13–22.

37. Even though I just wrote all those words, I do not encourage their use. There’s so much more to be said than a mere label can define. Christian love and the gospel deserve more care and thought.

informs us and forms us. I say nothing provocative when I quote from “A Liturgical Philosophy for Christian Worship”:

As much as Christians value their freedom to make decisions about the forms of public worship so that the gospel can be heard and proclaimed by all, they understand that freedom must be guided by love: love for the gospel and love for people. Liberty is not license, and Christian freedom does not stand above wisdom, responsibility, and respect.

The worship rites used in the Christian community must include, therefore, (1) a clear and concise confession of the gospel in all its facets and (2) forms that carry the gospel to people’s minds and hearts. The former task we do with faith; the latter we do with love. Both tasks we do with joy.<sup>38</sup>

I am tripping all over myself to say this clearly. In saying, “we are liturgical people,” I am not at all implying that “The Service” is the only way to worship or the better way. (About that cup of coffee and conversation—I’m buying if a brother wants to talk.) I am happy to talk about the pastoral care decision and the people in my area of service that have led me to that decision. And, even more so, God’s given me two ears to listen. I’d love to hear about your pastoral care. I think we, and the people we serve, would be richer for it.

When God’s people gather for corporate worship, they are going to do something liturgical. When Lutherans gather for corporate worship, having Jesus Christ at the front and center of worship benefits all who gather there.<sup>39</sup>

### We Are a Free People, and a Brotherly People

My goal is not to regurgitate what has been said previously at this symposium nor what has been said time and again and eloquently by so many others, but three things need to be said regarding our freedom and brotherly exchanges in this matter.

First, a proper understanding of gospel freedom and the things neither commanded nor forbidden by God need our constant attention. The gospel and those who might wander up our sidewalks, as well as our brothers and those who might wander up their sidewalks, deserve our best efforts. Dr. Wade Johnston quotes from the President’s Report at the 2009 synod convention: “In other words, when something is determined to be an adiaphoron, that’s not where the discussion *ends*, that is when discussion among Christians *begins*.”<sup>40</sup>

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38. Jon Zabell, ed. *Foundations: Christian Worship* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2023), 114. I commend all of chapter 6 for a helpful overview of this topic.

39. James K. Smith reminds that the reformers, too, had reservations about medieval Roman Catholic worship. “But their [the Protestant Reformers] response, rather than being *antiliturgical*, was to be *properly* liturgical. The problem wasn’t liturgy per se, but disordered liturgies.” *You Are What You Love*, 69.

40. Johnston, *An Uncompromising Gospel*, 99. The entire chapter, entitled “Lessons from the ‘Culture of Conflict,’” is deserving of study.

Second, nothing that I have said about our worship denies the opportunity for variety, freshness, or care for the souls we shepherd. Again, love for the gospel and for people calls on us to speak boldly against legalism in these matters and just as boldly against frivolity. If I were to venture a guess, you can rather easily identify the ditch you are more apt to fall into.<sup>41</sup>

Third, I come back to this. God has given me brothers in this matter, brothers near and far. Public worship may look different in your parish than it does in mine. That sentence—bare and nude—causes me no consternation. The struggle to listen, does.<sup>42</sup> So does the struggle to speak and the tendency to build walls. I shall erect my own fortress! Professor Paustian, thank you for saying it so pastorally!

I hope we can all talk about this openly and generously, metaphorically holding hands, that is to say, as people who are on the same side. I hope we can still recognize the beating heart in one another, there by grace, and reach for it, each of us gladly bearing the burden of understanding the other. I hope we will not present ourselves as people who are outright unpersuadable on issues that divide us, as if to say, “What in the world could I possibly learn from you?”

Let’s assume we can find something of real value in the other’s point of view, something to enfold it in our own deepening, richer and more complex view.... We can be fascinated to know the person standing before us like an unread book. We can keep in touch with our true fellowship, our “having in common” nothing less than the living Lord Jesus.<sup>43</sup>

### **Our Lutheran Identity Embraced in Our Current Context: Theses for Our Consideration<sup>44</sup>**

It is not the essayist’s intent with the following theses to say, “Here’s the checklist. Here’s the measure of orthodoxy or orthopraxy. Here’s what defines you as a Lutheran pastor or a Lutheran parish.” It is my intent that the “so what” essay gives something “so what” to chew on now and to aid the conversation moving forward.

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41. Professor Mark Paustian deserves our attention in this matter. See devotion 51 in *Our Worth to Him—Devotions for Christian Worship* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2021), 173–75.

42. Phillip Magness has a short chapter called “The Importance of Listening” worth a read in his *Church Music: For the Care of Souls* (Bellingham: Lexham, 2023), 113–17. I commend to you the whole book, a short, easy, applicable read, and one that understands the pastoral (care of souls) nature of Luther’s worship reforms and Lutheran worship.

43. Paustian, *Our Worth to Him*, 179–80. And there’s more. Professor Paustian provides six concrete ways to talk with a brother in these matters in devotions 53 and 54.

44. Arranged not in order of importance but for conversation’s sake.

### Thesis: Lutheran Worship is Rooted in Promise

When it comes to discussion about what belongs in worship, so often the conversations revolve around form, style, taste, and preference. Professor Kenneth Cherney lists worship as one of many places with implications for grasping Luther's gospel as promise.

Movements that originate with trust in the promises of God are likely to be authentic, graceful, and efficient. Other movements will probably result in our hurting ourselves. In addition, consider this rule: whatever "establishes consciences" through faith in God's promise belongs in the church. Whatever doesn't build up consciences in freedom, joy, and peace will be a distraction at best.<sup>45</sup>

Worship that understands that reality is inherently Luther-an, and offers much comfort to the hurting soul in the pew. (Again, Luther's worship reform was pastoral at its core.) Taylor Mertins offers: "For some strange reason God delights in *this*, and, wonders of wonders, God continues to hand over the good news through letters, songs, preachers, and pulpits until our hearts are strangely warmed and we know, deep in the marrow of our souls, that Christ has taken away our sins, even ours, and has saved us from the law of sin and death."<sup>46</sup>

I suppose this is another way of saying: "Let the gospel predominate." Yes, and more. This is our daily bread. We can never ponder it or be filled with it too much. It underscores a reality: The gospel is not something we hear and believe in so that we get to a certain measuring line of understanding the gospel, as if it were a book of facts to be learned or mastered and now I am ready for the exam. "God delights in you, forgives you, loves you" is how you know him and how he is known by you. Let it fly. This is what carries you. This, too, goes with your people and carries them. This promise comes with no strings attached lest the door be opened again for the monster of uncertainty.<sup>47</sup>

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45. Kenneth A. Cherney, Jr., "Core Like a Rock: Luther's Theological Center" (paper presented at the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Symposium on Reformation 500, Mequon, WI, 2 October 2017), 24. <http://essays.wisluthsem.org:8080/handle/123456789/7381>. The entire essay is worth consideration, but for this thesis, see also 9–10.

46. Taylor Mertins, "The Gospel is a Promise: Abraham, Paul, Romans, and John Wesley," *Mockingbird*, May 24, 2024, <https://mbird.com/theology/the-gospel-is-a-promise/>.

47. Here Cherney references August Pieper's essay, "The Proper Distinction of Law and Gospel and its Application for Pure Teaching and Spiritual Life," in Curtis Jahn, ed., *The Wauwatosa Theology*, vol. 2 (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1997), 66: "So whoever proclaims faith as a condition for justification sets a demand before the person to be justified, that is, proclaims the law to him, and in fact proclaims the greatest law of all, the first commandment."

## Thesis: Lutheran Worship Is for Dead People

Dr. Steven Paulson writes:

Christian worship is for dead people. It comes out of the liturgy of the burial of the dead. “You have died,” says the preacher Paul over and over again (e.g., Rom 6 and 7; Gal 2; 2 Cor 5). That means worshiping comes after we have died. Worse yet, worship is for dead people who nevertheless believe themselves to be able, well, and alive. Luther once summed it up this way: “Scripture, however, represents man as one who is not only bound, wretched, captive, sick, and dead, but in addition to his other miseries is afflicted, through the agency of Satan his prince, with this misery of blindness, so that he believes himself to be free, happy, unfettered, able, well, and alive.” When real sinners worship they are dead and blind to their death.

Inner-blind and outer-dead people are a very poor demographic for making worship work. The dead often lack promise and direction and are hard to motivate. Not knowing their condition makes it even worse, since they proceed to demand that worship motivate them to transform!<sup>48</sup>

You know this from your pastoral care. You know this from your adult instruction class. You know this, for if you had the proverbial dollar for every time you have heard, “But pastor, it’s because we have a free will,” you’d be rich. Dead people do not like being told they are dead, and that their only hope of living comes from outside of them.

We were taught early on as preachers that preaching kills and preaching makes alive. So, too, worship kills, and worship makes alive. The dead need a resurrection! Worship that centers on the forgiveness of sins—regularly and weekly—gives your people what they need, for that worship gives life, life to the fullest.

Let’s try this out practically and pastorally. The couple comes into church late or at least late enough where they have avoided you at the doors. They simply do not have the strength to paste on their smile, look you in the eyes and say, “We’re good. It’s good. It’s all good.” They feel the weight of unrealistic expectations, of themselves and/or of others. Some of it is self-imposed, to be sure. Some of it is from what’s been done unto them. It’s guilt. It’s shame. It’s fear. It’s sin. This hour is for them. This hour is for them to be killed and raised back to life. This hour is for their prayers and maybe their tears, for their praises and even for their lapses in attention. This hour sets them aright, again, towards God, and towards their neighbor.

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48. Steven Paulson, “What is Essential in Lutheran Worship,” *Word & World* 26.2 (Spring 2006), 154. The words he quotes from Luther are from *The Bondage of the Will*, LW 33:130.



Thesis: Mindless Worship Can Happen within Any Style/Structure of the Service  
(Sub-Thesis—Not All Mindless Worship is Bad)

“Sometimes we take style too seriously and end up worshipping a form rather than the God who seeks to reshape us through his chosen forms.”<sup>49</sup> I imagine that sentence could cut into the heart of many a worship leader. You can mindlessly echo texts ancient or new, and an often-repeated refrain from the greatest song choice on the CCLI list can be sung as mindlessly as “Sing the doxology, pastor—the old one, 644, like we used to every week. We didn’t even have to think about it.”

I understand Scripture’s warning against thoughtless worship. I understand lips and hearts far removed from one another. I understand the fear of just going through the motions. Worship leaders of any style—hear the warning call.

Permit, however, a counterpoint. There may come a time in life, sooner for some than for others, where mindlessness becomes our state. Again. There comes a time when repetition is the one thing I’ll be able to speak back; the one thing I’ll be able to hang onto. And while there’s a place for thinking about the children when it comes to repetition (I’ll address that later), here I speak of the weak and the infirm and the aged.

You see, this auditorium brings back a memory from last year’s symposium. My mother had just died, five years after the diagnosis of “early onset dementia” (which also had a common-termed diagnosis: “Mom—were we really that bad as teens that you’re just giving it all back to us now?”) She did not say much in those last months. She didn’t appear to know a whole lot, either. But she knew when her faithful pastors and chaplains would come to see her. She knew them, as the years passed, not because of who they were, but because of what they did, what they said, what they prayed, and what they sang. So here I stood, singing away, “Holy, Holy, Holy,” and I’ll tell you that wave of emotion—a recognition in time that *this* moment in time, was created for me, just for me, by a gracious God—came over me. Not just the text. Not just the tune. (Was it a familiar tune or a tune new to my ears? I can’t remember this day.) For all that glorious song sang into my heart that day, it is not nothing, the recognition of how that same song formed my mom and helped carry her beyond the years when she could no longer sing it or comprehend it. Indeed, blessed is he who comes to answer her prayer: “Hosanna!” Indeed, blessed is he who comes to answer my prayer: “Hosanna!” You mean he comes to answer in this bread and wine? I know why I sing with saints and angels.

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49. Michael Horton, *A Better Way: Rediscovering the Drama of Christ-Centered Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 144.

### Thesis: Lutheran Worship Has an Answer for the “Cold and Lifeless” Argument

I will candidly ask the question of the youth in catechism: “Do you find worship boring?” Let them be brave. If one thinks you actually want their answer, he might actually give it, and others follow suit. Can they actually say to you: “Pastor, church is boring!”

My response: “Maybe church is boring because you’re boring. You’re dull. You’re not very bright.” I say this in love, and I say this to love them, and I say this without a hint of disgust or anger at them. I ask myself an honest question: “If they think worship is boring—who’s the primary one to blame?” I answer knowing full well the one who has instructed them—or failed to do so.

So again shots can be fired against what we do not understand. “Cold and lifeless and boring”—I am not sure those words can describe the moment of angels rejoicing, heaven and earth crashing together, the presence of Jesus, a binding together of a couple on the brink of divorce, a parent and a child who ended the day before screaming at one another, a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law who have at their core different ideals for the same man. This is the place where lives are changed. This is the place where hope is given. This is the place where those whose life has a limit (Ps 90:10) but whose eternity is at the forefront have come—and the Spirit of the living Lord Jesus Christ does something. Labels are easy to attach—but cold and lifeless? I think not.

Cold and lifeless certainly would not fit this situation. I just got off the phone with a parishioner and will be meeting with him later today at the funeral home.<sup>50</sup> He came to Monday evening service—tired, worn out, having stood another long day’s guard at his wife’s hospice bed. “I think you designed that service just for me last night.” Well, in a way I did. We gathered together and sang together; we prayed together and listened together. We dined together and we were blessed together. Together—pastor and this dear saint, and another young family, who had connected with him in the midst of his wife’s illness and therefore sat with him in worship. Together. Nothing can quite prepare a spouse for the early morning hospice phone call—but times like this along the way have their part.

### Thesis: The Building Preaches a Sermon, Too

My family groans whenever we visit a new city and I suggest: “Maybe we can tour a few churches?” You can tell a lot about a congregation by their worship space.<sup>51</sup> Congregational churches in the Boston area had prominent places for the choir, the speaker, and the “big-named” families who attended. The Basilica of St. Josaphat in Milwaukee leaves no doubt about

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50. Written in real time, this funeral home meeting and funeral are now a past reality. We do these things “in the sure and certain hope in the resurrection.” Is there any other way?

51. Interestingly, not just what the building once looked like, but changes that have been made to the building, and when those changes occurred, will often give insight into what is/what is not receiving emphasis.

the center of their worship, the high altar adorned with the Latin phrase: “*Ecce, Tabernaculum Dei Cum Homo Est.*”<sup>52</sup> Their sub-altars and votive candles teach their theology, too. Likewise, a big pool will teach something about one’s baptismal theology.

The building preaches a sermon, and it can be a very powerful sermon, indeed. I once instructed a man who was raised going to his grandparents’ Roman Catholic Church in Chicago, where the mass was conducted from start to finish in the language of their home country. He said, “Over the years, I never really knew what the priest was saying, but I spent a lot of time studying the pictures, the windows, the statues, and the people.” I was taken aback by how much of “the story” he knew from those formative years. Another parishioner made me laugh but then gave me pause for further consideration: “You know, pastor, it just *smells* like church!” Here she was home. Here she was comfortable. Most pastors do not get a hand in the building they worship in, but we do well to pay attention to what the building teaches and use the building to teach.<sup>53</sup> The sights, sounds, and smells of our places of worship can be a source of rich blessing as we continue to proclaim the Christ in all of his beauty to our people.

#### Thesis: The Pastor Cares about Leading Worship Because He Cares about the People He Leads in Worship

Pastor Will Willimon, retired Dean of the Chapel at Duke Divinity School and retired bishop in the United Methodist Church, is considered by many to be one of the most influential Protestant preachers of our day and age. The more I read him, I also see that Willimon is often self-deprecating and willing to take his share of the blame. He candidly offers his view from the pew:

What I saw was not very pleasant. “Why,” I had to ask myself, “do we pastors continually inflict our congregations with poorly prepared, poorly delivered sermons when any lay person will tell you that (at least in Protestant churches) preaching is primary? Why, when a pastor is before more people in Sunday morning worship than at any other time in the week, do we mumble through vague, poorly constructed, almost inaudible prayers; slouch around the altar as if we were fixing a washing machine rather than making Eucharist; chatter incessantly about nothing through the entire service, and in general, appear to go to great lengths to give people the impression that we are doing

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52. Not just how the building stands now, but the consideration of the cost, sacrifice, and ornateness of a late nineteenth-century church, especially compared to the homes in the neighborhood built in the same era, teaches something. Horton makes the same case about his visiting of churches in many impoverished nations. Horton, *A Better Way*, 186.

53. Horton, in his chapter “Is Style Neutral?” maintains that “Conservative, traditional churches often underestimate the importance of these [building] issues, counting on instructional instruction to carry all the weight.” Horton, *A Better Way*, 176.

nothing of any consequence, leading them nowhere of any great importance, and dealing with material of no particular significance?”<sup>54</sup>

Precisely because you do care for them, the people, you also care for the “what” and the “how” of the service. Or conversely, in caring for the “what” and the “how,” you are also caring for the people.

There are several anecdotal stories to illustrate this point, but I share this one from outside of our denomination. My wife and I were visiting a big city on the East Coast and walked about a mile from our hotel to a local church on a Sunday morning. I suppose these labels could be used: urban, multi-ethnic, multi-generational, traditional, conservative, liberal, high church, smells and bells, liturgical, and historical. These labels, too: excellence, warmth, loving, neighborly focused, transcendent, immanent, relevant, and dignified, yet not stuffy.<sup>55</sup>

The takeaway as we took it all in as observers from the back third of the sanctuary: these pastors knew their people; these pastors loved their people; these people cared for one another. Pastor and people recognized the greatest relationship in this place was with the God-man Jesus Christ. What happened in worship was obviously part of a bigger picture of the church’s ministry.<sup>56</sup>

### Thesis: Lutheran Worship is Authentic

I am not sure when the adjective “authentic” became popular as a descriptor of worship, but it seems that buzzwords like “Bible-believing church” twenty years ago and “mission-minded church” ten years ago have been replaced by “authentic church” today.<sup>57</sup> Maybe I have missed it, and we’re on to something new.

54. William Willimon, *Worship as Pastoral Care* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 196. Yes, I understand his view is not of WELS churches, in general. Yes, I understand we don’t “make Eucharist.” Are his points still applicable? I think so. I found several takeaways, and a few good laughs, in every chapter of this book.

55. I chose to include this list of labels to hopefully make the point: labels used without teaching are not helpful. E.g., in this list, how can a church’s worship be both conservative and liberal? If one properly defines conservative, and one properly defines liberal, it is not an issue. That being said—I would not encourage these labels in our day and age for what I hope is obvious reasons.

56. Here’s one additional anecdote: Willimon (210) recounts a conversation with a congregant on how things were going with their new pastor. The answer? “He’s wonderful, he gives the best benedictions!” A pastor, it seems, taught his congregation what the benediction was, and why, and then actually blessed the people in a manner that they knew the Lord’s action of caring for them and blessing them through their pastor. There’s something to aspire to, seminarian. Maybe your supervising pastor will comment on your report: “He gives a great benediction!” I half-jest.

57. Pr. Peil said it this way: “In 2023, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary’s word of the year was ‘authentic.’ When you consider the celebrity culture, social media hypocrisy, and AI, it is not difficult to see a desire for something real. There are still plenty who see the church as hypocrites too. David Schmitt pointed out that if you get rid of Truth, all that’s left is authenticity. Unless you have the Truth, right? Then you can have both and there’s no way that’s not attractive in a postmodern world.”

Frank Senn aptly reminds us, “What finally makes worship authentic is not human design but the presence of Christ in the proclamation of the gospel and in the celebration of the sacraments, whose Spirit works through these means to create, sustain, and awaken faith.”<sup>58</sup> Authenticity is not something we produce, but rather a Third Article gift, produced by the Spirit where the Spirit has promised to do such work. And, as such, *authentic* worship in one place may not (should not?) have the exact same sounds, smells, and sights as in another place. There’s a reason that we do not just pipe into our sanctuary the video of the most gifted preachers in our church body. There’s a reason why our musicians and vocalists are not “an error-free performance captured on Spotify.” To say it in lowbrow fashion: you dance with who brought you. All of God’s gifts are used, in that place, at that time, for those people. The highs and lows and opportunities and challenges in my locale will differ from yours. When it comes to congregational song, “sing what the people can sing, using the talents the Lord has placed in the congregation for leading them.”<sup>59</sup>

Authentic Lutheran worship is comfortable in her skin and proud to be who we are for the benefit of those around us. My need to prove anything faded about the same time I started wearing dress pants that have more elastic than sweatpants. We are comfortable because we know there is more than meets the eye” when we gather around Christ and his gifts on a Sunday morning. It can all seem so lowly. It can all seem so ordinary, but there, God loves us so.<sup>60</sup>

### Thesis: Our Worship Prayers Lift Our Eyes Beyond Ourselves in a Most Helpful Way

It was a guest preaching opportunity, a mother in her darkest days after a miscarriage, and Barbara Bush who taught me this thesis.

Lesson one: It was a small gathering (that our eyes could see, not counting the saints and angels) in a beautiful church with a rich and storied past. Things are not what they once were, and I do not say that in a negative or disparaging way. In the beautiful Prayer of the Church, we prayed for a new mission and her pastor and the souls being reached some six hundred miles from where we were sitting. It elicited a few comments in the follow-up Bible study, about being part of something bigger and about opportunities in our own neighborhood. All of this resulted from one little petition.

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58. Frank Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 565.

59. Magness, *Church Music*, 140.

60. Cf. Mark Paustian, *Our Worth to Him*, 34. “C. S. Lewis commented about his early impressions of worship and worshipper alike: ‘I disliked very much their hymns, which I considered to be fifth-rate poems set to sixth-rate music.’ When he was offended by the inescapable ordinariness of it all—you can admit that you’ve been there as well—a little humility brought him back to himself. ‘I realized that those hymns were, nevertheless, being sung with devotion and benefited by an old saint in elastic-side boots in the opposite pew, and then you realize that you aren’t fit to clean those boots. It gets you of out your solitary conceit.’”

Lesson two: I picked up the book to deepen my understanding of the prayer that sits in the center of the Compline Service, which has grown to be a monthly event and source of refuge for a portion of our church family. Tish Harrison Warren had this to say, from the midst of agony:

Prayer forms us. And different ways of prayer aid us just as different types of paint, canvas, color, and light aid a painter. When I was a priest who could not pray, the prayer offices of the church were the ancient tool God used to teach me to pray again.... When we pray the prayers we've been given by the church—the prayers of the psalmist and the saints, the Lord's Prayer, the Daily Office—we pray beyond what we can know, believe, or drum up in ourselves. "Other people's prayers" disciplined me; they taught me how to believe again.<sup>61</sup>

Lesson three: This one is handed down anecdotally. In 1992, Bill Clinton defeated George H. W. Bush in the presidential election. The Bush family were members of an Episcopalian parish in Houston, and as you might expect, the Episcopalians' Prayer of the Church is pretty formal. They—as we—pray for our government leaders by name. The story is told that the priest was going to omit a petition for President Clinton in the General Prayer, but that Mrs. Bush insisted: "He needs our prayers." And so in our parish we pray for Joseph our president and Tony our governor, and the prayer and petitions remain the same whichever party sits in Madison or on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, DC.

Our prayers lift our eyes beyond us. They remind us of God's providence. They exercise our trust. They help us think about those next door, the next town over, and halfway around the globe. They teach us thanksgiving and joy, empathy and sympathy. In some traditions what we know as the Prayer of the Church is known as the "Pastoral Prayer." Pastoral hearts shine forth in pastoral prayer.

### Thesis: Lutheran Worship Is Thoughtful and Careful

I laughed out loud at this. In his chapter, "Is There Such a Thing as 'Traditional Worship'?" Ronald Byars offers this: "'Traditional' usually means 'the way we've always done it.' Or, at least, 'the way we've always done it except for when they did it differently before my time, or except for when it was done differently in the dark ages before people were as enlightened as they are now.'"<sup>62</sup> Byars makes the very helpful case: "We are not bound by what has been handed on, but we cannot be indifferent to it."<sup>63</sup>

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61. Tish Harrison Warren, *Prayer in the Night: For Those Who Work or Watch or Weep* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2021), 16–17.

62. Ronald P. Byars, *The Future of Protestant Worship: Beyond the Worship Wars* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 37.

63. Byars, *The Future of Protestant Worship*, 39.

Dear brother, you are not bound by what has been handed on in areas that are free. Traditionalism as a mere passing on, simply as resistance to change, a “we’ve always done it”—that’s a non-starter. But to be a traditionalist in the best sense of the word, to be one who literally hands over, and to fight and contend for the faith handed over (Jude 3), now we’re on to something. And maybe, just maybe, “traditional” is not the best label to apply to the gathering of God’s people for your time together, at least not without a lot of explaining. Can we ditch the label? Can I be thankful for what’s been handed over, and with an eye towards my present, hold on to that which serves the gospel for the people gathered in my midst? Can I know what I am keeping and why it’s been kept previously? Can I be thankful for that which I am “moving on from”?

You know what comes next. Contemporary. Again, Byars: “Like the word ‘traditional’ when used to describe worship, it has no meaning except when paired with the other.”<sup>64</sup> Is there a better way to speak? And maybe, just maybe, “contemporary” is not the best label to apply to the gathering of God’s people for your time together, at least not without a lot of explaining. Can we ditch the label? Can I wrestle with what best serves this contemporary, “with the times” crowd? Can I do so with an eye towards our history, an eye towards my present, and an eye towards the church’s future? Can I do so with the spirit of humility that recognizes I have blind spots all over the place? Can I do so with trusted brothers and sisters?

I hope this is fair and I am open to a brother’s correction if it is not: there’s plenty that has been held onto for good, pastoral reasons, and there’s plenty that has been changed, too, for good, pastoral reasons. Sadly, however, much has been held onto, and much abandoned, it seems, without much pastoral thought at all. Is this a place where brothers can grow in thoughtfulness towards the task at hand and in conversations with one another? Sainted LCMS Professor Norman Nagel is often quoted in a way that encourages a thoughtful consideration of the best of the past and the present: “We are heirs of an astonishingly rich tradition. Each generation receives from those who went before and, in making that tradition of the Divine Service its own, adds what best may serve in its own day—the living heritage and something new.”<sup>65</sup> I would delight in such a thoughtful conversation. I would delight in such thoughtfulness, even if I wind up disagreeing with my brother’s conclusions.

This, it seems, is far more helpful than a label.<sup>66</sup>

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64. Byars, *The Future of Protestant Worship*, 49.

65. *Lutheran Worship* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1982), 6.

66. Take that statement about labels for what it’s worth, from a “collared guy.” Joking aside, I recognize there are plenty of parishes in WELS, in Lutheranism, and in Protestantism, that use these labels. Some of these places have used these labels for a length of time that predate my time in pastoral ministry. I’m not saying, of course, that labels are bad. I am encouraging that if used, they be taught.

Thesis: Lutheran Worship Upholds Our Confession  
Yet Also Confesses the *Una Sancta*

There was a time when what we sang was limited to the book in the pew rack in front of us. Do you miss those simpler days? Or do you wake up for worship planning, super-charged that the internet is at your disposal, guaranteeing that you will not run out of options for those in your care, many of whom may have non-Lutheran roots?

I commend to you the vast array of musical choices from outside the Lutheran tradition, plenty found printed in *Christian Worship*, plenty not, that are free and beneficial for our use, without sacrificing our confession. Pastor Michael Schultz sounds an evangelical note:

Singing acceptable hymns “from other traditions” does not make one less than confessional or something less than Lutheran. If anything, making use of solid-content hymnody from other traditions is one of the best examples of catholicity we might expect to find. Much like we pray the same Lord’s Prayer with all Christians (but not physically together), we can also sing the same songs, albeit under different physical roofs and under different denominational flags.<sup>67</sup>

Our style of worship and our musical choices offer great opportunity for us to confess that we are part of the church catholic. On a practical level, I can encourage the recent adult confirmand from the UMC, who laments some of what she misses from her former tradition. “Let me know what hymn you’re missing; it may fit well here.” The former Roman Catholic can be encouraged that there is plenty of ritual she can hang onto—now charged with new meaning. The former Baptist can rejoice in her daughter’s baptismal regeneration and still enjoy some Fanny Crosby. I can close out a service with a modern-day hymn that originates from Sydney, Australia, and say in closing: “Man, I can’t wait to meet that guy in glory and see what this song sounds like with an Australian accent.” There’s much more that could be said here, pastorally.

Thesis: “*Wir sind in der Wisconsin Synode; wir machen keine ‘show’*”  
Was a Helpful Phrase at a Point in History

Dr. Mark Braun’s essay on the relationship of doctrine and liturgy in the WELS introduced me to this phrase by August Pieper and gave plenty of food for thought.<sup>68</sup> I’d be interested in reading the sequel to this history. What might they say about us, a generation or two from now?

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67. Schultz, “The Future of Worship in the WELS,” 21.

68. Mark Braun, “The Black Geneva Piety of the Wisconsin Synod: An Analysis of the Changing View of the Relationship of Doctrine and Liturgy within the WELS,” *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly*, 79.3 (2006): 180–94, and 79.4 (2006): 206–34.



Here's something I hope might be said: "They wrestled with the concept of unity and uniformity and recognized that the former does not mandate the latter." Unity is found in the gospel, not in forms, no?

Here's something I hope might be said: "They were a good news sort of people, and they dared something for Christ."

Here's something I hope might be said: "They recognized that not all show was for show's sake; and not all lack of show was on account of indifference or because *Wir sind in der Wisconsin Synode*."

Here's something I hope might be said: "The brothers wrestled tirelessly with the how of worship because they were convinced by the Spirit of worship's what and worship's why."

### Thesis: Lutheran Worship Seeks to Serve Both First-Time Visitors and Long-Time Parishioners

All analogies limp, but here goes one. It was a muggy summer's night in Chicago, and our annual trip to see my grandparents had also come with tickets to Wrigley Field. What boy with a ball glove and a wad of Big League Chew had not thrown himself into the hedges time and again, robbing make-believe home runs as if crashing into Wrigley's hallowed ivy? My grandfather, born in the village of Beli, on the island of Cres, Croatia, in 1919, had never dreamt of such a sight, and as I recall, had never been to a major league baseball game. But he liked people-watching and loved his son and grandsons, so off the four of us went.<sup>69</sup>

Looking back, there was so much that evening that my grandpa no doubt missed, not knowing the difference between a linebacker or a first basemen. I'm quite sure he was not impressed that the game went fourteen innings, either. But this time had an impact, and I'm sure, if he would've gone again, there's more he would've picked up on.

Sorry—I told you all analogies limp. Bear with me.

I remember a young man whose progression with our church family was pre-baptism classes for his son, Adult Instruction classes with his wife, and regular, ongoing conversations with his pastor. It was a joyous day when our conversation led to his statement: "I'm ready to be confirmed." My response? "Have you ever been to church?" And he had, a few times, in his youth. We worked through that. He started coming. The questions kept rolling—his time in the Lord's house on the Lord's day kept producing more and more to think through and to talk about. He was confirmed. The questions kept coming.

I have him in mind as Sunday morning plans come to fruition. I have him in mind—and others like him—who might just roll up that long sidewalk in our day and age. Also in my mind

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69. Recalling this story recently, my father reminded me of a detail that I had forgotten, how I tried slipping into the bleachers to catch a ball during batting practice, only to be escorted back out by a security guard who was not amused.

are those who have been through three iterations of a Lutheran hymnal, plus a *Sampler* and *Supplement* to boot, every year of their life spent at this parish. Like that warm muggy night at Wrigley, they're all being served. Like that warm muggy night, they're all finding a place.

God bless the faithful pastor who wrestles with what hurdles can be avoided and what hurdles will need to be overcome, slowly, as he considers every last set of feet up that sidewalk. God bless us with the humility to look anew at "why we do, what we do" with those souls in mind. God bless us with the ability to put our own personal preferences aside and the ability to rise above pandering to the squeaky wheel.<sup>70</sup>

Thesis: Lutheran Worship Has in Mind Those Who Cannot Read  
Sub-Thesis: Lutheran Worship Fussing Over Children

This high-school-aged boy found it a bit comical, attending church with his grandpa who was legally blind, right after the release of *Christian Worship* 93. He just kept rolling with the TLH verbiage, louder and louder as time went on. Maybe I found it a little less comical, when attempting to roll out Divine Service I as a young pastor, a parishioner would take the folder and, without breaking stride, dump it in the waste basket on his way *into* church.

There's a place for variety. We can list the blessings. Yet, I am mindful of what variety can do to some of those most dear to my pastoral heart. I'm not thinking of those demanding, "you must not," but rather those who are yearning for the one that will not change for them—Christ Jesus as Lord. You understand. This is one of those pastoral care decisions I wrestle with; you might wrestle and come to a different conclusion. I respect that.

Likewise, I think about those feisty "traditionalists" in my parish, the child whom a mom sometimes shushes: "Not so loud" as they boom out "Our Father" and "I believe" and "Amen."<sup>71</sup> You've maybe been there, when in your haste in editing you mistakenly cut a congregation's response, but the children shout it out anyway: "Thanks be to God!"

Jesus welcomed these children (Mark 10) and so do we. What a testimony to your members and to the visitors and to the passerby—these children are welcomed here! These children are important here! A pastor's smile and his genuine warmth will say it clearly: we want your children here. They are ours, too. What can I do to help you, dear mother? How can we make this easier for you? Let the service folder notes, the announcements, the space, the messages, the whole thing—let them know this is a hill you'll die on. For the kids!

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70. Pr. Jonathan Bauer offers three simple balances that may play well in your setting, too: 1) Variety with stability, 2) excellence with authenticity, and 3) accessibility with mystery. *Foundations*, "Worship and Outreach," 315–18.

71. Kids know what they like. Ask Logan, running up the sidewalk to before school care, when his dad told him to stop running at seven in the morning: "But running into school is my tradition!"

## Thesis: Lutheran Worship Informs and Lutheran Worship Forms

Do you recall the first time you realized that a lot of what you have learned has been “caught” rather than “taught”? At first blush, I’m thinking here of households and extended families and the unique way they do things. I’m thinking here of the old neighborhood ball games and the pecking order in the student section of a high school football game. There’s learning where data is dumped; and there’s learning by doing and by observing.

This informs our catechesis. We want our students to “know” a distinction between law and gospel, between demand and promise. We teach them, and we should. It is one thing to teach them that the law terrifies and the gospel consoles, but more. You actually proclaim the law that kills them. You actually hand over the gospel that comforts and consoles them. You are not simply filling up the “brain on a stick,”<sup>72</sup> treating them as a repository of information. You are catechizing mind and heart, an embodied soul, a real living human. More than teaching which passages are law and which are gospel, you lay on their heart Luke 15, a prodigal father and a prodigal son.

This understanding carries over to the realm of public worship. Worship informs us, to be sure. There’s information to be conveyed—in responses, in song, in Scriptures, and in sermon. Knowledge is transferred. Knowledge grows. But again, it’s more than knowledge being transferred. Previously I gave you a silly example from Christmas. Here is one from Easter: “Did any of you get out of bed this morning simply for a free breakfast and some church coffee? No, more than that? Did you come here at daybreak because you could not wait to hear how the story ended? Is it that you walked out of here in darkness on Friday evening and you’ve been on the edge of your seats, wondering what Sunday morning might add to the story? Did any of you come here today and say, ‘Look at that. The grave. It’s empty. And the stone is rolled away. Didn’t see that coming!’ By the way, if that is you, and you’ve never heard this before, I can’t wait to tell you more. This is actually what gets me out of bed each day—this story. But most of us, all of us, we knew this information. Then why are we here? We are here because this story not only informs us, but also forms us.” And then the sermon goes on.

More than a brain on a stick, those in worship are there, body and soul, and the gospel story has its way with us. Worship forms us.<sup>73</sup> Not just the knowledge of sin and forgiveness—but *your* sins are forgiven. Not just “look what Jesus did”—but Jesus did it *for you*. Not just, it’s time to leave this place, but “The Lord bless and keep you.”

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72. That phrase is not mine. Cf. James K. Smith, *You Are What You Love*. Chapter 4 helped me immensely on the information/formation distinction, especially Smith’s articulation of confession, 103–10.

73. I think this is really a fun pastoral conversation. As you think through your worship, how is it forming, or malforming? Maybe look back at how you used to worship, or worship you’ve experienced, and you can ask the same objective questions. I used the example of the *Sanctus* earlier in the essay. Maybe I could also use the example of Uncle Rope, who used to sit in the fellowship hall, popping out LifeSavers (even those old green and white ones) to every child who passed by. This, too, was formative.

There's much more to be said here, but three things I leave you with on this subject. Smith references the old quote oft attributed to Mark Twain: "He who carries a cat by the tail learns something he can learn in no other way."<sup>74</sup> I can listen to a most masterful storyteller describe the experience, or I can experience it myself. Worship is not just talking about the cat or observing the cat from a safe distance. Worship is swinging the cat by the tail.

Secondly, most of us are familiar with a rite of confession and absolution as part of our Sunday services. A young pastor was quite surprised when surveys done in preparation for the School of Worship Enrichment in York, Nebraska, revealed that this was the second most highlighted item of our time together. It plays out, week after week, not simply information, nor simply "a rite to be followed," but "a gift that goes with us throughout our week as we seek to follow Christ.... And you move through your day inhabiting a different Story, with the humility of confession ready on our lips, hungry for the mercy of God, longing to embody it for your neighbor."<sup>75</sup>

Thirdly, if it's true that we are liturgical people and that there are rival cultural liturgies vying for our time, our attention, and our hearts, the pastor will recognize the import of worship that not only informs, but forms. Again, Smith makes a compelling argument:

The Scriptures seep into us in a unique way in the intentional, communal rituals of worship. If we want to be a people oriented by a biblical worldview and guided by biblical wisdom, one of the best spiritual investments we can make is to mine the riches of historic Christian worship, which is rooted in the conviction that the Word is caught more than it is taught. The drama of redemption told in the Scriptures is enacted in worship in a way that makes it "stick." Study and memorization are important, but there is a unique, imagination-forming power in the communal, repeated, and poetic cadences of historic Christian worship.<sup>76</sup>

Thesis: As We Worship, We Consider Our Service to the Person Sitting Next to Us

"In the mute testimony of an old man's tears, in a young girl's song, and even in our own pale worship—thin stuff though it is—we may yet sense the sweet promise of the glory to be

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74. Smith, *You Are What You Love*, 85.

75. Smith, *You Are What You Love*, 110.

76. Smith, *You Are What You Love*, 84. I think of hospital rooms and hospice care centers where this plays out. The power of the *Nunc Dimittis* at this time; or the Creed; or the *Kyrie*—these scriptural truths have been woven into their being. Then—what about the family that survives, and when they worship again, but this time without their loved one, now safely home with Jesus?

revealed.”<sup>77</sup> I know what I like. I know what I love. Yet, you give me pause. The people I worship with—they give me pause. What if “I” isn’t the word in worship?

Two years ago, our symposium focused on Christian compassion. Time and again I heard the old phrase: “See how they love one another!” It is a striking blow to this heart—would this be the first concluding thought about our assembly on a Sunday morning? Like the story is told of the woman who anointed Jesus’ feet in the home of Simon the Leper (Mark 14), stories are told and retold about the beauty that is the body of Christ, embodying the love of Christ.<sup>78</sup>

I wonder if the dear person sitting next to me knows that their presence is one way that God loves me. I wonder if I am always so good at seeing my time in worship as an opportunity to love one another in this space. I wonder if that tempers my words for “what I really like” or “what I don’t like” when it comes to our time together (Heb 10:25).<sup>79</sup>

Let us not give up meeting together. Let us spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us think about the person next to us, that they would be loved by Christ, through us. Let us think about the unchurched neighbor, the one we pray visits us, or takes a glance at what’s going on.

Let us think about our part in this beautiful narrative, for their sake and ours, with these words guiding us:

Let us, in Heaven’s name, drag out the Divine Drama from under the dreadful accumulation of slipshod thinking and trashy sentiment heaped upon it, and set it on an open stage to startle the world into some sort of vigorous reaction. If the pious are the first to be shocked, so much the worse for the pious—others will pass into the Kingdom of Heaven before them. If all men are offended because of Christ, let them be offended; but where is the sense of their being offended at something that is not Christ and is nothing like Him?... Surely it is not the business of the Church to adapt Christ to men, but to adapt men to Christ. It is the dogma that is the drama—not beautiful phrases, nor comforting sentiments, nor vague aspirations to loving-kindness and uplift, nor the promise of something nice after death—but the terrifying assertion that the same God who made the world lived in the world and passed through the grave and gate of death.

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77. Paustian, *Our Worth to Him*, 111. The entire devotion I have used repeatedly as part of an Adult Instruction Class and other settings as another way of speaking like the preacher to the Hebrews: “Let us not give up meeting together!”

78. I think of Rosaria Butterfield’s conversion to Christianity, as told in *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert: An English Professor’s Journey into Christian Faith* (Pittsburgh: Crown & Covenant, 2014). I think of my in-laws, and a friendship they formed in a door-to-door canvass in Saginaw, which now includes tea and fixing an old fridge and regular conversations among newfound friends. I think of countless stories I’ve heard and witnessed as pastor.

79. Magness’s *Church Music* is a helpful read on the subject of thinking outside of ourselves when it comes to the selection of church music. I imagine it would be a helpful study among worship committees or for an adult Bible study conversation. I think of a soft-toned, pastoral conversation with a concerned member: “For everything you don’t love, there is someone who does. For everything that ‘offends’ you when we do, someone else is ‘offended’ when we don’t.”

Show that to the heathen, and they may not believe it; but at least they may realize that here is something that a man might be glad to believe.<sup>80</sup>

#### Thesis: Non-Verbals Matter and a Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words

My child says, “I’m sorry.” Her gritted teeth, and her eyes refusing to look at her sister, tell me something different. “Yes, dear, I’m listening,” but the laptop is still open, and the game is still on, and my eyes have not moved an inch in her direction. Non-verbals matter. In fact, they speak volumes.

I recall the painstaking task of watching a recording of a service years ago, and noting all the “extras” that did not add a thing to the service, but were rather distracting, and at times, downright annoying. Is it worth doing the same—and instead of watching for what you say, take an audit of what you do, in worship?

What’s the sermon that is preached by how you move about before worship with people, and during worship at the altar? What’s the sermon that is preached as you give the absolution, speak the blessing, offer your prayers? Any non-verbal cues as you distribute Holy Communion? What about when you lead the family in procession before a funeral? Or the first five to ten seconds when the bride and groom are at the altar, before you welcome the family and friends?

I think of a non-verbal that has become a local favorite, and almost always necessitates a trip to the dry cleaner. We regularly mark St. Michael’s and All Angels on the Sunday near the end of September, and we include at the end of the service the “blessing of the children.” Sometimes that means looking up to the eighth grader whose mom dragged him up there, and sometimes it is on my knees on the chancel floor, getting down to the level of the two-year-old, bravely holding the hand of her older sibling. If ever there was a Sunday where my lousy preaching will be forgotten and forgiven!

#### Thesis: Lutheran Worship Understands the Other-Worldly Nature of Our Task and the Every-Day Nature of Our Task

I’ll admit that when I get caught up in the minutiae, the narrow, the things of worship that have caused tension in worship committees and boards of elders and among brothers and sisters in Christ (I still get caught up in that word, “war”), it takes my eyes as pastor away from where this pastoral heart and pastoral eyes need to be. Lord, have mercy.

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80. Horton, *A Better Way*, 17. I will give credit where credit is due on this point. Michael Horton quotes playwright Dorothy Sayers, and while I had marked it up in my paperback, it was Pr. Jonathan Bauer at the 2024 WELS National Conference on Worship, Music, and the Arts who drew it again to my attention.

In pastoral care, I often see folks I love who are struggling, whose time and energy and all get caught up in the penultimate, at the expense of the ultimate. There's a lesson for me to learn there, when it comes to worship. Lesson learned there, for me, in worship.

How's this for the ultimate? "You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me" (John 5:39).

How's this for the ultimate? "But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31).

How's this for the ultimate? I kneel in humility, "forgive me, Father," and I stand in joy, for one in the stead of Christ, with his authority and his authoritative word, has spoken, and I have life.

We come together in this place, and we understand real lives, so day-to-day, week-to-week. We meet them where they are. As we meet them where they are, we never lose sight of the ultimate. By God's grace, we rise above the minutiae, and can we see it—what God is up to and what God has in store for those who love him.

Back to what our first essayist championed as the key component of historic, Lutheran worship. This is ultimate. "It took an Anglican to rescue Luther from the Lutheran liturgical gurus."<sup>81</sup> What Bryan Spinks demonstrates—time and again—is the centrality of the chief doctrine to Lutheran worship, and how Christian freedom and love for neighbor flow from there.<sup>82</sup>

Practically—the supper is ended, but the fruit of the supper now extends.<sup>83</sup> Faith is here strengthened. Love for one another is increased.<sup>84</sup> Eyes again have been fashioned to look beyond penultimate to ultimate, which then allows us to view the penultimate in a new light. Our vertical reality extends in a horizontal form. We take our place in the world, living, if you will, outside of ourselves.<sup>85</sup> For this we pray:

Let not your good Spirit forsake us;  
Grant that heav'nly-minded he make us.  
Give your Church, Lord, to see  
Days of peace and unity.  
O Lord, have mercy!<sup>86</sup>

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81. John T. Pless, in the foreword to Bryan Spinks, *Luther's Liturgical Criteria and His Reform of the Canon of the Mass* (Sidney, MT: Synoptic Text Information Services, 2021), iv.

82. Spinks, *Luther's Liturgical Criteria*, 28–34.

83. *Christian Worship* 932, "Sent Forth by God's Blessing."

84. The vocational prayer at the end of "The Service" captures this perfectly. If you push me on it, Setting One is the clearest: "We pray that through it [this saving gift] you will strengthen our faith in you and increase our love for one another." *Christian Worship*, 170.

85. St. Peter uses the ultimate to address the penultimate in 2 Pet 3:11: "What kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming."

86. *Christian Worship* 673, "O Lord, We Praise You."

Thesis: Lutheran Worship is Our Song to the World;  
Praise is Proclamation and Proclamation is Praise<sup>87</sup>

The church I serve has big windows to the outside world, and the traffic on West Veterans Way increases day by day. There are plenty of times when the sirens will be heard and heads all turn south to see what's passing by. I often will make the comment when presiding over a private baptism service, "I wonder what any of those people would think if they were to glance in here right now and see this wonder in the making."

Of course, we do not just wait for the world to look in or to wander up our sidewalk. The church has a song to sing, our radical witness to the world!<sup>88</sup>

Here the hard work of pastoral care continues. What to sing? How often to sing? Why to sing? Substance over style or style over substance? Let music serve the Christ and those he loves, and not for its own sake.<sup>89</sup> God bless the pastor who goes about that work, often putting his own preferences aside, concerned for those he's called to serve both in his congregation and in his community. Carl Schalk—knowing that hymnody at its best sings and teaches the gospel—sees hymnody's use primarily as a pastoral decision. "To say, for example, that the choice of hymns in worship is simply '... a matter of taste' is ultimately to avoid taking responsibility for the spiritual, musical, and moral development of ourselves and our children."<sup>90</sup>

Two practical matters before I move on from this topic. First, as mentioned previously, worship informs us and forms us. Music, too, informs, but forms. What was sung into you as a child and what you've sung into your children has an impact on head and heart and soul and mind.

Second, "hearts changed by the gospel really do have something to boast about."<sup>91</sup> I think about the impact congregational song has had on others, and many instances come to mind, but I will share one. Our church's annual Blue Christmas Service is a quiet, meditative, devotional service for those particularly struggling. The devotion that evening was from Isa 40,

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87. I enjoy music, but I'm no musician. I'll belt out the congregational song, but I'm no singer. For those who find themselves in that boat, I heartily recommend Magness's *Church Music: For the Care of Souls*. Several of the earlier chapters helped me embrace thoughts on "the song of the church" that I had not considered before.

88. Magness (11) gives credit to Keith Getty for that phrase. I thought it was my own, but I'll give Getty credit, too. Magness shares a list of reasons middle school choir members gave as to why they wanted to sing in a choir. Not a bad list: "Raise spirits. Sustain culture. Bring people together. Sustain people on their journey. Have an impact on people's lives." Magness, *Church Music*, 23.

89. Paustian, *Our Worth to Him*, 145. "Do not let music be a diva craving the attention of the crowd for itself. Let it be a John the Baptist that points away from itself to Jesus."

90. Carl Schalk, *First Person Singular: Reflections on Worship, Liturgy, and Children* (St. Louis: Morningstar, 2000), 12.

91. Magness, *Church Music*, 83.



but it was the small girl's voice (and the gospel she proclaimed in song!) that drove home the comfort of the night:

Jesus, laid in a lowly manger,  
Facing a world of dangers,  
Come to turn me a stranger  
Into a child of God.

Jesus, take away every darkness,  
Steady my simple footsteps  
That I might in your goodness  
Live as a child of God.<sup>92</sup>

### Thesis: Lutheran Worship Acknowledges That Everything Is Beautiful in Its Time

A woman coming through a divorce said this: "It's not that He could make this place beautiful. He is making everything beautiful in its time."<sup>93</sup> St. Paul says it this way: "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor 1:18). Isaiah says it this way: "Truly you are a God who has been hiding himself, the God and Savior of Israel" (Isa 45:15).<sup>94</sup> St. John testifies, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). The Apostle Paul says, "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ" (Rom 10:17).

The one that is so dear to you, dear brother, where will they find this God? I come back to the idea of the church's worship over millennia. Here we are, with one brush stroke to add to this grand canvas.<sup>95</sup>

How shall we worship? "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2).

The joy of our worship and the challenge of our worship is nothing new. The hidden God is revealed as he wishes to be known in his time. All things beautiful in his time, even when

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92. Keith and Kristyn Getty "Jesus, Joy of the Highest Heaven," accessed at <https://gettymusic.store/>.

93. Katy Padilla, <https://jasonmicheli.substack.com/p/everything-beautiful-in-its-time>.

94. For a devotional exposition of this bombshell that is so central to Lutheran theology, see Philip Hirsch, "Embrace the Cross, Anticipate the Crown," (essay presented to the 67<sup>th</sup> Biennial Convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, Saginaw, MI, 1 August 2023). <https://welsconvention.net/convention-resources-2023/>.

95. One snarkily asks: Will church historians look back over our era and say: "Well, that was helpful?" In humility I cry "mercy;" in joy I stand forgiven.

such beauty is hidden beneath apparent weakness and brokenness. So we sing, we pray, we proclaim, and we worship, certain and confident, and trusting in his promise.

## Conclusion

Thank you, President Treptow, and members of the Symposium Committee, for the privilege of preaching last year and presenting this year, for the opportunity this assignment afforded me to put into practice on this topic the drowning of my old flesh and arising to live as I am, baptized, November 27, 1977, by Pastor James Rockhoff, a historical reality lived out in real time. I look forward to my doughnut, maybe two, and heading home to my parish, to say to them anew: “The Lord be with you” and for them to respond: “And also with you.” I need that.

I also head back home with prayers for you, dear brother, prayers for those you serve, prayers for those who have not yet wandered up that sidewalk, and prayers for those you are heading down that sidewalk to meet.

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*Lord Jesus, ever be Jesus, for me. For us. For them. Give us joy, humility, strength, love, and courage to embrace our Lutheran identity in our current context. This to your glory. This for their good. Amen.*

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**<sup>15</sup> Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. <sup>16</sup> Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. <sup>17</sup> 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.**  
(Col 3:15–17)

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